Cultivating Discomfort

I open this final chapter, about cultivation, discomfort, and the cultivation of discomfort, with an end that ushers us back toward a beginning. In the final sentence of Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Garden (Book)* (1999), the Antiguan writer provocatively concludes her garden reveries by asserting, “I am in a state of constant discomfort and I like this state so much I would like to share it” (1999, 229). What is it about Kincaid’s relation to her garden that produces this unabashed discomfort? Indeed, what is so enjoyable for her about discomfort, and how might we read and learn from her desire to “share” it? Kincaid’s garden book—which explores her “attachment in adult life to the garden” (3) through colonial histories, botany, consumerism, mundane garden life, and exotic garden travels—is replete with sketches of bodily and psychic discomfort. Unlike the more romantic genre of gardening prose, Kincaid unearths her Vermont garden by contextualizing it within histories of colonization and their attendant human and botanical transplantations. In a similarly unromantic gesture, she also shares her own masterful fantasies through her garden meditations. Her fantasies of violence thus come mingle across the text with the histories of colonialism from which she emerged as a subject.

In the earliest pages of *My Garden (Book)*, Kincaid narrates a scene in which she finds herself inexplicably digging up parts of her lawn into “the most peculiar ungardenlike shapes,” until one day she realizes “that the garden I was making (and am still making and will always be making) resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it” (1999, 7–8). For Kincaid, the garden is a repository of history, “an exercise in memory” that draws her back to uncontainable pasts both personal and political (8). Like those histories it elicits, the garden escapes and refuses the will of the gardener who desires mastery over it. Through Kincaid’s discomfort,
we begin to learn the ecological stakes of human mastery and the critical potentialities of feeling, recognizing, and inhabiting our own discomforts. Throughout the text, she evokes the garden as a place rooted in memory and history and underscores the personal and political pasts—and the forms of violence that constitute them—that grow into and through the garden. It is a space in which the seeds of mastery continue, in more and less subtle ways, to germinate through the gardener and her particular attachments. The discomforting turn of Kincaid’s text also circles us back to the very beginning of *Unthinking Mastery*, to the grounding claim that while the rhetoric and activism of decolonialism have decried mastery in its expressly colonial form, they have failed to account for the ways that mastery has continued to propagate in other, but critically related, forms.
and practices of both political and mundane life. The scale of dehumanist potentialities in the previous two chapters have moved us from intrahuman violence to the violence of humans over animals. In chapter 3, I considered through the figure of the humanitarian the complicity of liberal subjectivity with the systemic dehumanizing violence it wishes to amend, while in chapter 4 I broadened the horizon of this violence through a discomforting embrace of the human’s animality and a critique of the human’s masterful violence against animals. In this final chapter, we are turned ever more expansively toward dehumanist ecologies—and toward a practice of being uncomfortable in the world. A crucial part of this discomfort will come from having to reckon with the agency of nonhumans (the plants and animals who inhabit Kincaid’s garden), since these other lives and agencies are caught up in a becoming with human agencies. When it comes to comfort, it is not only the human’s that is at stake.

If comfort is, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, about “the fit between body and object” (2013, 425), discomfort allows us to pose the question of why some bodies can and cannot fit comfortably within particular spaces. I have discussed Ahmed already in chapter 2 in terms of her phenomenological reading of Fanon’s embodiment of racial difference, but here I am interested in Ahmed’s “Queer Feelings,” in which she theorizes discomfort’s generative potential. Ahmed argues that discomfort need not be read as strictly “constraining or negative” but rather can be transformative for normative social life: “To feel uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives. Discomfort is hence not about assimilation or resistance, but about inhabiting norms differently. The inhabitation is generative or productive insofar as it does not end with the failure of norms to be secured, but with possibilities of living that do not ‘follow’ these norms through” (2013, 430). It is not so much that discomfort becomes “radically” transformative by breaking away from norms completely but rather that discomfort shows us how to abide differently within those norms. But discomfort is also a passage through which we are moved by “a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving” toward other (perhaps no less discomforting) possibilities for collective life (425). Kincaid’s garden prose cultivates discomfort, in part by showing us how within bourgeois life, according to Ahmed, one “can be made uncomfortable by one’s own comforts” (425)—how even within the ease of relative affluence, discomfort can persist and proliferate. But Kincaid also shows
us how this bourgeois discomfort leads back to other discomforting histories, such as those of colonial dispossession and theft, and the discomforts produced through the recognition of one’s always failed mastery over the object in relation to which one seeks comfortable refuge. Crucially, Kincaid also makes her readers uncomfortable, by confronting us with her own violent fantasies and with her own perversely Orientalist representations of other dispossessed peoples (a topic to which I return in detail below). She thus writes her garden through relays of unease, offering discomfort as a politically fertile affect.

