

# The World and the Garden: Ekphrasis and “Overterritorialization” in Jamaica Kincaid’s Garden Writing\*

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*The garden is often regarded as a feminine space of withdrawal. By contrast, this essay examines how Jamaica Kincaid envisions the garden not as a retreat from the world but as an opportunity to delve into the colonial histories of plants. Kincaid traces the twinned histories of botany and empire, highlighting how the botanic garden served as a laboratory for the development of plantation crops and therefore played a pivotal role in imperial and capitalist expansion. I concentrate on Kincaid’s use of ekphrasis, which reveals the many aesthetic, scientific, and colonial discourses that construct the garden as a both discursive and material space. Kincaid’s ekphrastic prose produces an effect of “overterritorialization,” in which loco-descriptive details do not provide the reader with a sense of place; rather, the overabundance of details overwhelms and even unsettles the reader. Kincaid’s garden writing thus shows us an alternative model of reading postcolonial environmental literature.*

**Keywords:** Jamaica Kincaid, postcolonial ecocriticism, place and literature, garden writing, botany, ekphrasis

## I.

“There is slavery in the vegetation,” V. S. Naipaul writes of the Suriname landscape in his travelogue *The Middle Passage* (1962). “In the sugarcane ... in the breadfruit ... in ... a clump of cashew trees ... [and] star-apple trees.”<sup>1</sup> Naipaul points to what he calls the “reminders” of enforced agricultural labor in the Caribbean, embedded in “every side of big house and slave quarters” and in the natural landscape. Here as in his other writing, Naipaul associates the natural world with the human

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1 V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies—British, French, and Dutch—in the West Indies and South America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 182–83. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

violence of slavery and socioeconomic oppression in the Caribbean. We can easily read such moments as metaphors for the entrenched legacies of imperialism that endure in contemporary Suriname. In his tour through the coastal district of Coronie, Naipaul notices the homes' "modest display of fruit: two or three oranges, a melon perhaps, two or three pomegranates, nothing more" (187–88). On the property of the town's sole Indian family, a dilapidated yard houses "two or three dwarf coconut trees ... [beside] rusting junk in a rusting corrugated-iron shed" (188). For Naipaul, the natural landscape—the "unfamiliar landscape, whose monotony invited no exploration"—acts almost as a metonym for the deprivation of contemporary Suriname (187).

I'd like to press more deeply on Naipaul's description of the enslaved and impoverished landscape and read his language as more than just figurative. For instance, the "vegetation" that Naipaul cites is a mixture of both indigenous plants like the star-apple tree and transplanted crops like sugarcane, cashew, coconuts, pomegranates, and oranges. Naipaul specifically points out the history of breadfruit, which was brought from the South Pacific and cultivated in St. Vincent as a source of cheap food for slaves in the late eighteenth century. The commingling of native and nonnative plants is one of the many ways that discourses of indigeneity are troubled in the Caribbean world. What's more, the juxtaposition of sugarcane and breadfruit, cashew and star-apple reveals how horticulture was a key component of imperialism, which circulated plant specimens along with human bodies. Might we not read the natural landscape as more than just a metaphor for deprivation but rather as a site that troubles the division between figurative and material space?

For Jamaica Kincaid, it is the garden that asks and unlocks such questions. An avid gardener herself, Kincaid has written numerous gardening essays that range from a travelogue of her plant-hunting expedition in Nepal (published as *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* [2005], part of the National Geographic Literary Travel Series) to ruminations on her own Vermont garden that have appeared in magazines including *The New Yorker*, *Architectural Digest*, and *Travel + Leisure*.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to *My Garden (Book)*: (1999), a compilation of Kincaid's gardening essays written across the 1990s, the writer describes the unruly origins of her first garden in Vermont. In her early attempts at gardening, Kincaid proves unable to shape her flowerbeds, whose outlines look little like the "flower beds in gardens I admired, the gardens of my friends, the gardens

2 Readers familiar with Kincaid's work will note the garden's frequent appearances in her fiction and nonfiction. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid details the gardens of the protagonist Xuela's husband, who impractically attempts to adapt the traditional flora of English country gardens to the climate of Dominica: "And pressed between the pages of this book were some specimens of flower he had known and I suppose had loved, but flowers that could not grow in this Dominican climate; he would hold them up to the light and call out to me their names: peony, delphinium, foxglove, monkshood ..." In the memoir *My Brother*, Kincaid notes how she was reading Russell Page's autobiography *The Education of a Gardener* when she learns of her brother's AIDS diagnosis: "And when I picked up that book again, *The Education of a Gardener*, I looked at my brother, for he was a gardener also, and I wondered if his life had taken a certain turn, if he had caused his life to take a different turn, might he have written a book with such a title?" See Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 143–44; Kincaid, *My Brother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 11.

portrayed in my books on gardening” but instead take on the “most peculiar ungartenlike shapes”:<sup>3</sup>

I wanted a garden that looked like something I had in my mind’s eye, but exactly what that might be I did not know and even now do not know. And this must be why: the garden for me is so bound up with words about the garden, *with words themselves* ... (7, emphasis mine)

Kincaid often reflects on the schism between the idealized gardens that are “portrayed in my books on gardening” and the unruly one in her backyard. Despite her careful efforts, the garden is nonetheless a natural object that defies the writer’s desire for a prescribed form and shape. As Wendy Knepper observes, Kincaid both is frustrated by and delights in the garden’s “spontaneity of life”: “Kincaid finds happiness in the garden because it is a locale that resists her intentions, designs, and impulses to create a certain kind of order.”<sup>4</sup> What’s more revealing is how the garden exists as a textual space for Kincaid. It is not simply that the archives of garden writing loom largely in her mind as she tends to her disorderly flowerbeds, though Kincaid does dissect the imperial origins of garden writing, as I will further explore. But as she qualifies carefully, the garden is not only tied together with “words *about* the garden,” or what we might understand as botany, horticulture, and the many other discourses that frame our understanding of the garden. It is also “bound up ... with *words themselves*,” which suggests a fusion between writing and gardening.

