

**Mobility and Anxious Cosmopolitanism: Jamaica Kincaid's
Among Flowers
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Eden is never far from the gardener's mind. It is The Garden to which we all refer ... and it is forever out of reach ... Vermont, all by itself should be Eden and gardenworthy enough. But apparently, I do not find it so. I seem to believe that I will find my idyll more a true ideal, only if I can populate it with plants from another side of the world. (Kincaid 189)

The 'transnational' in its adjectival form describes 'processes between or beyond national boundaries involving several nations or nationalities.' As a noun, it describes 'someone operating in several countries' (*American Heritage Dictionary*). As Donald Pease notes in his introduction to a volume on transnationalism and American studies, when used as a noun, 'transnational' refers to a condition of 'in-betweenness ... flexibility, non-identification, hybridity, and mobility.'¹ Since it lacks a 'thematic unity', it refers at once to 'factual states of affairs' as well as to 'the interpretive framework through which to make sense of them' (4). Pease further notes that the term frequently 'bears the traces of the violent sociohistorical processes to which it alludes' (4). As an interpretive framework, then, the 'transnational' re-evaluates social and cultural formations within national imaginaries by showing/tracing how identities, people, objects and ideas were never bound within national borders, or even national identifications. The transnational may be studied in its localized sites and domains. The analysis maps the flows, mergers and confluences of the transnational within these local sites. One such site is the subject of the present essay: travel and mobility. Rüdiger Kunow in the same volume proposes that since mobilities constitute cultural relations, then mobility must become 'part of ... the critical lexicon wherein a field of study defines itself as cross-cultural, comparatist, and transnational.'² However, what cannot be left out of the study of the transnational is the anxiety and tensions attendant upon the cross-cultural encounter and the awareness of socio-historical processes that influence these encounters. It is this anxiety of the transnational that I examine in a text that foregrounds mobility and cross-cultural interaction.

In 2001 the well-known author Jamaica Kincaid embarked on an expedition, with collector Daniel Hinkley and a collector-couple, Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones, to the Himalayan regions of Nepal to collect flowers for her garden back in Vermont, USA. The trip was funded by the National Geographic, which later also published her travelogue, *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*. Kincaid writes with an

¹ Donald E. Pease, 'Introduction', *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease and John Carlos Rowe (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2011) 4.

² Rüdiger Kunow, 'American Studies as Mobility Studies: Some Terms and Constellations', *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease and John Carlos Rowe (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 245-274, cited from 245.

awareness of the socio-historical processes and events of botanical imperialism. She is also, simultaneously, aware of the privileged mobility she enjoys as a First World traveler in a Third World nation. Her travelogue exhibits a cultural insiderness that redefines her mobility as a 'different' (being Black) First Worlder in a Third World context and setting. This cultural insiderness is a characteristic, as has been recently argued in the case of Indian travelers of the colonial period, of the philosophical-ideological accompaniment to the transnational condition – of cosmopolitanism.³

However Kincaid's narrative offers a slightly different kind of the confident, even strident, cosmopolitanism celebrated in the fiction of Salman Rushdie or the critical theorizations of a Homi Bhabha. This essay traces the emergence of an 'anxious cosmopolitanism' in Kincaid's text. It is a cosmopolitanism that emerges in the cultural expertise and privileged travel of the First Worlder in a Third World region, but it is also riddled with tensions that suggest Kincaid's anxiety around her legacies of horticultural empires and her privileged position. Further, anxious cosmopolitanism in Kincaid is the result of an attempted *distancing* from both her legacies and her present identity as a First Worlder expert in gardening.

Before examining the discourse of uncertainty a preliminary discussion of the discursive contexts of anxiety is in order.

Motility and the Apparatus of Travel

Kincaid is assured by her fellow traveler Dan Hinkley before they set out that the expedition will be an 'adventure' (7). The term first occurs on page 1 of her narrative when she describes an earlier journey (through China) as a plant-hunting and seed-collecting adventure.' The term's evocation of a history of such adventure-travel is a crucial preliminary moment in the discourse of uncertainty that Kincaid eventually articulates. The term is elaborated in conjunction with a quasi-fantasy, again recalling a history of such journeys:

This account of a walk ... can have its origins in my love of the garden, my childhood love of botany and geography, my love of being isolated, of imagining myself all alone in the world and everything unfamiliar, or the familiar being strange... (7)

Kincaid's articulation of an imaginative geography echoes other famous articulations, notably that of Jim Hawkins in RL Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and of Marlow in Joseph Conrad's problematic colonial text about Africa, *Heart of Darkness*.⁴ Hawkins says:

³ Pramod K. Nayar, 'Beyond the Colonial Subject: Mobility, Cosmopolitanism and Self-fashioning in Sarat Chandra Das' *A Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 14.2 (2012) 1-16; Pramod K. Nayar, 'Colonial Subjects and Aesthetic Understanding: Indian Travel Literature about England, 1870-1900', *South Asian Review* 33.1 (2012) 31-52.