**Transplanting Discomfort**

For all the ways that discomfort can suddenly befall us, it is also an inheritance. In Derridian terms, we can call discomfort a hauntological affect that marks the present with a past, one that is in no sense easy to trace (Derrida 1994). Because so much of our discomfort—political, intergenerational, cultural, sexual—is inherited, and thus often unconscious, its potential to become an affective site of political resistance and reinvention requires a degree of psychic tilling. In her work on emotion and education, Megan Boler argues that a “pedagogy of discomfort” (1999, 196) may in fact be not only desirable but ethically imperative. For Boler, pedagogies of discomfort emphasize the bodies and materialities that both make life possible and differentiate (often radically) some lives from others. Practicing and teaching our discomforts can become acts of learning to live with the ambiguities and uncertainties of our complex ethical entanglements. Teaching discomfort, then, is an act of uprooting our deeply felt—but often deeply buried—discomforts. It is a way, in other words, of making discomfort conscious to those who embody it, as well as to those entangled with it in more and less complex ways. Yet when we learn discomfort unconsciously, we do so in ways that are complex and often difficult to articulate. This is at least in part because discomfort is often transmitted through composite networks of time and transplanted across generations and geographies. The site of the garden is a particularly fecund site through which to think discomfort precisely because it is a threshold space—often situated between the home and the world, between culture and nature.

The garden for me has always been a vexed space and the act of cultivation has been woven through with wonderment, confusion, and intense
unease. Some of my earliest memories are of my mother at work in her garden, a space that seemed to flourish magically at her touch. In her famous essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1983), Alice Walker reminded feminist thinkers to look “low” rather than “high” to find the artful legacies embedded in women’s work. Like Walker’s, my mother’s garden has always been a space of extraordinary beauty and bounty. It has been an open sanctuary for her across the stages of her adult life, one situated beyond (but importantly, adjacent to) a home marked by palpable forms of cross-cultural, gendered, and intergenerational discomforts over time. Similar to Kincaid’s own emergence as a gardener, my mother’s attachment to the garden began in the early stages of motherhood. The act of cultivating food seemed hand in hand with the act of raising humans (a deep immersion into growing wild things). My mother’s gardening life began in a plot of a small community garden in central Canada, at the intersection of mourning and motherhood. Having moved from her beloved Montreal (a city to which she had once migrated by way of Belfast) to what then seemed to her a stark and hopeless prairie land, she found the city of Winnipeg had little to offer her beyond the conventions of married life for which she had moved.

My memories of my mother’s garden do not stem from that community plot but rather are rooted two plots later in her magnificent garden behind 134 Westgate, where we were raised beneath a canopy of giant elm trees in a beige brick home that was, for most of my life, in a state of unrelenting restoration. Like the house itself, the garden was my mother’s passion. But unlike the home, the garden was a sanctuary outside—in “nature”—that allowed her to separate herself off from the uneasy life that was unfurling within the home. If our home was tumultuously cleaved by cultural differences (my mother was a proudly disobedient feminist from Ireland who was a product of the Jewish diaspora, and my father—who hailed from India—was keen to have a “proper” family in an era when interracial families simply were not so), the garden for my mother was a refuge from the forms of physical and psychic discomfort proliferating within the home. But if her garden—in all its glory—was a space of refuge for my mother, it was also one into which the discomforts of the home spilled out into the earth. My mother used the garden as a repository of the political and personal forms of violence that had shaped and governed her life. The garden was also—and crucially—a space in which she did violence to herself, pushing her body beyond its limits and “beating the shit out of herself” (to
quote a recurring yet unusually crass utterance of hers) in order to work out the impossible social dynamics that had made life inside intolerable. As a repository for violence and its fertile ground, my mother’s garden was always a magnificent site of her discomfort—and a space within which I could not help but to share in it.

My mother’s passion for the urban wild occupied an overwhelming degree of psychic space in my childhood. She was the founder of the Coalition to Save the Elms, a grassroots movement that proactively prevented the devastating effects of Dutch Elm Disease in Winnipeg. She battled against the Manitoba hog industry for its toxic environmental and social effects, prevented the demolition of countless historical buildings, and fought to save natural urban spaces from becoming sites of urban development. As a well-known environmental activist in our city, my mother held a certain acclaim as an ecofeminist renegade, so much so that a therapist of my youth once asked me in her presence whether I rather wished I was a tree, so that I could be assured of her absolute attention and unabated care.