Though often regarded today as a feminine space of withdrawal and introspection, the garden enjoyed a different status when horticultural journals exploded in popularity in Victorian Britain. In the nineteenth century, garden writers often understood horticulture as a vehicle of social and moral reform. Lynn Voskuil explains that gardening was seen as a moral activity, which would not only provide food for cottagers and the working poor but also encourage them to become more industrious workers.<sup>5</sup> But at the turn of the century, garden designers such as William Robinson, Gertrude Jekyll, Edith Wharton (who moonlighted as a landscape designer), and Vita Sackville-West cemented their reputations on the high-maintenance styles of gardens like Sissinghurst Castle, and gardening became more the domain of upper-class women. One only has to think of John Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1865) to see how the garden—representative of the home and “shelter ... [from] the anxieties of

3 Jamaica Kincaid, *My Garden (Book)*: (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 7. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

4 Wendy Knepper, “How Does Your Garden Grow? Jamaica Kincaid’s Spatial Praxis in *My Garden (Book)*: and *Among the Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*,” in *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Space in Contemporary Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 44.

5 Lynn Voskuil, “The Victorian Novel and Horticulture,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, ed. Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). More broadly, Voskuil traces the linkages between gardening and discourses of improvement in both horticultural journals and also the Victorian bildungsroman (what she terms “*Bildungsgarten*”), which demonstrated how plants and people were subjected to the same sorts of cultivation and training. For more on the language of “improvement” in Victorian garden writing and novels, see her forthcoming book, *Horticulture and Imperialism: The Garden Spaces of the British Empire, 1789-1914*.

the outer life [that attempt to] penetrate it”—has symbolized the delimitation of women’s social roles to the domestic sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Kincaid acknowledges the gendered and classed myopia of certain strains of garden writing: “I suspect that the source of my antipathy to Sackville-West and her garden is to be found in her observations of the garden, in the way she manages to be oblivious of the world. For the fact is that the world cannot be left out of the garden” (82). The original publication of many of Kincaid’s garden essays in lifestyle magazines such as *Architectural Digest* and *Travel + Leisure* only further demonstrates the classed dimensions of this genre of writing. And yet Kincaid constantly returns to the garden in both her fiction and nonfiction because it is a site that has historically refused the boundaries between the material and discursive, between physical space and textual space. This is evident in the language of individual development—in terms such as grow, cultivate, root, and engender—which was often derived from horticultural practices. Famously, Raymond Williams notes how “culture,” the most complicated word in the English language, stemmed from the agronomical sense of “cultivation.”<sup>7</sup> Derek Walcott argues that in English literature, “[c]ulture and agriculture are synonyms”<sup>8</sup> for one another. Indeed, Kincaid’s writing compels us to consider the etymology of diaspora, which originally referred to the dispersal of seeds beyond their point of origin.

Certainly, the world can never be left out of the garden. Rather than see the garden as a pastoral retreat, Kincaid points out botany’s entanglement in the colonization of the Americas. She describes how the botanic garden in her native St. John was an expression of colonial power: “The botanical garden reinforced for me how powerful were the people who had conquered me; they could bring to me the botany of the world they owned” (120). Tending to the dahlias in her own garden in Vermont, Kincaid contemplates the flower’s origins in Mexico, which were papered over when it was renamed and hybridized by the Swedish botanist Anders Dahl (119). But botanists did not only produce a historical amnesia over the origin of the many plants that circulated through their gardens. As Kincaid recognizes, by developing crops such as sugarcane, botanists were also responsible for facilitating the destruction of native ecosystems, which were cleared for monocultural plantations. She imagines Christopher Columbus as an Adam-like botanist, who views the “New World” as a blank Eden that can not only be renamed but also deforested, depopulated, and then restocked with cash crops and slaves<sup>9</sup>:

[f]inding in these new lands people and their things, people and things he had never heard of before, he empties the land of these people. It is when the land is completely

6 John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Nord Deborah Epstein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 77. This is a truncated account of the complex genealogy of garden writing and its intersections with the Arts and Crafts Movement. For more on this history, see: Judith B. Tankard, *Gardens of the Arts and Crafts Movement: Reality and Imagination*, (New York: Abrams, 2004).

7 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 87.

8 Derek Walcott, “The Garden Path,” *The New Republic*, April 13, 1987, 27.

9 Implicit in Kincaid’s reimagining is the fact that Christopher Columbus infamously introduced sugarcane to the Caribbean. For more on the history of botany’s role in imperialism, see: Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

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 ... (159).

As with Naipaul, for Kincaid there is slavery in the vegetation—in more obvious agricultural suspects such as sugarcane and also less obvious botanical ones such as dahlias. Environmental violence in the Caribbean is at once discursive and material: the erasure of native plant names comes coupled with the eradication of indigenous peoples and entire ecosystems. The garden, with its close historical ties to the science of botany, can make legible the twinned horticultural and colonial histories of plants.