⁴ I use the term 'imaginative geography' in Edward Said's sense, referring to the practice of 'designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs"' so that 'both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ours' (Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1994 [1978]) 54. Kincaid

I brooded ... over the map [of Treasure Island], all the details of which I well remembered. Sitting by the fire in the house-keeper's room, I approached that island in my fancy, from every possible direction; I explored every acre of its surface; I climbed a thousand times to that tall hill they call the Spy-glass ... Sometimes the isle was thick with savages, with whom we fought; sometimes full of dangerous animals that hunted us; but in all my fancies nothing occurred to me so strange and tragic as our actual adventures.⁵

And Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* confesses:

when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there.⁶

Thus 'adventure' in Kincaid's account of her trip has contextual resonances with earlier colonial narratives of exploration.

Her fantasies of travel and adventure among plants constitute her imaginary reordering of the world as a resource for her Vermont garden. The reference to her earlier trip suggests that she is not a novice in this kind of travel. She is a seasoned traveler. The appending of the map in the preliminary pages also recalls earlier narratives, both fictional and real, of travel, discovery and adventure right from Europe's Early Modern period to the Victorian Age. She is also an experienced traveler backed by an organization, the National Geographic Society, and she travels in the company of a veteran plantsman and botanist. The inoculation program makes sure she has prepared her body against the onslaught of 'diseases for which I had not known antidotes existed ... and diseases I had not known existed' (5). The visual on the cover, where Kincaid the author-traveller poses with a backdrop of the massive Himalayas, recalls the adventurer-explorer narratives of the nineteenth century.

Yet in the rest of her narrative Kincaid effectively elides this apparatus of travel. Kincaid focuses on the experience of travel, and not on her motility. Motility is 'the way in which an individual appropriates what is possible in the realm of mobility

imagines herself alone in a world divided into the familiar and the unfamiliar. In a particularly illustrative segment capturing the imaginative geography of Kincaid's childhood and adulthood she speaks of her thoughts on Kathmandu: 'to think of Kathmandu again: when I suddenly was in the middle of that part of it, the Thamel, I was reminded of feelings I had when I was a child, of going to something called "the fair," something beyond the everyday ... I did feel as if I was in the unreal, the magical, extraordinary' (17-18). The fantasy of a different, unfamiliar land is not therefore a feature of childhood alone – it works its power into adulthood as well when territories, real and imagined, merge as Kincaid experiences Kathmandu's landscape.

⁵ RL Stevenson, *Treasure Island*.

⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

and puts this potential to use for his or her activities.’⁷ All the features described in the preceding paragraph constitute her motility. This crucial component of the apparatus of travel is something Kincaid downplays and, I suggest, abrogates so as to deny her cultural authority as an empowered First World traveler. It is with this abrogation that Kincaid crafts for herself the anxious cosmopolitanism of the transnational age.

The Uncertain Traveller

The first thing that strikes one on reading *Among Flowers* is Kincaid’s complete lack of epistemological, discursive and physical certitude as a traveler in the Indian subcontinent. This image of the uncertain traveler is inaugurated even before her departure to Nepal.

Kincaid’s text opens with a series of events that undermine the eager expectations of the imminent expedition. Her passport is lost, 9/11 intervenes and she over-strains her foot while training (4-6). Her son Harold stands weeping in the doorway when she leaves (7-8). The stresses from these emotional events are also mingled with her own eagerness to go on the plant- and seed-collecting trip: ‘I always want to be someplace where seeds are being collected, I want to be in the place where the garden is coming into being’ (7). Yet she experiences a disquiet as she drives off because she suspects that ‘the experience I was about to have would haunt many things in my life for a long while afterward, if not forever’ (8).