It makes perfect psychoanalytic sense, then, that I would later come to work during my undergraduate summers as a tree planter in Northern Canada. For Canadians, tree planting is a fairly well-known subculture, comprised of mostly young, mostly white urbanites—often university students—who travel out to “the bush” to plant seedlings across clear-cut forests. By law, the logging industry of Canada is required to replant a percentage of the trees they cut, and planting companies bid for contracts to replant demolished forests. This results in a somewhat questionable net gain for the environment, since it promotes the regrowth of forests after they have been heavily logged. The culture of tree planting is one marked by brutal labor practices in which planters—with hundreds of saplings strapped to their bodies, sporting hard hats, steel-toed boots, and heavily duct-taped fingers—maneuver their way through logging debris in conditions ranging from snow to blistering sun. Planters are often swarmed by insects (black flies, deer flies, horse flies, etc.) as they pick their way across devastated geographies. The days are long, the repetitive motion of the work tolls on bodies, and there are days when the only sustenance a planter has for the workday is devoured by bears while planters look on helplessly at a distance. Planting is typically piecework, and most relatively skilled planters—conditions depending—plant thousands of saplings per day.
For all its brutalities, tree-planting is also a coming-of-age experience for many young Canadians and a first attempt for most at communal living. This seamless relation between the intense rigors of planting life and the social bonds shaped through it are stunningly captured through Canadian artist Sarah Anne Johnson’s exhibit *Tree Planting* (2005) (fig. 5.2). Moving between photography and still vignettes crafted through small clay figures and fabricated landscapes, Johnson’s work charts the intensities, rigors, and passions of life in the bush. She captures the wildness of humans and the magic of flora and fauna that persist in and around intentional ecological catastrophe. In her piece *The Buffer Zone* (fig. 5.3), she represents from an aerial view a picturesque Canadian highway cutting through forest. Yet she reveals this forest to be an illusion crafted for highway passengers who cannot see that just beyond the tree line lies ecological devastation. Through an expanse of felled timber that extends beyond the borders of the image, Johnson exposes the hidden life of the clear-cut. Across her work, humans are represented both as extensions of the natural world and in stark contrast...
to it. If the clear-cut is itself devastation, so too are human bodies devastated within it. And if the clear-cut—despite its ruin—insists on life and beauty after its willed destruction, the damaged bodies of human planters and their solidarities likewise continue to vibrate and echo with utopian promise.

Tree-planting was my first experience of communal life, my first time being in an environment in which nudity was mundane, in which the taboo practices of urination and defecation became—often out of necessity—a public affair, and in which filth, wounds, and the body’s return to uncultivated states were badges of extraordinary honor. The hardest work, the wildest parties, the closest to nature, the most intimate moments of collective life unfurled alongside—and because of—environmental devastation. If planting culture holds a radical social promise in its act of collective environmental repair, it is also haunted by those other socialities at the expense of which planting culture emerges. Clear-cut logging is very often—and often unbeknownst to planters—undertaken on unceded indigenous territory, with indigenous communities having scarce (if any) input about or

benefit from the destruction of their lands. The commitment to practicing communal living and feeling (often brutally) utopic, in other words, comes at the cost of violent eradications both environmental and social. How can we think about such profound bonds formed through more and less conscious engagements with radical violence? Jodi Byrd’s The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism (2011) is a vital touchstone here, as she points to how settler colonialisms are “predicated on the very systems that propagate and maintain the dispossession of indigenous peoples for the common good of the world” (xix). Here the questions of complicity and dispossession that framed the preceding two chapters surface again, summoning us to consider ways of inhabiting our own discomforting politics differently—of living alternatively within our contradictions rather than seeking to escape them.

It so happens that I was at my most poetically prolific in the clear-cut. Often miserably uncomfortable, driven to madness by swarms of bugs and the inescapability of penetrating sun or driving rain, I composed poems aloud in the trenches. This was art as salvation: poems became my way of working through the intolerable conditions of the labor. Without paper, ink, or free hands to capture them, these poems lived in the clear-cut as I worked—as though everyday language itself was being embedded in the earth along with thousands of saplings. Every once in a while a line will return to me, but most of them live in the clear-cuts that by now have become young forests again. If the language of those poems remains largely imprecise to me, what I remember of them is their tenor and tone, the ways they were always putting into language the urgent feelings of discomfort that came through me but also seemed to emerge from the clear-cut quiet of forests that once were. Without the precision of language, they sound to me now—from the distances of time and geography—like melancholic howls of hope. They took up the real and imagined histories of broadly conceived indigenous lives that had inhabited those desecrated forests and wrestled with the labor of piecework that I desired so much also to be peace work. They were poems that sought out complicity, that struggled not to extricate my labor from the forms of violence that enabled it but aimed instead at putting the present into conscious contact with histories—human and ecological—that had made possible my discomforting labor and communal bonds. Replete with failure and an uneasy awareness of complicity, these clear-cut poems took root in my own vital ambivalence, grasping at
the queer promise of being exactly where I was and trying to inhabit the world otherwise there and then. *Here and now.*

**Vital Ambivalence**

Kincaid’s desire to “share” her discomfort and her often discomforting ecological prose become a way of locating her own violent entanglements and inescapable contradictions while bringing her readers into the folds of their own. She enacts *vital ambivalence*—a practice of representation that emphasizes, politicizes, and embraces the subject’s contradictions and slippages. Kincaid stages her ambivalence through her attention to the living, agential space of the garden. Her vital ambivalence upturns the unthinking proliferation of masterful subjectivity by emphasizing the split subject that is at once masterful *and* oriented toward decolonization. Following R. Radhakrishnan’s insistence that it is necessary for postcolonial studies not to read ambivalence as a sign of the postcolonial project’s weakness but rather to “politicize this given ambivalence and produce it agentially” (2000, 37), I read Kincaid’s ambivalent gardening prose as an urgent and provocative call to return to the “seeds” of our cultivated subjectivities and to follow Kincaid’s recognition within her garden of the “series of doubts upon series of doubts” (1999, 15) at root in our own subjectivities.