Although this essay focuses primarily on Kincaid's writing, it also keeps an eye on how the garden looms in a wider archive of contemporary Caribbean literature.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, it is often the idealized and aestheticized image of the garden (rather than that of the plantation) that signals the literal and psychological displacement of the Caribbean writer. The garden, with all the imperial and literary histories that it evokes, becomes an especially charged image for Caribbean writers, whose colonial educations have ingrained in them the romantic images of cottage gardens and bucolic countrysides. Sarah Phillips Casteel traces the trope of the ruined garden in Caribbean literature, locating it in the pastoral leanings of Naipaul and Derek Walcott's works. For Caribbean writers who have inherited the pastoral's literary and visual vocabulary (whether in the form of Wordsworth's noble rustics or the gothic cathedrals in Constable's paintings), adapting the pastoral mode reveals the chasm between their native landscapes and the landscapes represented in art. But as Casteel argues, the local landscape often comes up short in such comparisons: "This peculiarly botanical sense of displacement and the devaluation of the local landscape that tends to accompany it ... is indeed a favorite motif of Caribbean literature."<sup>11</sup>

The motif is such a "favorite" as to have generated its own critical term, the so-called "daffodil gap," named after a pivotal scene in another of Kincaid's writings, the novella *Lucy* (1990).<sup>12</sup> The novella follows its eponymous protagonist as she moves

10 Ecocriticism has come under deserved fire for its inattention to race and gender and to the environmental issues of the global south. Over the past decade, however, postcolonial ecocritics have partially corrected this myopia, and much ecocritical scholarship has recently crystallized around Caribbean history and culture. It is not surprising that postcolonial ecocriticism has concentrated on the Caribbean given the region's position in the Atlantic slave trade and the almost unparalleled environmental devastation it has suffered from monocultural plantation agriculture. For more on this growing body of scholarship, see: Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley, eds., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005); Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Christopher Iannini, *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery, and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

11 Sarah Phillips Casteel, *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 30–31.

12 It is difficult to pinpoint exactly who coined the term *daffodil gap*, but scholars often attribute it to Helen Tiffin. That said, it should be noted that Tiffin does not take credit for inventing the term but rather explains that it commonly circulated among postcolonial writers: "The gap between the lived colonial or post-colonial experience and the imported/exported world of the Anglo-written has often been referred to by Commonwealth post-colonial writers and critics as 'the daffodil gap'" (920).

to the United States to work as an au pair for Mariah, the matriarch of a wealthy family. Upon learning that Lucy has never “seen spring”<sup>13</sup> or daffodils, Mariah misguidedly takes her to a garden filled with the flowers—the sight of which triggers a murderous fantasy for Lucy:

They looked like something to eat and something to wear at the same time; they looked beautiful, they looked simple, as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea. I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them. Just like that. I wanted to kill them. I wished that I had an enormous scythe; I would just walk down the path, dragging it alongside me, and I would cut these flowers down at the place where they emerged from the ground. (29)

Although it may be a “mystery” for Lucy, the trigger for her fantasy of botanical violence is apparent to many readers of Kincaid’s novella: Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” a poem that Lucy was forced to memorize and recite in the colonial classroom. Kincaid has spoken of the effects of the daffodil gap, which produces a fissure between the landscapes she encountered in her native Antigua and in her school reader: “The reason that I do not like daffodils is not at all aesthetic but much more serious than that: having been forced to memorize a poem about daffodils, when none were found in the place I grew up” (46). As Ian Smith explains, Romantic poetry often operated as a tool of empire that decoupled the Caribbean landscape from its violent imperial histories: “[C]olonized people can be made to celebrate nature in a totally de-contextualized way ... [and so] distracted from seeing the history of nature as conquered, appropriated and made the site of forced labor.”<sup>14</sup> Lucy’s impulse to kill, to cut down and sever the daffodils at their roots, represents a rejection of her colonial education and the larger institutional forces that render invisible colonial violence and “erase a complicated and unnecessary idea.”

Again, we see how “cultivation” takes on its multiple meanings in the ways that the daffodil—and the garden more broadly—plays an integral part of the development of Lucy’s colonial subjectivity. Scholars often fixate on how the “daffodil gap” produces a kind of postcolonial melancholia, in which the Caribbean writer’s obsession with the metropolitan landscape comes coupled with an alienation from, or even a disavowal of, the native landscape. But I do not want to reduce the daffodil gap to a binary that splits so-called “real” (read: local and native) from “imaginative” (read: pastoral or garden) landscapes. Although longing and self-denigration tinge Kincaid’s writing, she does not merely seek to displace the garden for the tropics, to uproot the daffodil and plant a hibiscus in its place. As Naipaul has already shown, the divisions between the indigenous and the alien are especially slippery in the cross-pollinated world of the Caribbean.

In what follows, I demonstrate how Kincaid disrupts such a simplistic binary and theorizes a much more complex understanding of the relationship between place and

See: Helen Tiffin, “Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid,” *Callaloo* 16.7 (1993): 909–21.

13 Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 17. Subsequent references appear as parentheticals in the text.

14 Ian Smith, “Misusing Canonical Intertexts: Jamaica Kincaid, Wordsworth and Colonialism’s ‘absent things,’” *Callaloo* 25.3 (2002): 817.

literature, particularly in a postcolonial context. Although many scholars have examined Kincaid's fraught relationship with her British literary heritage, none have considered how she also turns to French Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet and Gustave Caillebotte as interlocutors with her writing and gardening. In doing so, scholars overlook how Kincaid employs ekphrasis to destabilize the boundaries among literature, painting, and place in her garden writing. As Susan Stewart argues, the garden is "the wresting of form from nature."<sup>15</sup> In her attention to the many aesthetic, scientific, and colonial discourses that construct the garden, Kincaid shows how the garden is itself a form and not simply a natural object to be represented in literature or painting.