What emerges in these opening moments is a travelogue dedicated less to pleasure than to anxiety, and given more to uncertainty rather than to confidence. The Caribbean-born, US-resident author of influential postcolonial texts – texts on gardening such as *My Garden* and travelogues like *A Small Place* – is an uncertain traveler.

Her first night in Kathmandu she spends looking out for bats: ‘I was very afraid of them’ (18). Her awareness of bats comes from textual knowledge: Roy Lancaster’s travelogue of Nepal where he says that ‘they [the fruit bats] look like weathered prunes’ (19). This description troubles Kincaid: ‘the idea that bats could look like something to eat was unsettling’ (19). She labours under the impression that these bats ‘swooping around in the deep blue-black night air’ were ‘hoping to realize the sole purpose of their existence: settling into my hair’ (19). When she finally sees one, she ‘made a tiny squeal’ (15). Kincaid’s way of dealing with this anxiety is to put things into ‘perspective’: ‘What is a lone rat scurrying in a small restaurant in a crowded city next to a small village situated in the foothills of the Himalaya full of Maoist guerrillas with guns?’ (19)

Kincaid foregrounds several things simultaneously in the space of one paragraph. First, she presents herself as a traveler who has a minimal, and therefore inadequate, knowledge of the regions she is traveling in. The hyperbole – that the bats exist in order to infest her hair – is self-conscious: she now presents herself as prone to ridiculous anxieties. Finally, when she seeks to demonstrate a measure of control over these natural sources of anxieties, she deploys a textual-rhetorical control: Kincaid erodes the threat of the bats by gesturing at a far greater threat, a human one, that of the Maoist guerrillas.

⁷ Kaufmann, cited in John Urry *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) 38.

Writing about neocolonial travelogues, Mary Louise Pratt has argued that the genre exhibits a lack of cultural authority, where the difference from earlier, colonial travelers is in 'what one is entitled to claim to know about others.'⁸ From very early in her narrative, as indicated above, Kincaid refuses the position of the confident 'observer.' Instead, she presents herself as a person who has consumed images of Nepal, but declines to possess any real cultural authority to pronounce anything more than highly subjective, nervous judgments on the spaces she is travelling in. That is, Kincaid carefully refuses the authority of the First World traveler, or her antecedents, the colonial plant collecting travelers, by depicting herself as an uncertain, partially informed, textually reliant, near-hysterical traveler. If, as Jill Didur proposes, Kincaid's text is a 'counter-colonial narrative', then this 'counter' component emerges in epistemological and discursive instability that Kincaid's text foregrounds.⁹

Kincaid now proceeds to fill out this early sketch of herself as the nervous traveler. She is grateful of the crows she sees on her second morning in Nepal that their species' 'band of gray ... makes the crow seem less menacing, more friendly, as if it is not capable of the devious cunning of the crows I am used to seeing here in North America' (19). At breakfast she wonders what the Maoists would be up to: 'since they couldn't kill the king, would they kill me instead?' She goes on:

From time to time I lost a sense of who I was, what I thought myself to be, what I knew to be my own true self, but this did not make me panic or become full of fear. I only viewed everything I came upon with complete acceptance ... I loved my tent and would probably have died for it, and am now so glad things never came to that. (20-1)

This sense of self-alienation, of a loss of the sense of the self, makes her more accepting, Kincaid claims. Hyperbole returns to the narrative when she believes she would have died for her tent, but admits that she is glad the events didn't demand it. She expresses a lack of interest in the royal palace she passes by, looking, instead, for the fruit bats on the trees. Unfortunately, 'everyone, even the driver, could see them, but I could not' (21-2). There seems to be no respite for the uncertain traveler: she admits she does not see the bats because her eyes are influenced by 'a combination of the anxiety, wonder, and strange happiness' (22). Her anxiety levels soar when she enters the aeroplane which 'resembled something my children would play with in the bathtub ... like an old-fashioned view of the way things will look in the old-fashioned future' (22). While airborne 'it seemed to me as if we were always about to collide with these sharp green peaks; I especially thought this would be true when I saw one of the pilots reading the day's newspaper' (22). Dan assures her that 'the other times he flew in this part of the world, the pilots always read the newspaper and it did not seem to affect the flight in a bad way' (22-3). Then, in a natural sequence of events and narrative, Kincaid 'worried about it [the plane] landing, as I had been worried

⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008. 2nd ed.) 227-8.