My contention here is that through the practices—linguistic and material—that shape her garden, Kincaid tends a decolonial ethics through split forms of self-representations that refuse modernity’s insistence on a unified self. Indeed, Kincaid herself engages a form of vulnerable writing in which she takes up the ecological by perverting genres and insisting on a form of self-narration that is not reducible to Enlightenment subjectivity. Her contradictions signal not a gap between conscious and unconscious drives or a Freudian version of contradiction and complexity but two kinds of consciousness at play in the subject. She is *both* a fierce and antagonistic critic of colonial domination *and*, as a bourgeois gardener, a willful participant in forms of dispossession that she ties back to histories of colonization. What her garden reveries make clear is that in order to mobilize feminist, ecocritical, and decolonial discourses, the foundational problem of mastery that underscores and binds them must be queried through the self-representation of the subject who is situated ambivalently in relation to Enlightenment thinking and its worldly manifestations.
While Kincaid queries “the relationship between gardening and conquest” (1999, 116), this relation remains expressly equivocal across her garden writing. She continuously sketches scenes, memories, and relations of violence that link the garden to more explicitly “political” forms of domination, coming to the realization that the garden is “a way of accommodating and making acceptable, comfortable, familiar, the wild, the strange” (44). And she shows us that part of this “strange” and “wild” nature springs precisely from within a version of the human itself, from the uncanny landscapes outside and inside the human. A case in point is the brilliant movement of discomfort across the concluding paragraph of My Garden (Book).

She begins with a return to an Edenic English garden after having traveled through Chinese landscapes in her ecotourist search for seeds to plant in her Vermont garden. Sitting at a dining table at Gravetye Manor in Sussex, once home of the famous English botanist and “inventor” of the English garden, William Robinson, Kincaid is struck with a violent fantasy. Amid the stunning beauty and reverence of Gravetye’s famous gardens, Kincaid writes: “I had a delicious lunch in the dining room, and while eating I was struck with the desire to behead all of my fellow diners who were not traveling with me . . . because . . . because . . . because. Eden is like that, so rich in comfort, it tempts me to cause discomfort” (229). At Gravetye, with its soils rich in colonial histories of dispossession, Kincaid indulges both in the beauty of the place and in historically based fantasies of beheadings. Beauty, space, proximity, and temporality are entangled in this fantasy of execution, where (presumably white) strangers with whom she shares in Gravetye’s indulgence become headless sacrificial bodies. In this fantasy, Kincaid as colonial subject holds sovereign power—but a power over undifferentiated subjects who are also critically like her by virtue of a shared passion for colonial English gardens.

Kincaid’s ecological writings have been taken up to some extent by the recent surge of postcolonial ecocriticism, which seeks to map the vital connections between environmental and postcolonial studies. This scholarship is founded on a core agreement that “what the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment—one that requires attention, in turn, to the cultural politics of representation” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 12). While highlighting the relations between economic power and environmental sustainability, post-
colonial ecocriticism as a discursive field is also invested in how global narratives intervene in dominant formulations of the environment as an exploitable resource for certain human populations and how nondominant environmentalisms emerge through such narratives. Because in this discourse globalization is understood as a “latter-day colonialism based upon economic and cultural imperialism,” postcolonial studies has become a critical way through which to read environmental crises and the narratives that represent them (Roos and Hunt 2010, 3).

Although Kincaid’s ecological writings are familiar within this interdisciplinary turn, the emphasis has been on her explicit critiques of colonialism. In the introduction to their coedited volume, for instance, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley employ Kincaid’s gardening prose to bolster an ecocritical critique of the “eighteenth-century homogenization of the natural world” (2011, 10). They argue that Kincaid becomes a crucial supplement to Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1994), in which he dwells on the theory of natural history and the power of language to shape dominant ideologies. Unlike Foucault, who was not explicitly concerned with the colonial politics of “ordering,” Kincaid emphasizes such politics through her critique of the (re)naming and classification of plant species during the colonial period. For her, “this naming of things is so crucial to possession—a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away—that it is a murder, an erasing” (1999, 122). While ecocritical scholars have been quite right to see Kincaid as a crucial voice in environmental critiques of imperialism, the tendency in this scholarship is to cite her most direct critiques of the colonial enterprise without dwelling on the discomforting ambivalence of her prose—an ambivalence that I contend is absolutely crucial to politicizing her work beyond a straight critique of imperialism.

I use the term “straight” here to signal how queer theoretical trajectories can help to reorient Kincaid’s work for and within postcolonial ecocritical scholarship. Jill Casid (2005) has pointed to the practice of relandscaping in colonial territories that was so vital to the imperial project. For Casid, looking back on the landscape of the West Indies as a colonial archive allows us to see the queer seeds of resistance that were always and from the outset germinating. Kincaid brings this history into the present, representing the postcolonial subject as one vitally and ambivalently tied to colonial force and the garden as a site of enduring colonial mastery. When Kincaid
posits a relation between gardening and conquest, for instance, she queries whether we might cast the conqueror as a gardener and the one who works the fields as the conquered (1999, 116). Doing so, she recalls the slave plantation, putting it into discomforting relation with her own Vermont garden. Embedded in Kincaid’s critique of colonial practices of mastery are the discontinuities and ambivalences of the postcolonial subject whose practices in relation to her garden often rehearse and subvert colonial modes and fantasies of mastery.