With its surfeit of visual and other sensuous details, Kincaid's garden writing seems a prime candidate for the kind of loco-descriptive literature that is praised for its extended representations of place. For many ecocritics and other scholars invested in the so-called turn to place, such literature is celebrated for its careful appreciation of the textures of place. But such an attachment to place is a vexed and sometimes impossible experience for diasporic writers like Kincaid; it is all the more vexing in the context of the Caribbean, whose landscapes (gardens included) are scarred with the histories of colonization and scientific conquest. Implicit in Kincaid's garden writing is a dilemma: How can a postcolonial writer—especially one invested in expressing the displacing experiences of diaspora—create a "sense of place" without feeling genuine place-attachment? As I will argue, Kincaid's rich descriptions of gardens do not create an immersive world. Rather, her prose is what I call "overterritorialized": laden with dizzyingly copious citations of botany, art history, and colonial travelogues, Kincaid's writing unmoors the reader rather than grounding her in a single location. Destabilizing any "sense of place" and yet also "rooted" in what is often seen as the most local of spaces, Kincaid's gardens present a much more tenuous relation between place and literature.

## II.

In the essay "Monet's Garden," Kincaid recounts her visit to the artist's famed garden in Giverny, the Normandy commune that served as the inspiration for his paintings of bridge-covered ponds and water lilies. Kincaid opens with a question that demands we consider Monet's garden and paintings alongside each other:

What would the garden be without the paintings? Would I be standing in it (the garden, Claude Monet's garden), *looking* at the leaf-green arches on which were trained roses ('American Pillar,' 'Dainty Bess,' 'Paul's Scarlet Rambler') and clematis ('Montana Rubens'), *looking* at the beds of opium poppies, Oriental poppies, *looking* at the sweep of bearded iris (they had just passed bloom), *looking* at dottings of fat peonies (plants only, they had just passed bloom), and *looking* at roses again, this time standardized, in bloom in that way of the paintings (the real made to shimmer as if it will vanish from itself, the real made to seem so nearby and at the same time so far away)? (125, emphasis mine)

The thick description of American Pillar, Montana Rubens, and Oriental poppies is emblematic of garden writing, which often itemizes exhaustively the precise names of

15 Susan Stewart, "Garden Agon," *Representations* 62 (1998): 111.

flower varieties. What's more, the density of description would seem to situate Kincaid in a fixed, specific, and (to use her own language) "real" location in Giverny. But all that is situated melts into air as it becomes unclear whether Kincaid is describing the garden in Giverny or the garden in Monet's paintings. The roses, as she observes, "bloom in that way of the paintings" and are "made to shimmer as if [they] will vanish"; in another moment, she describes how the "pond itself ... looks like a canvas" (127–88). Further belying the "real" garden is Kincaid's fixation on visuality, emphasized by anaphora: the author is not so much "standing" in Monet's garden as she is "looking" at the many sights of Giverny's botanical bounty. But is Kincaid viewing the garden depicted in Monet's Giverny paintings or in the physical garden itself? She does not give a clear answer: "I was looking at all these things, but I had their counterparts in Monet's paintings in my mind" (126).

The ambiguity only deepens. Upon seeing some water lilies tipped over on their sides, Kincaid explains how she anxiously corrects what she perceives as their misplacement: "[O]n seeing them that way I immediately put them back in the arrangement I am most familiar with them in paintings, sitting in the water that is the canvas in all their beginning and all the ends hidden from me" (127). Kincaid's anxiety over the misplaced water lilies presents another version of the daffodil gap (perhaps now a "water lily gap") that in this case emphasizes the rift between the landscape enshrined in French Impressionist painting and the landscape that stands before her. What's more significant is how Kincaid reverses the usual process of mimesis: although we usually understand painting to represent the natural landscape, the reverse occurs as Kincaid rearranges the water lilies to mimic Monet's artwork. More broadly, the essay as a whole is an exercise in ekphrasis as Kincaid lyrically and meticulously details the many flowers, lakes, and bridges that populate Monet's garden. The overabundance of botanical detail may give the impression that one is immersed in a Normandy landscape of bearded irises, peonies, and poppies, but the reader is never sure whether she is securely located in the town of Giverny. The ambiguity of ekphrasis makes it impossible to discern whether Kincaid is describing the water lilies of Monet's paintings or the garden itself. Kincaid herself acknowledges the many complex layers of mimesis within this experience:

For here is the real thing, the real material thing: *wisteria, water lily, pond, Japanese bridge*—in its proper setting, a made-up landscape in Giverny, made up by the gardener Claude Monet. And yet I see these scenes now because I had seen them the day before in a museum (the Musée d'Orsay) and the day before that in another museum (the Musée Marmottan) and many days and many nights (while lying in bed) before that and it is the impression of them (*wisteria, water lily, pond, Japanese bridge*) that I had seen in these other ways before (the paintings in the museums, the productions in the books) that gave them a life, a meaning outside the ordinary. (128–29, emphasis mine)

As with much of her writing, Kincaid's recursive prose expresses belying ideas: the garden is "real" but also artificial in its "proper setting" and "made-up landscape." The passage's peculiar grammar also reveals what seem to be conflicting perceptions of the garden. The components of Monet's garden, "wisteria, water lily, pond, Japanese bridge," are repeated twice: first in parentheses and then outside of them.



Initially, Kincaid insists on their materiality and fixity in a specific location—“For here is the real thing”—although we are uncertain where exactly “here” is. But in the second instance, now enclosed in parentheses, they are an “impression” that is born out of and located in a variety of textual spaces, from the original paintings housed in the Musée d’Orsay and Musée Marmottan in Paris to the internationally circulated museum catalogs that contain reproductions of Monet’s artwork. Although the physical garden is fixed in a single location, the textual garden is mobile and travels across locations and across the mediums of painting, photography (in the form of catalog reproductions), and print.