⁹ Jill Didur, "'Gardenworthy': Rerouting Colonial Botany in Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*", *Public* 41.1 (2010) 172-185, cited from 173.

about it getting up into the air and staying there' (23). Upon landing the presence of soldiers immediately reminds her that this was 'evidence of the dreaded Maoists' (23).

The incipient nostalgia for the comforts she has left behind follows close upon the anxiety at the new place: Kincaid recalls her 'fantastically equipped kitchen' and the local supermarket where she could 'choose to buy or not buy, strawberries in summer, winter, any time I liked' (24-5). (That said, it is interesting to note that Kincaid strives to prove that her anxiety is not simply due to her immersion in an all-new environment: she is an anxious person anywhere. Thus she tells us of her doctor in the USA, 'a man named Henry Lodge, who I often believe exists solely to reassure me that I am not about to drop dead from some imagined catastrophic illness,' 24.)

Later there occurs what appears to be the most horrific manifestation of Kincaid's colonial legacy in the postcolonial world. Kincaid is describing the local men who help them on their expedition:

There was Cook; his real name was so difficult to pronounce, I could not do it then and I could not do it now. There was his assistant, but we called him 'Table', and I remember him now as 'Table' because he carried the table and the four chairs on which we sat for breakfast and dinner. There was another man who assisted in the kitchen department and I could not remember his name either, but we all came to call him 'I Love You', because ... he overheard me saying to my son, Harold, 'I love you', and when he saw me afterward, he said in a mocking way, 'I love you' ... There were many other people, attached to our party, and they were so important to my safety and general well-being but I could never remember their proper names ... This was not at all a reflection of the relationship between power and powerless ... 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... (26-7)

In terms of narrative strategy, foregrounding her anxiety, constantly reprising it for us, ensures that Kincaid's utter lack of attention to the surroundings and locals gets both subsumed and forgiven. By drawing attention to the inadequacy on her part, by emphasizing that the lack of interest in the names of the local was *not* an embodiment of their – tourist-native, First World-Third World – power relations, Kincaid puts in place a discourse which she hopes is *not* of First World carelessness, arrogance and authority. Rather, Kincaid abrogates her cultural authority – of indifference to the native-as-ciphers in her narrative, but also the right of the First Worlder to 'name' the native just as Robinson Crusoe once did to/for 'Friday' – within inexplicable anxiety ('my own personal fragility', as she puts it). In a sense this is the climactic moment of the uncertain traveler/narrative.

But Kincaid also embodies the individualized leisure travel of the privileged Black First Worlder here, and thus departs from the routine stereotype of the compelled African traveler image (as Tim Youngs has argued about African American travel writing¹⁰). She does this partially when she gains financial authority – she

¹⁰ Tim Youngs, 'Pushing against the Black/White Limits of Maps: African American Writings of Travel', in *English Studies in Africa* 53. 2 (2010) 71-85.

overtips the porter who carries her luggage at Kathmandu because she was ‘so grateful to be [her]self’ – as a First Worlder, paying in dollars, over the native (11). She also simultaneously asserts this privileged First World traveler when she bestows, along with her companions, fresh (nick)names and identities upon the local guides and helpers.

It is this simultaneity of roles, of the anxious traveler and empowered First World traveler, that make Kincaid’s work such a fascinating text in terms of its narrative strategies and politics. We see this simultaneity expressed, again, in the register of anxiety. After she is taken to see a local school, Kincaid, along with her fellow-travelers ‘felt’ sending money or books for the school ‘would be a good thing to do when we came back to our own overly prosperous lives.’ Kincaid says this ‘feeling’ stays with her until much later when she writes her travelogue, ‘a strong feeling.’ But, she admits, she has ‘done nothing to make this something beyond [her] feelings’ (29). Kincaid here gestures at her empowered First World traveler and her anxious traveler roles that together make for a considerably ambivalent text.

(Horti)Cultural Insiderness

Thus far we have seen how Kincaid resists the tag of an empowered First World tourist by presenting herself as an anxious and uncertain traveler. The discourse of anxiety that permeates *Among Flowers* is, I shall now demonstrate, complicated by another discourse, that of cultural insiderness.