Recalling Halberstam’s (2011) utopic summons to inhabit and embrace our failures, we can read Kincaid’s always failed attempts at mastering her garden as a promise of stalling mastery. The vital ambivalence that she stages across her garden prose—always shifting between being the conqueror within her garden and being conquered (by colonists and by her garden), by casting herself as both Subject and Object—gestures toward Monique Allewaert’s argument about personhood and colonialism in the American tropics. Allewaert contends that when we read across “artifacts” of the American tropics, we witness the emergence of human subjectivities that do not conform to the models of subjectivity made dominant through Enlightenment thought. Reading artifacts from the American tropics, Allewaert illustrates “the emergence of a disaggregated conception of the body that enables an understanding of the person that cannot be reduced to either of these periodizations’ understandings of the human, nature, or politics” (2013, 9). Kincaid’s vital ambivalence is attached but not reducible to the Enlightenment conception of the human, and her garden writing emphasizes a subject whose position in relation to the “natural” world remains haunted by both the force of Enlightenment thought and those other “conceptions” of subjectivity that it has repressed.

**Wild Disruptions**

In a fascinating discussion, Caribbean-born Vermont gardeners Kincaid and Kathleen M. Balutansky express their apprehensions about “colonizing” their gardens as territories already inhabited by other species. Balutansky explicitly links her gardening practice to the violent erasures and disposessions of colonization. To this concern, Kincaid replies that “people with our history, when we give it some thought, we are very careful about the issue of displacing others” (Balutansky and Kincaid 2002, 795). She pos-
its people of the tropics, in contrast to Europeans, as those who “live along with things” (795). Kincaid represents this tension in her garden prose, such as when an American botanist visits her garden and suggests the removal of certain trees from her property (1999, 34). Casting the trees as agents deserving apology, Kincaid is affronted by the audacity of the American who would not hesitate to destroy them. This commitment to living along with things, tied to colonial histories and the lessons wrought from them, posits Kincaid as a subject ethically formed by a violent past. This is an ethics that learns from colonization and reaches beyond the human consequences of colonial force by including “things” in her ethical frame.

All at once, and in a perfect play of her vital ambivalence, Kincaid tells Balutansky that in her garden she struggles endlessly to defend against wild invaders and to “keep things under control” (2002, 797). Kincaid acts repeatedly as a master of her garden. She enacts what Mick Smith calls “ecological sovereignty” (2011), which names the modern sovereign control over particular bounded spaces. Straddling between self-representations that on the one hand pitch her as an ethical subject formed through colonization and on the other hand as yet another master emerging from the colonial encounter, Kincaid appears absolutely incongruous. Yet her narrative brilliance is rooted in this incongruity, through which she stages a critical disruption of the ways we imagine and sustain ourselves as bounded, coherent subjects.

If wild animals are under human threat in Kincaid’s garden, they are also absolutely crucial to her garden reveries. At several moments in My Garden (Book), she is disrupted by unexpected creatures that throw her off her narrative course. Wild animals tend to appear at moments in which Kincaid is dwelling on existential problems (how to live with the uncertainties of life, for example) or over a particular botanical species in her garden that will not conform to her desires. While Kincaid is grappling with her “fears” and her “responsibility toward others,” for instance, a woodpecker begins suddenly to hammer at her house (1999, 25). This maddening interruption of her thought decenters the human focus of the text. Through its disruption (which is to say, its act of living), the woodpecker becomes entangled with Kincaid’s fears and ethical queries. The wild becomes, in other words, folded into the narrative subject who wishes to deny it.

There are a series of similar vignettes in Kincaid’s garden prose in which she violently fantasizes about killing animals. Of rabbits and woodchucks, she “plot(s) ways to kill them but can never bring myself to do it” (1999, 71),
and when she captures a raccoon that she imagines to be “full of malice,” she plans to drown it in a barrel of water before being halted by “the three whining pacifists I have somehow managed to find myself living with (my husband and our two children)” (50). Her explicit drive toward violence illustrates a radical break from the picture she paints of the Global South and practices of living along with other species. Her prose performs the exceptional status of the human while disrupting it, calling into crisis the product of European modernity by propping up and disabling its own fictions.