It may seem odd that Kincaid turns to ekphrasis, which has traditionally been limited to poetry and is most closely associated with classical literature. But Kincaid yokes the rhetorical device to different purposes in her prose. Ekphrasis is constituted by the dynamic of two different artistic mediums coming into contact—what James Heffernan describes as the “representational friction that occurs whenever the dynamic pressure of verbal narrative meets the fixed forms of visual representation.”<sup>16</sup> This representational friction is accompanied by what is often seen as the adversarial relationship between the visual and verbal mediums as painter and poet duel it out to see whose art reigns supreme: Is it painting or poetry that best captures the abundant beauty of Giverny’s gardens? But W.J.T. Mitchell argues that there is another dynamic at work in ekphrasis—that of the relationship among the speaker, addressee, and described object.<sup>17</sup> Mitchell explains that in ekphrasis the writer is situated between the object and an addressee “who will be made to ‘see’ the object through the medium of the poet’s voice” (164). But this ekphrastic conversion is never fully attainable: the addressee may attempt to use the writer’s words to reconstruct the visual object, but the conversion of visual representation into verbal can never be achieved. Ekphrasis, then, is built on inevitable failure; it is a rhetorical device that registers the insurmountable gap between visual and verbal art.

We witness the gap between image and word as Kincaid futilely attempts to depict Giverny in all its sensuous details of bearded irises and blooming poppies. But even though ekphrasis traditionally revolves around the agon between visual and verbal, in Kincaid’s hands ekphrasis crystallizes around an additional conflict: the tension between physical and imaginative space. Kincaid articulates her complex understanding of ekphrasis at the conclusion of “Monet’s Garden”:

And yet the garden at Giverny that he (Monet) made is alive in the paintings, and the person seeing the paintings (and that would be anyone, really) can’t help but wonder where they came from, what the things in the painting were really like in their vegetable and animal (physical) form. In the narrative that we are in (the Western one), the word comes before the picture; the word makes us long for a picture, the word is never enough for the thing just seen—the picture! (130)

16 James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 19.

17 W. J. T. Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 151-81. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

At first glance, Kincaid seems to echo the classical understanding of ekphrasis when she asserts that the “word” only makes the reader “long for a picture.” (Indeed, the passage is remarkable in how closely it aligns with the language of Mitchell’s analysis.) But the tension between word and image is triangulated when Kincaid explains that the “person seeing the paintings ... can’t help but wonder where they came from, what the things in the paintings were really like in their vegetable and animal (physical) forms.” The tension is not contained to verbal and visual but extended to include the “vegetable and animal (physical) form.” In other words, the reader may long for the painting, but the museum-goer then longs for the garden. Moreover, Kincaid subtly acknowledges that the garden is both an artificial and a natural space; it is an aesthetic object “made” by Monet as much as his paintings are. Kincaid, therefore, describes a more complex structure of ekphrasis that is built on the failed conversion among the verbal, visual, *and* spatial. (This explains why Kincaid gravitates toward the *plein air* paintings of Impressionists such as Monet and Caillebotte, who planted their easels in the gardens that they also carefully manicured.)

Ekphrasis, then, functions in two ways: on the one hand it is itself unstable, and on the other it acts as a destabilizing force in Kincaid’s writing. The ekphrastic exchange among verbal, visual, and spatial is always in flux and never a one-way slide. It’s not simply that the poem or painting falls short of the garden itself; Kincaid repeatedly asks, “What would the garden be without the paintings?” (125). Kincaid mobilizes ekphrasis as a rhetorical device that keeps in play and registers the constant conversion among the verbal, visual, and spatial.

What’s more, ekphrasis often causes feelings of disorientation as Kincaid is unsure whether she is standing in the gardens of Giverny, looking at a Monet painting, or reading a museum catalog. Kincaid’s sense of misplacement recurs throughout all her garden travelogues, whether she is touring the greenhouses of Kew Gardens or plant-hunting in remote China and Nepal. For all her expertise as a gardener and garden writer, Kincaid can never shake the sense that her presence in these spaces is inappropriate or even a violation. Walking through the rooms of the house at Giverny, Kincaid describes how she “hurried, I rushed through. I felt as if at any moment now, the occupant, the owner (Monet, whoever it might be) would return and I would be caught ... in a place I was not really meant to be” (131). The sense of displacement is not surprising given Kincaid’s fraught relationship with the tradition of European literature and art that she has inherited. As discussed earlier, the garden is an acute instantiation of Kincaid’s colonial inheritance; she both is enthralled by the daffodil and also wants to scythe it. Ekphrasis rests on the unbridgeable gap between the visual and verbal, the painter and poet, the object and addressee. But like the daffodil gap, in Kincaid’s hands the ekphrastic gap is underwritten with the colonial violence of uneven power relations. Kincaid’s ekphrasis, then, destabilizes those imperial narratives that would elide the botanical plants’ origins and fix in place a dominant narrative, calling our attention to *both* discourses of material gardens *and* material gardens as discourse.