Kincaid admits to losing her sense of self, distance and direction. She is troubled by a ‘confusing notion – sky or ceiling’ (34). Later she offers a catalogue of her confusions: ‘my understanding of distances collapsed’, ‘The Himalaya destroys notions of distance and time’, ‘my senses were addled’, ‘I could not make sense of, tell direction for one’ (36-8). Soon after this account of her disorientation she writes:

I was making this trip with the garden in mind; so with everything I saw, I thought, how would this look in the garden? This was not the last time that I came to realize that the garden itself was a way of accommodating and making acceptable, comfortable, familiar, the world, the strange. (44)

She carries memories of her Vermont garden, and when she collects plants and seeds, she ‘began to see [her] garden again’ (113). This itself, as Jill Didur rightly points out, marks out the garden as a space where the foreign is domesticated. But what is more significant is that the enclosed Vermont garden functions as a *mental* landscape of comfort, a dream *secretum iter* (the garden of retirement in English poetry) and fantasy *hortus conclusus* (the enclosed garden) in the radically different and disorienting landscape she now inhabits in Nepal. The disorientation in space that Kincaid experiences produces and heightens her anxiety, and she attributes it to the land: ‘the Himalaya destroys notions of distance and time’ (37). This anxiety, induced by her displacement from the Vermont garden to the ‘wild’ Himalayas is compounded due to/by the human presence therein. Kincaid writes: ‘when we stopped for lunch, they crowded around and stared at us in silence. They watched us as we ate our lunch. It felt odd...’ (38). The reversal of the scopic regime of the European explorer (documented in every travelogue from Columbus downwards) that Kincaid records here is also the context of her discomfort in the land she is exploring. Her emphasis on

being observed and monitored gestures at the Himalayas being a laboratory where strange new arrivals – the Americans – are subject to the same kind of testing, observation and internment as some exotic species.

This mental or imaginative *hortus conclusus* of a Vermont garden comes into existence even within the Himalayan setting as a mode of domesticating the exotic. Christa Knellwolf has argued that colonial exoticism worked by decontextualizing native/local cultures and relocating them into new ones so that the threat of the local, unknowable and mysterious ‘foreign’ could be controlled within museums, exhibitions and gardens.¹¹ By juxtaposing her image of her Vermont garden alongside the irreducible physical setting of the Himalaya, Kincaid at once decontextualizes and recontextualizes the exotic. She begins to see her garden again when she picks up her exotic seeds in what might be read as an act of grafting, in terms of both botany/horticulture and her own mental topiary.

This domestication of the exotic is, I argue, an instance of cultural insidership where Kincaid is able to visualize and mentally relocate the Nepali plant life into a familiar setting because she understands plants, planting and plantation. Kincaid does not here function as a naïve tourist wonderstruck at the variety of plant life she witnesses in the Himalaya. She functions as a knowledgeable planter and gardener. This is an index of her location as a cultural insider to planting – and Western plant-collection and planting. Such cultural insidership alleviates her anxiety, and repositions Kincaid vis à vis the landscape she passes through.

Kincaid’s cultural insidership is first made evident when she displays considerable textual knowledge about Nepal. Drawing upon what Mary Louise Pratt terms *antecedent literarios*, or prior/earlier literary productions, Kincaid cites Roy Lancaster, Joseph Hooker and other plant hunters (18-19, 31, 96-7, 103, 106, 115, 119-120, 132). Kincaid says about Smythe’s work:

That night ... I began reading *The Kanchenjunga Adventure*, Frank Smythe’s book ... I was drawn to it as if a spell had been cast over me; first the book and then the mountain, and all the way on my walk, there was nothing I wanted to see more ... For my twenty some days I spent walking among the hills of the Himalaya, I lugged this book around; and for many days after I got back, this book was like a child’s comforter to me. (31)

Didur argues that Kincaid cites predecessor plant collectors in order to set herself apart from these predecessors, operating on what Didur terms ‘different economic and cultural imperatives of European exploration and colonialism’ (182).¹² But it is precisely this textual knowledge that first offers her the imaginative geography of the place she is about to go to, and thus *prepares* her for the exotic. At one point she says of a particular species: ‘I had seen pictures of it, but before this, it held no interest to me’, thus suggesting that textual knowledge enables her to deal with the ‘real’ (135).

Cultural insidership is also exhibited in Kincaid’s very evident expertise in botany. Her knowledge about the plants positions her as a knowledgeable plant-

¹¹ Christa Knellwolf, ‘The Exotic Frontier of the Imperial Imagination’, *Eighteenth-century Life* 26.3 (2010) 10-30.