If for Kincaid the garden is “a way of accommodating and making acceptable, comfortable, familiar, the wild, the strange” (1999, 44), it is also a place in which that human comfort is always wildly disrupted. In her narration of a scene in which “one proper afternoon,” as she is busy pondering the wisteria in her garden that will not conform to her desire, a fox appears and disorients her narrative trajectory (16). For Kincaid, the fox threatens the sovereign sanctity of her garden. (But this, we know already, is fantastic, since the misbehaving wisteria was already working to threaten her mastery.) If the fox breaks her from her mediation on the wisteria, it also gives rise to a fascinating psychological movement in which Kincaid first envisions the fox’s coat as an ornamental object but turns abruptly to a radical inquiry into her own human subjectivity: “I believe I am in the human species, I am mostly ambivalent about this, but when I saw the fox I hoped my shriek sounded like something familiar to the fox, something human” (18). Kincaid’s “hope” that the fox will recognize her shriek as issuing from a human is a hope that the fox will be scared away from her garden. Yet on another and crucial level, the fox is positioned to recognize (even confirm) for Kincaid a humanity about which she is both uncertain and “mostly ambivalent.” The fox is thus both an unwelcomed animal intruder and, through the hope that it will recognize her voice, one that might call her into human being. Her response to the fox trails between fear and jealousy: “The way he would run away from me with his head turned toward me, watching me behind him as he propelled himself forward, was frightening. I could not do that. And then he disappeared into another part of the wild and I could not follow” (19). Kincaid’s psychic play in the fox scene moves ambivalently from the complete objectification of the fox as “ornament,” to a fear of its capacities, to a suspension of her own species being (“I believe I am in the human species”). Like Animal, who as we saw in the previous chapter emphasizes his own contingent humanity, here Kin-
caid likewise throws her relation to the human species into question. This sweepingly dehumanist movement takes us from the exterminating force of the modern subject, to the colonial question of who counts as human, and finally to the more primordial question of what the human is as a life form. Kincaid’s dehumanism traffics between a human both familiar and strange, representing the human’s complex adjacency to colonial history and to the animal in ways upsetting, unpredictable, and abidingly disruptive.

**Garden-Variety Orientalism**

What part of “the wild” does Kincaid inhabit? In her caustic travelogue *A Small Place* (1988), she writes to the white tourist (identified poignantly as “you”) about the geographic, historical, architectural, and social lives of her Antiguan homeland. Positing the tourist as “an ugly human being” whose presence in Antigua echoes and extends colonialism, the book functions in part as a disinvitation to vacation on the island. The tourist industry, she explains, has supplanted colonialism, keeping Antiguans subservient to Western powers and desires. The tourist industry in Antigua, then, is a neo-colonialist enterprise with which those on vacation are critically entangled. Given her staunch critique of the tourist industry as an extension of colonialism, it comes as a surprise that in Kincaid’s later garden writings she participates eagerly in “seed hunting” expeditions across China and Nepal. These ecotourist expeditions, aimed at collecting “exotic” seeds to cultivate in her Vermont garden, edge uncomfortably close to her fierce critiques of Western tourism in Antigua.

Kincaid’s narrative self-location is expressly complex, straddling between an alliance with others “like me” who are subjects of colonial and neocolonial power and situating herself as part of the neocolonial “conquering class.” In her garden travel prose, she slides between these conflicted modes of self-representation, rehearsing in often vexing ways the Orientalist travel practices and fantasies that cast her in the role of the “ugly” Western traveler. Her plant-hunting pursuits are first detailed toward the end of *My Garden (Book)*, when she travels to the Yunnan province in China, and later to Nepal in *Among Flowers*. It is in the latter text that she confesses, “I had no idea that places in the world could provide for me this particular kind of pleasure” (2005, 3–4). Unlike the ugly Western traveler of *A Small Place* (1988), who remains oblivious to the social conditions of Antigua and uses
the place as a relaxing “escape” from real life, Kincaid’s pleasures abroad are ones derived through repeated discomfort and unease produced through her foreign travel. But like the travels of other tourists, her journeys often neglect the lives of those who serve her. How should we think about this frustrating movement between Kincaid’s staunch critique of tourism and the ways that she narratively celebrates her own complicities with it? I want to suggest that Kincaid’s contradictions—far from being mere signs of her hypocrisy—reveal a postcolonial subject (in her case, a formerly dehumanized subject now imbued with Western bourgeois subjectivity) as one whose paradoxes upend the very foundations of Man. Kincaid in this sense harmonizes with Sylvia Wynter by emphasizing through her garden prose how the construction of particular narratives and the performance of particular versions of being human are intimately and inextricably linked. By exploiting the contradictions of the subject through narrative, Kincaid demonstrates an awareness of how the human is sociogenically produced. As though answering Wynter’s call to produce new modes of being human, Kincaid’s narrative plays with ambivalence and contradiction, emphasizing the cracks in postcolonial subjectivity and opening up the possibilities that may flourish from its fissures.