### III.

Kincaid may be confused whether she stands in Giverny or the Musée Marmottan, but this does not prevent her from methodically recounting the many

museum catalogs, memoirs, and gardening encyclopedias that accompany and archive these spaces. The experience of reading Kincaid's garden writing is akin to sifting through the author's reading notes of miscellany that ranges from a Pennsylvania seed catalog ("It is from [*The Cook's Garden*] that I always get my lettuce and other salad greens") to the autobiography of Mary Prince, an African slave who labored in the salt ponds of Antigua (89, 139–40). Kincaid even goes so far as to include a personal mail order to a fruit nursery in *My Garden (Book)*. These intertextual elements situate Kincaid's writing in an array of locations stretching from the US northeast to the Caribbean and beyond. Kincaid's sense of displacement, then, stems not from a lack of knowledge but rather an overabundance of it. Take for instance the author's tour of Kew Gardens in London, where she stumbles upon what she believes is the "most beautiful hollyhock I have ever seen." Upon reading the accompanying placard, however, she is devastated to learn that the flower is no hollyhock but a cotton plant:

It was not a hollyhock at all but *Gossypium*, and its common name is cotton. Cotton all by itself exists in perfection, with malice toward none; in the sharp, swift, even brutal dismissive words of the botanist Oakes Ames, it is reduced to an economic annual, but the tormented, malevolent role it has played in my ancestral history is not forgotten by me. (150)

Cotton exists in different discursive spaces all at once: "by itself" it is an "innocent" plant, whereas in the language of botany it is reduced to an "economic annual."<sup>18</sup> But as Kincaid points out, the language of economy is a disconcerting euphemism for the "malevolent role" it has played in the history of slavery in the Americas. (Also implicit in this passage is the hierarchical distinction between "cotton" and "*Gossypium*," the plant's common and Latinate names.) Like the daffodil, cotton triggers painful personal memories for Kincaid as she recalls the childhood summers she spent in Antigua achingly separating the blooms from pods of cotton plants. As much as the plant produces feelings of instability for Kincaid, it is also meticulously "contextualized" by her. I use "contextualize" in its most literal sense, meaning to place in a specific context—or, in this case, many specific contexts. Depending on its context or discursive location, the cotton operates either as innocent flora, a passive victim of the standardizing impulses of botany, an active participant in the Atlantic slave trade, or a triggering memory. The question is not so much *what* does cotton mean but rather *where* does it mean?<sup>19</sup>

On the most obvious level, the aforementioned scene provides a ready answer to this question. "This is not a fiction," Kincaid insists; "this all occurred to me while seeing this particular flower in bloom in Kew Gardens," the world's largest and most storied botanic garden (151). This is one of many instances when Kincaid fixates on the botanic garden and its curious history within the machinations of empire.<sup>20</sup>

18 For more on the pivotal role that cotton has played in modern capitalism, see: Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

19 I borrow this pithy turn-of-phrase from Lytle Shaw's scholarship on site-specific art and poetry. See Shaw, "Where Does It Mean? The Site-Specific Critic as Ignorant Schoolmaster," paper presented at the annual meeting for the Modernist Studies Association, Boston, Massachusetts, November 19–22, 2015.

20 Katherine Bergren discusses in detail how Kew Gardens played a vital role in building English nationalism and empire. See: Katherine Bergren, "Localism Unrooted: Gardening in the Prose of Jamaica

Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, botanic gardens served as research centers for the development of new plants—including plantation crops such as rubber, quinine, and tea that were destined for the tropical colonies. Moreover, the botanic garden served as clearinghouses for plant specimens collected across the empire. It was in the botanic garden that such plants were collected and classified and that plant taxonomy was developed. In fact, as Kincaid recounts, Carl Linnaeus worked in the botanic garden of George Clifford (then director of the Dutch East India Company), and it was there that Linnaeus began to develop his system of binomial nomenclature. As Kincaid details, the development of botanical taxonomy was an imperial project that erased the indigenous origins and histories of plants as they were ushered into a new “universal” classification of plant nomenclature: “[T]hese new plants from far away, like the people far away, had no history, no names, and so they could be given names. And who was there to dispute Linnaeus, even if there was someone who would listen? This naming of things is so crucial to possession ... that it is a murder, an erasing ...” (122). Historians such as Richard Drayton have argued how botanical research played a crucial role in the reconnaissance of colonies, whose raw materials would lay the groundwork for new plantation economies that cultivated and exported these horticultural goods. As Drayton notes, the botanic garden acted at once as “meditative retreat, scientific collection, menagerie, public playground, palace, and experimental station.”<sup>21</sup>

Kincaid similarly points to the botanic garden’s multiple functions as tourist attraction, scientific laboratory, and engine of empire. The author often sets her essays against the backdrop of the botanic garden, noting how her experience of the natural world is highly mediated by these museological venues. Notably, in the aforementioned scene, it is the placard that reveals the true identity of the cotton plant; if not for Kew Gardens’ curatorial texts, the author would have unwittingly believed that she was admiring an innocent hollyhock. Such scenes invite us to consider how our understanding of natural objects is governed by botanic gardens as well as other cultural institutions like heritage centers (such as the Giverny estate) and museums (like the Musée Marmottan, which houses the largest collection of Monet’s paintings in the world). But Kincaid does not draw attention to these museological institutions to make a point about the false experiences that they offer. Rather, she suggests that the garden is not just fixed in specific physical locations like Kew Gardens, Giverny, or the Musée Marmottan, but operates within discourses of the botanical sciences, colonial history, and art history. The botanic garden is one of the many institutions that explain, circulate, and display the natural world—and in doing so, regulates our experience of it.

Kincaid and William Wordsworth,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22.2 (Spring 2015): 303–25.

21 Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), xii–xiii. In addition to Drayton, numerous other historians and anthropologists have explored the imperial history of the botanic garden. See: Lucile H. Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Garden* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Londa L. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Indeed, it is worth noting that many of Kincaid’s garden essays predate the publication of these seminal books on the history and anthropology of the botanic garden.