¹² Didur, “‘Gardenworthy’” 182.

collector, even in an alien landscape, and even when the plant species she encounters do not quite fit her existing categories and frames of classification. Here, for example, is Kincaid's account of her encounter with annuals:

I recognized them from shape and texture, only I had seen them in another color, deep purple. I had seen those same flowers in a nursery in Vermont and in a garden in Maine but only in deep purple. To see them now in pink while remembering them in purple enhanced my feeling of anxiety and alienation ... Now as I trudged along ... I was thinking of something I had known in passing ... trying to latch on to it as if it were one of the certainties in the whole of life. (41-2)

Admittedly, Kincaid here is persuading us to discern her alienation in the midst of the flowers. The disconnect between her textual, but also previous experiential knowledge and her present setting is what Kincaid wants us to note. Despite this alienation and anxiety, she comes to the flowers with considerable authority, speaking of annuals, their care and their growth in the same breath as she explains her anxiety at a new species. She also adds a serious qualifier even as she highlights her anxiety: 'all the time I was walking around in Nepal I was mostly thinking of my garden' (42). Later, when walking through a village she 'recognizes plants from Mexico', and is reminded that 'the Garden of Eden is our ideal and even our idyll, the place where food and flowers are one' (64-5).

What I am proposing here is that Kincaid's anxiety about being in a disorienting place with Maoists for neighbours is negotiated through her cultural insiderness with botany (so perhaps we can think of it as horticultural insiderness). Kincaid therefore draws upon her motility to engender mobility. This is the mark of a certain kind of agency where Kincaid is able to negotiate with the Himalayan landscape, her fellow travellers and even the locals to some extent, based entirely on her expertise. Further this assertion of cultural and quasi-scientific authority as a botanist and horticulturalist is a self-fashioning with considerable ideological purchase. It enables Kincaid to assert individual agency and to quietly erase the financial and structural institutional authority bestowed on her by the National Geographic society. Motility, therefore, is what constitutes Kincaid as a (horti)cultural citizen, and one who is able to traverse multiple cultures.

Being an extremely self-reflexive amateur botanist Kincaid is also aware of the politics of gardening, and thus again exhibits a certain cultural insiderness of the knowledgeable. In an extended meditation on gardening she writes:

I have made a garden in a part of the world where the flora is interesting and full of wonder enough. I only have to turn to a page in the travels of William Bartram and there I will find any number of plants ... that enthrall me. But something that never escapes me as I putter about the garden, physically and mentally: desire and curiosity inform the inevitable boundaries of the garden, and boundaries, especially when they are an outgrowth of something as profound as the garden with all its holy restrictions and admonitions must be violated. The story of the garden, when it is told by the gardener, is an homage

to the gardener's curiosity and explanation of a transgression by a transgressor.
(115-16)

Here Kincaid invokes politics and myth in order to reference not only the Biblical Eden (the space of primal transgression) but also national and geographical boundaries that were violated by enthusiastic plant collectors in the colonial era. In addition to setting her narrative as a counter-colonial one, Kincaid firmly situates her garden, gardening and plant-collecting expedition as stemming from a passion that had nothing to do with colonial cultures of collecting. She sets herself, about half-way through the narrative, as cleverly knowledgeable about the *plants* she sees – there is very rarely complete awe or wonder in her narrative.

It is just this one aspect, her garden, and concomitant meditations upon Edenic spaces, the *secretum iter* and the *hortus conclusus* of her Vermont setting, that mediates between Kincaid and the immediate landscape of Nepal. There is little reference to any interaction or negotiation with the local cultures, other than botanical ones, in Kincaid.

Anxious Cosmopolitanism

Jill Didur argues that Kincaid demonstrates a diaspora ethics that seeks to establish an 'equivalency between her own experience of colonialism and the experience of subaltern Nepalese in the twentieth century'.¹³ Whether Kincaid establishes an 'equivalency' is an arguable point. As already noted her travel was funded by the National Geographic. It appears as though Kincaid quietly glosses over the problematic associations of the organization with colonialism and ethnographic profiling of races, now well documented in several studies.¹⁴ Even the journalism (that is, non-scientific and non-anthropological work) that the *National Geographic* published was, as Carlos Tatel reading the visuals of the magazine in the age of American expansion has shown, 'very anthropological, containing cultural meanings' that were suited to American political, militaristic and cultural projects of the age. Such representations, in science, anthropology or travel accounts, notes Tatel, contributed to the 'imaging and imagining of the non-Western world.'¹⁵ It constructed 'Otherness' in different registers, whether in science, medicine or literature.