Kincaid’s Rousseaeuan “walk” in Nepal is replete with reverie and reflection and situated precariously between a longing for full possession of the “rare” and “indigenous” that can be transplanted and cultivated “at home” and a discursive disavowal of this desire. Mimicking the language of colonial botanists, Kincaid states in no uncertain terms that “claiming . . . was the overriding aim of my journey” (2005, 71). She is often discomforted—if not disgusted—by the seemingly strange practices of the Chinese and Nepalese people whom she encounters during her seed hunts. Yet she tells her readers that her hunt in Nepal would “haunt many things in my life for a long while afterward, if not forever” (8). Kincaid moves—sometimes bewilderingly—between alliance with the Nepalese and radical difference from them. She grounds her alliance historically: “Because of my own personal history, every person I saw in this situation seemed familiar to me” (18). This “familiarity” (with those whose cultures are very different from her own) emerges again when she declares, “I only viewed everything I came upon with complete acceptance, as if I expected there to be no border between myself and what I was seeing before me, no border between myself and my day-to-day existence” (20).
Nevertheless, her difference from the Nepalese in *Among Flowers* is most forcefully articulated through the politics of naming, a politics she describes in the colonial context as a violent erasure in *My Garden (Book)*. In the latter text, through her reflections on the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, she ties European botanical practices to colonization through their mutual practice of renaming in the production of European knowledge. Like the colonial explorers who “emptied worlds of their names” (1999, 160), so too did the early botanists proclaim the names of species “not to fulfill curiosity but to possess” (156). Possession here is not merely claiming ownership over something but “a murder, an erasing” of the thing being (re)named. As in Genesis, where God gives humans dominion only after they have named the animals, the power to name precedes and extends itself toward mastery. The Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki emphasizes this power when he illustrates how naming shapes our orientations toward other things: “Calling a forest ‘timber,’ fish ‘resources,’ the wilderness ‘raw material’ licenses the treatment of them accordingly” (2007, 289). Suzuki emphasizes how destructive social practices become authorized through uses of language and the particular practice of renaming things in ways that legitimize their material exploitation.

The power to (re)name, then, comes to signal a mode of masterful relation in which the one who names is also the one who can bestow, classify, and possess. Kincaid’s own acts of renaming signal particularly poignant forms of dehumanization that are overtly linked to colonial practice. When Kincaid refuses to recognize the names of the Sherpas whose laboring bodies make possible her journey, she renames them through characteristics identifiable to her: the Sherpa who cooks her meals becomes “Cook”; the one who carries their dining table on his back is known to her and her fellow seed hunters as “Table”; and the Sherpa who speaks little English is named after the one phrase he knows—“I Love You” (2005, 26).

Of the Sherpa she names Table, she declares, “I was appalled that someone had to carry this whole set of civility” (30). The point here is not simply that Kincaid—like Linnaeus and the colonists she critiques—engages the violence of renaming. There is a crucial continuity among the colonial, the botanical, and the ecotouristic in that they perform the possessive erasures of others, enforcing masterful world relations by naming others as if they exist for oneself. The Sherpa becomes Table not merely because the name
describes the particularities of his work but because his work as a table carrier is oriented toward Kincaid’s own comfort. The Himalayan seed hunt is a perversely neo-Orientalist undertaking—narrated through Kincaid’s postcolonial and Western perspectives—that represents the Sherpa’s labor as the only consequential aspect of his existence.

Of her nearly indiscriminate forgetting of the names of the Nepalese people who made possible her journey, Kincaid declares: “This is not at all a reflection of the relationship between power and powerlessness, the waiter and the diner, or anything that would resemble it. This was only a reflection of my own anxiety, my own unease, my own sense of ennui, my own personal fragility. I have never been so uncomfortable, so out of my own skin in my entire life, and yet not once did I wish to leave, not once did I regret being there” (2005, 27). The erasure of the Other thus becomes not about sheer power and the ability of the master to strip the slave of a world. Instead, Kincaid turns the erasure inward, signaling how her own “anxiety,” “unease,” “ennui,” and “personal fragility” paves the way for the erasure of others. What Kincaid advances here is a list of feelings that align with Judith Butler’s (2004) concept of “vulnerability,” a state of reckoning with one’s own unease and reliance while accepting without “regret” or defensiveness the fact of being in this position. In this instant, fragility is not something to be disavowed but something to embrace. At the same time, Kincaid’s language also echoes the master/slave dialectic in fascinating ways. Writing from the narrative position of a postcolonial bourgeois subject, Kincaid reveals the uncanny continuity between the psychodynamics of the colonial master and the postcolonial subject that I have traced across this book. Indeed, she appears here to fulfill Fanon’s theory that the postcolonial bourgeoisie would in turn come to reproduce the material disparities of the colonial moment if during decolonization a full proletariat revolution did not occur. And she knows this: Kincaid’s explicit desire to eliminate others (like the fox) is turned inward to reveal her own profound discomforts; she effaces the Other because she is discomforted by alterity and because she herself fears effacement. What would it mean to stay with this vulnerability, to bear the familiarity of the Other, whose simultaneous likeness and difference are so profoundly distressing?
Wonderment and Time

There is a fascinating moment toward the end of Among Flowers in which Kincaid is inspired by the beauty of the Sacred Lake in Topke Gola. Gazing at this natural wonder, Kincaid is filled with “the joy of spectacle, the happiness that comes from the privilege of looking at something solely rare and solely uncomplicated. But the Sacred Lake plunged me into thinking of the unknowableness of other people” (2005, 151). From the privileged gaze rehearsed in the first sentence, Kincaid articulates a thoroughly anthropocentric view of the landscape as “solely uncomplicated.” Yet she is then “plunged” by the lake, which surfaces as an agent that acts on her, immediately after which she declares “the unknowableness of other people.” She moves from enjoying the extraordinariness of the foreign landscape to an assertion about how other people (like her garden) cannot be truly known, and this movement is prompted by a barely perceptible recognition of an agency that is radically Other. By reading Kincaid’s contradictions vulnerably, her slippages between performing as a critic of neocolonialism and as a bourgeois postcolonial Orientalist, we witness the shadow of a nonmasterful subject, one that while still tied to structural modes of violence also allows itself to be “plunged” by others (both human and nonhuman) into other orientations. While it is abroad that her seed hunting narratives most glaringly expose the contradictions of the bourgeois subject, it is back “at home” in her American garden where this nonmasterful subject begins to take root and grow.