This is not to say that the garden exists only as a textual space for Kincaid, who often emphasizes her bodily experiences of the garden. The author details how she sat in the shade provided by a rubber tree in the St. John botanical garden and how her back ached from the labor of digging new garden beds in her Vermont yard. Moreover, the author often strays from the “objective” language of botany and the prim-and-proper prose of Victorian gardeners such as Gertrude Jekyll. Kincaid recalls how in her childhood she used the botanic garden in St. John as a hideout where she would steal away with and kiss other girls. When reading a particularly dry biography of Jekyll, Kincaid ponders the garden designer’s repressed sexuality: “This book is very decent and discreet—just the qualities I want in a friend, but not in a book I am reading. Was Gertrude ever in love with anyone? Did she ever have sex?” (94) As Agnese Fidecaro argues, Kincaid sees the garden as a “sphere in which the materiality of the body and sexuality reasserts itself,” one that makes space for female “bodily unruliness.”<sup>22</sup>

#### IV.

I understand that this essay has seemed to vacillate between two opposing ways of understanding the garden. Are we to regard the garden as a physical space, a sensorium of bodily experiences? Or is it a primarily textual space made up of the myriad discursive traditions that have framed our understanding of the garden and the natural world more largely? I have postponed answering these questions outright in the hopes of showing how Kincaid avoids such a binary. Instead Kincaid favors a more dialectical understanding of the garden, one that she illustrates in the essay “Earthly Delights” when she remarks that she would like multiple copies of her gardening books:

I would like to have two copies of *The Graham Stuart Rose Book*, one for when I am sitting inside my house, dry and comfortable, and one for when I am tramping around my garden in the rain and mud, or walking through the sprinkler while it’s on. I read my books but I also *use* them; that is, sometimes the reading is almost a physical act. (80–81, emphasis in the original)

It seems odd for Kincaid to conflate the acts of gardening and reading. But she is not so much equating manual and intellectual labor as she is dissolving the divisions between inside and outside, between the textual garden in the book and the physical garden that lies in the outside “rain and mud.” For Kincaid, the book is a tool akin to spades, hoes, pruning shears, and other gardening equipment—to be “used” and not just read: “I use my books about the garden in almost the same way I use the other things connected to it. My copy of Peter Beale’s *Roses* is tattered and smudged, because I read it while I am in the middle of planting or weeding or watering” (77).

This tension between the textual and physical garden is also exposed on the cover of Kincaid’s collection *My Garden (Book)*. The collection’s title contains peculiar punctuation that includes parentheses enclosing the word *Book* and

<sup>22</sup> Agnese Fidecaro, “Jamaica Kincaid’s Practical Politics of the Intimate in *My Garden (Book)*,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34.1/2 (2006): 255–56.

a terminating colon.<sup>23</sup> The parentheses seems to act as a qualifier, suggesting that “My Garden” exists only textually as a book that participates in a tradition of garden writing. (This is further reinforced if we interpret the colon as introducing a list of items—that, in other words, *My Garden (Book)*: is followed by and equated to the list of gardening essays that comprise the collection.) Rachel Azima similarly points out that Kincaid’s use of parentheses distinguishes the “garden book” from the “garden” itself. By placing *Book* within parentheses, Azima asserts, Kincaid subordinates the “writerliness of the text” and correspondingly makes primary the “physical space of the garden.”<sup>24</sup> But although the parenthetical does suggest a distinction between the “physical” and “writerly” garden, I would argue that the relationship between the two is not as hierarchical as Azima claims it is. The paratextual<sup>25</sup> elements of the book’s cover suggest a more complex play of punctuation. The paperback editions of *My Garden (Book)*: feature a pull quote beneath the title, in which a reviewer deems Kincaid’s collection to be “[o]ne of the finest (garden) books I have read.” Notably, the pull quote reverses the parenthetical: it is the garden and not the book that is enclosed in parenthesis and therefore subordinated. The cover design, then, playfully mirrors and keeps in tension “Garden (Book)” and “(Garden) Book.”

With its complex insights into the interpenetrations between textual and physical space, Kincaid’s garden writing has much to offer to the field of ecocriticism. The relationship between place and literature has been at the heart of ecocriticism since its emergence in the 1980s. In their landmark anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1994), Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty position ecocriticism as an “earth-centered approach to literary studies” and center the field around the connections “between literature and the physical environment.”<sup>26</sup> For many ecocritics, this relationship has been a relatively harmonious one: the power of literature, so it goes, is its ability to capture the particularities of place. But more recently, scholars such as Ursula Heise

23 Although many of Kincaid’s publications contain colons in the title, this collection’s particular mixture of parenthetical and colon is unique as the colon proceeds rather than precedes the word *Book*.

24 Rachel Azima, “‘Not-the-Native’: Self-Transplantation, Ecocriticism, and Postcolonialism in Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Garden (Book)*,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 13.2–14.1 (2006–2007): 112.

25 More precisely, Gerard Genette would regard the cover and pull quote as part of the “publisher’s peritext,” which he defines as the “whole zone of peritext that is the direct and principal (but not exclusive) responsibility of the publisher ... the cover, the title page, and their appendages” (16). The peritext is part of the book’s greater “paratext,” which makes present the reception of the book to its audience: “[paratext] ensure[s] the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book... [T]he paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or—a word Borges used apropos of a preface—a ‘vestibule’ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (1–2). See: Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

26 *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii. Glotfelty herself was the first appointed professor of literature and the environment in the United States, a position that she currently holds at the University of Nevada, Reno. The main academic body of ecocriticism is ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment), which publishes the journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment). Many scholars have gone on to criticize ecocriticism for its disciplinary focus on literary studies.

have scrutinized how this veneration of the “sense of place” underwrites much of American environmental literature, in which intimacy with local landscapes is venerated as the ethics par excellence of environmentalism.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, geographers such as Doreen Massey have noted how the fetishization of place can lead to reactionary forms of cultural insularity or even ethnonationalism.<sup>28</sup>