¹³ Jill Didur, 'Strange Joy', *Interventions* 13.2 (2011) 236-255, cited from 238.

¹⁴ Among the other celebrity authors who have done similar travelogues for the National Geographic are Jan Morris, Oliver Sacks, WS Merwin, David Mamet, Louise Erdrich, Barry Unsworth, Ariel Dorfman. For studies of NatGeo's colonial and colonizing role see, among others, David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), CA Lutz and J.L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994), Lisa Bloom, 'Constructing Whiteness: Popular Science and National Geographic in the Age of Multiculturalism', *Configurations* 2. 2 (1994), 15-32, Linda Street, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic's Representation of the Arab World* (Temple University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Carlos Tatel, 'Non-Western Peoples as Filipinos: Mediating Notions of "Otherness" in Photographs from the National Geographic Magazine in the Early 20th Century', *Asian Anthropology* 10 (2011), 61-79, cited from 67 and 62.

But what Kincaid does achieve is a special sense of cultural insiderness that situates her beyond and simultaneously within colonial travel traditions. Zoran Pečić describes Kincaid's travelogue as exhibiting a 'hybridity' when she simultaneously 'invok[es] and subvert[s] the colonial travel narrative.'¹⁶ The ambiguity of being aware of her own colonial legacy of exploitation and gardening, and her sense of dislocation and alienation, says Pečić, locates her 'in an uncanny space between the familiar role of gardener and the unfamiliar position of the world traveler.'¹⁷ This hybridity is essentially a self-conscious cultural insiderness where Kincaid is aware of the legacy of colonial travel and is unable to abandon it, and instead sets out to convert what is a clear First World to Third World expedition into a personal one, erasing therefore the structures and ideologies that frame her entire travel.

We have seen how Kincaid presents herself in two important ways: as an uncertain First World traveler and as a (horti)cultural insider conscious of her legacy of colonial plant collection. I now propose that these two identities remain in tension to produce an anxious cosmopolitan identity in Kincaid's narrative. 'Cosmopolitanism', as Amanda Anderson theorizes it, is the sense of detachment from several places. My spin on Kincaid's cosmopolitanism proposes several additional layers to this 'detachment.' First, as noted before, her detachment from her home in the USA is physically and emotionally anxiety-inducing. Second, her awareness of her location in the history of colonial botany makes her anxious to ensure her detachment from this context of her travel. Third, her cosmopolitanism founded on a (horti)cultural insiderness, to which I shall come soon, is also anxious because she wishes to personalize her expertise and thus move it away from the history of horticultural empires. Her anxious cosmopolitanism, in other words, is a politically aware cosmopolitanism. It is the cosmopolitanism of a neo-colonial subject empowered by First World funding but conscious of her expertise as being made possible due to, not her racial but her socioeconomic and national affiliations (American, First Worlder). Her anxiety resides in the forced detachment she practises and exhibits from all her legacies: as Caribbean (with its fraught history of plantation and slavery), as a diasporic migrant in the USA with its history of racism, as a First Worlder embarked on a journey to a Third World region, where the two regions are connected in an iniquitous relationship. I use the term 'anxious cosmopolitanism', therefore, as a departure from the confident, even strident, cosmopolitanism of a Rushdie or a Kureishi in the postcolonial canon. Kincaid does not quite celebrate her cultural insiderness that facilitates her cosmopolitanism because her self-reflexivity tempers it with a historically inflected awareness of her privileged role. I now turn to the moments in and moves through which Kincaid's anxious cosmopolitanism emerges.

Kincaid's performance as cultural insider becomes more complicated when she undertakes two key acts, acts that Peter Hulme identifies as central to the footsteps

¹⁶ Zoran Pečić, 'Floral Diaspora in Jamaica Kincaid's Travel Writing', *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations* eds. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund (London: Palgrave-Macmillan 2011) 138-155, cited from 154.

¹⁷ Pečić 153.

genre of travel writing itself.¹⁸ First, Kincaid demonstrates a felt responsibility to the places she is passing through, the worlds of the Nepali borders and the people there. Second, she also is conscious of the predecessors who had travelled on these same routes (Hooker, Lancaster, Smythe). These moments, Hulme notes, often come as epiphanies, and in Kincaid are moments of intensity. I shall now trace the emergence of Kincaid's anxious cosmopolitanism in terms of these moments and moves in her narrative.