Ultimately, Kincaid’s garden is one that nurtures unanswerable questions, emphasizes antagonisms, and germinates the masterful gardener’s future disappearance. An integral part of the gardener’s personality, Kincaid declares, is made up of that which is “to come” (1999, 85). As such, the gardener is one whose present activity is driven toward a futurity. But the garden is always also historical, haunted by gardeners past and by the possibilities of flourishing that have been historically stamped out: “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” (218–19). As an intimate political space, the garden exists in a queer temporality. For Elizabeth Freeman, queer temporalities are “points of resistance” to normative temporal ordering, ones that “propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living histor-
ically” (2010, xxii). Against what Freeman calls “chrononomativity,” which functions by organizing bodies to capitalize productive use, the queer time of the garden is one in which we can begin to “trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been deemed useless” (xiii). Lingering in the queer temporalities of the garden—as a disruptive space that is always both historically haunted and future-oriented—we might ourselves become cultivated differently.

Seeking to define the complexity of the gardening subject and to describe its desires, Kincaid continuously shifts between her constitutive wonderment and fundamental hostility toward the garden. In *My Garden (Book)*, she writes: “Even after many years of gardening, I never believe a live plant will emerge from the seed I have put in the ground; I am always surprised, as if it had never happened to me before, as if every time were the first time” (1999, 49). Here, the garden produces something unbelievable for Kincaid, something bestowed with wonder precisely because the garden—the plants, the seeds, the soil, the perceptible and imperceptible beings that dwell therein—has an agency that is never reducible to the gardener’s will. This experience of watching nature act always as though for the “first time,” an experience that signals an engaged awareness of nature without intervening in its unfolding, is for Kincaid an essential part of the wonder of her garden. Yet in defining the desires of the gardener in the closing paragraph of the book, she explicitly casts the garden as a subjected adversary: “What does a gardener want? A gardener wants the garden to behave in the way she says, and when it does not, she will turn it out, abandon it, she will denounce the garden, not in general, only as it is particular to her, and we who come after will have to take some of what she loved and some of what she didn’t love, and accept that there are some things we cannot take because we just don’t understand them” (229). The gardener of the past relates to her garden as a possession, as that which can be abandoned and denounced when it does not “behave in the way she says.” While the gardener remains a subject passionate about the garden as a concept, she deplores her “particular” garden for not reflecting and confirming her mastery. Yet Kincaid is also the gardener of the future—the “we who come after”—and in this spirit is willing to give up on the fantasy of mastery enacted by the earlier gardener, who may well be her own earlier self.
While Kincaid registers the continuities between her wonderment toward and desire to hold mastery over the garden, her prose also persistently attunes to the garden as an agential space. It is a space rise with uncontrollable and at times unwelcome life, and the recognition of this life—even when she explicitly disavows it—begins to upend the stability of the gardener as sovereign subject. It is the garden, and its unwelcome inhabitants, that reveal to the gardener the fantasmatic nature of the sovereign subject. It compels those engaged with the garden to consider their own psychic and bodily materialities. Melissa Orlie argues that “each of us is not only matter but impersonal matter; made of stuff over which nothing is master and whose entirety no one is in a position to know. It is precisely when this unpalatable fact is glimpsed that the ego is most likely to submit to delusions of sovereignty” (2010, 122). Orlie frames mastery as a delusion, an unrealizable fantasy most likely to appear at precisely the moment that the subject has to confront its vulnerability, its disavowed openness to the nonhuman and inhuman actors that materially and biologically give rise to and sustain human life, and to the lives and histories of other humans. Kincaid’s garden—rife with unexpected visitors and “willful” species—reveals the entanglements of the past, present, and future as it uncovers not only the gardener’s vulnerability but her fraught constitution as a porously bounded subject.

Always filled with thoughts of “doom” in her garden, of “thoughts of life beyond her own imagining” (1999, 61) that produce her discomfort, Kincaid returns the reader consistently to the unanswered refrain, “What to do?” (26). She sketches the agencies and historical trajectories of both garden and gardener, of colonization and its resulting transplantations, and in so doing asks us to weed through the tangled subjectivities of this postcolonial moment—a moment in which mastery is both the driving force of the modern subject and its anticipated ruin. Here, in the work of vital ambivalence and the vulnerable engagements it elicits, repressed conceptions of personhood linger and subjectivities straddle mastery and wonder. Through the radical unpredictability of inheritance and of precisely not knowing “what to do,” Kincaid sustains a representation of the subject’s incongruity and vital ambivalence. This ambivalence is the vital inheritance that leads us toward emergent conceptions of being. The queer hope of dehumanism is that we might uproot our masterful subjectivities, dwelling within our devastated landscapes alongside other dynamic agencies that are making up the future with us.