At first glance, Kincaid seems to exemplify this place-based ethos in her plenteous descriptions of poppy fields and water lily ponds. But the botanical details of Kincaid’s prose do not ground the reader in a concrete place, nor do they serve as an index of place. Quite the opposite, the author undermines any attempts at verisimilitude. In Kincaid’s ekphrastic renderings of Giverny, the reader feels unmoored, unsure whether she is standing in Monet’s garden in Normandy, viewing a painting in the Musée Marmottan, or looking at a reproduction in a museum catalog. Kincaid flits among the discourses of botany, colonial history, personal memory, and memoir—sometimes all within the space of a single paragraph. Operating under a centripetal rather than centrifugal force, the garden opens outward into a variety of different places rather than turning inward into one single place. The garden is an unstable site where Kincaid experiences the slippages among its plural identities as colonial project, leisurely hobby, painterly muse, and more. Kincaid, then, offers a cautionary to ecocritics who may read and champion environmental literature for its verisimilitude and recording of place—a caution that is especially pertinent for postcolonial literature, which already is often read as ethnographic rather than literary.

Although Kincaid lavishly details the flower varieties in her gardens, she also makes impossible the feeling of immersion in her landscapes. This is partly the effect of Kincaid’s trademark paratactic prose, in which short clauses or sentences are placed alongside one another with coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions between them. This paratactic style abounds in Kincaid’s garden writing:

The buddleia “African Queen” is said (by Dan Hinkley in his catalogue) to bloom in midsummer, but it bloomed before the late (and false) blooming wisteria and it bloomed just after the date of midsummer in Finland; the buddleia “Potter’s Purple” is blooming now in late July, but I had bought it because I thought it would bloom in late August to early September; and so what will I do then, when late August arrives (as surely it will, since I like it; but winter I do not like at all and so I am never convinced that it will actually return); to what can I look forward? (14)

This is one sample among countless others that showcases the staccato rhythms of Kincaid’s prose: this sentence alone includes more than five subordinate clauses, three semicolons, and a parenthetical. Kincaid may cite the language of horticulturalists such as Dan Hinkley and chart the various bloom schedules of wisteria, but the horticultural details never coalesce to form a coherent picture of her Vermont garden. Gayatri Spivak argues in her canonical reading of *Lucy* that Kincaid’s parataxis

27 Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

28 Doreen Massey. *Space, Place, Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 146–56.

demonstrates the “power of language to withhold its own power of making connections.”<sup>29</sup> Brent Edwards goes on to contend that it “offers contiguity without connective, a disconnection between fictional past and present.”<sup>30</sup> In the context of Kincaid’s garden writing, both parataxis and ekphrasis work together to withhold the act of place-making, of connecting the reader to a place.

Yet Kincaid’s writing does not simply dissolve into deterritorialized placelessness. As the title of her collection intimates, she is invested in creating and even possessing “my garden.” Instead, the author’s paratactic and ekphrastic practices pull between two seemingly opposite poles. Kincaid articulates her strategy in an oblique aside:

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 unraveling 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. (24)

On the one hand, Kincaid admits to enjoying her opaque prose, which confounds any attempts to “unravel” or extract any coherent sense of place in her garden writing. Yet the metaphor of textile also suggests how Kincaid sees her writing as a densely interwoven “large piece of cloth.” It is often assumed that protracted descriptions of natural landscapes create a “sense of place” for the writer and reader. This is especially the case in environmental scholarship; one needs only think of Aldo Leopold’s sketches of Sauk County or Wendell Berry’s meditations on Appalachia to understand how ecocritics often conflate extended representations of landscapes with an intimacy with place. But in Kincaid’s hands, prosaic density—the “thickness” and “condensed” quality of her writing—makes her gardens impenetrable; “thick” description unsettles rather than settles the reader. In other words, Kincaid’s gardens suffer not from placelessness but from an oversaturation of place.

Kincaid’s garden writing, then, is what we may call *overterritorialized*. If we understand deterritorialization as the loosening of ties between place and culture, Kincaid overtethers her gardens to a catholic array of scientific, colonial, and aesthetic discourses. Her overterritorialized writing upends the usual assumptions of how literature represents place, how familiarity with a landscape automatically equates to an attachment with it. In the context of the Caribbean and other postcolonial ecologies, fluency with place does not engender connection but rather opposite feelings of alienation and even enmity. In her layered and sedimented prose, Kincaid does not create a “sense of place” so much as open up the garden within a heterogeneous overlapping of time and space, unearthing centuries of colonial and scientific conquest. Kincaid, then, offers a unique example of loco-descriptive literature that is “grounded” in place and yet also critical of the structures of place and place-making.

At one point, while contemplating the long history of environmental violence in the Caribbean, Kincaid asks herself: “[W]hen I come across these true and precise

29 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Thinking Cultural Questions in ‘Pure’ Literary Terms,” *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, eds. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (London: Verso, 2000), 338.

30 Brent Edwards, “Selvedge Salvage,” *Cultural Studies* 17.1 (2003): 29.



details ... where should I place myself?" (153). Of course, this is a question commonly asked by many diasporic writers grappling with their migratory identities. But the question becomes especially charged in the oeuvre of Kincaid's writing. To circle back to this essay's opening query, how would the meaning of this question shift if we understood it literally rather than figuratively? We can infer from Kincaid's multi-spatial and multi-temporal literature that there could never be a singular response to the question she poses. Kincaid's gardens encapsulate both a physical place and a discursive realm, traversing not only geography but also discipline and genre. In doing so, they act as the literal and figurative grounds on which to think across the twinned histories of natural and imperial histories.