First, it is Kincaid's very (horti)cultural insiderness that also enables her to perform a major fashioning of identity. Having presented herself as a very conscientious and enthusiastic gardener Kincaid justifies her collection expedition as a 'natural' transgression by the gardener (especially in the passage quoted above) even as she refrains from presenting herself as a confident colonial collector. That is, Kincaid wishes us to see her acts of boundary-crossing and fascination for exotic plants in the Himalaya *not* as part of an older colonial project but as the inevitable result of her interest in gardening and planting. With this Kincaid shifts the grounds of discourse away from imperial-colonial plant collection – exemplified by Joseph Hooker and in the collections of Kew and other gardens studied by Lucille Brockway and Richard Drayton – to a more personalized, individual enthusiasm for plants. This shift is what characterizes the postcolonial plant collector who, aware of the legacies of colonial botany, steers as far away from it as possible.¹⁹ The exotic is the nervous exotic – she does seek plants for her garden, but she distances herself from the wonders of the exotic by focusing on her subjective experiences of anxiety rather than wonder. The fact that she downplays her National Geographic affiliation and sponsorship also suggests an attempt to steer away from the prototype of the First World traveler (over whom, given the history of colonial travel, hangs a shadow of suspicion).

This last point, of Kincaid downplaying her 'lineage', so to speak, is also an act where cultural insiderness with colonial history and plant collecting situates her in the wake of predecessor travels *which she tries to disown*. She is, as she admits, replicating the trails and travels of Hooker, Lancaster, Smythe and other colonial explorers. This positions her firmly as a cultural insider, within a problematic history. Thus Hooker had explored the plant species of Borneo and other places to document the potential of importing them into England as well as to 'report on the capabilities of Labuan, with reference to the cultivation of cotton, tobacco, sugar, indigo, spices, guttapercha, etc.'²⁰ And now Kincaid hopes to acquire material to populate her American garden.

¹⁸ Peter Hulme, 'In the Wake of Columbus: Frederick Ober's Ambulant Gloss', *Literature and History* 6. 2 (1997) 18-36, cited from 24.

¹⁹ Lucille H. Brockway, *Science and the Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Botanical Gardens* (London: Academic, 1979), Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the "Improvement" of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Joseph Hooker, *Himalayan Journals* (London: John Murray, 1854, 2 vols), vol.1, 2.

A second move, and moment, in Kincaid is the recognition of the local. At an early moment in the narrative she writes: 'I saw the people and took them in, but I made no notes on them, no description of their physical being since I could they could not do the same to me' (77). This suggests an awareness of the incessant ethnographic documentation of almost every colonial traveler of the nineteenth century. Her refusal to perform ethnographic acts – documentation – of this kind immediately sets Kincaid in contrasting positions with the colonial legacy of travel. Another significant moment occurs when Kincaid's 'local' responsibility becomes visible towards the end of the narrative. Kincaid writes:

It was brought home to me again, that while every moment I was experiencing had an exquisite uniqueness and made me feel everything was unforgettable, I was also in the middle of someone else's daily routine, someone captured by the ordinariness of his everyday life. (166)

Her quest for flowers and the exotic, like that of her predecessors', Kincaid realizes, is also woven into the very ordinary lives of the people she passes by (and will never meet again, or know with any degree of intimacy). She follows in the wake of Lancaster and Hooker, but is more conscious of the Maoists today, the poverty of the villages she passes through, the load carried by the porters, etc. She is at once, therefore, loyal to the trails of her predecessors and attentive to the present world she passes through. It is this present 'ambulant gloss' (Peter Hulme's terms) on the colonial traveler that ultimately constitutes Kincaid's politics, that of an anxious cosmopolitanism. This 'ambulant gloss' on predecessor texts/travelers where she exhibits a certain amount of overlapping allegiances across global and local, First World and Third World, is a crucial moment in the making of Kincaid's anxious cosmopolitanism.

Kincaid's multiple allegiances that she faithfully documents offer us a dynamics of identity-making. Kincaid (i) refuses to be just a cultural insider to the tradition of colonial botany, (ii) is a willing cultural insider to plantation and gardening and (iii) as a footsteps traveler remains firmly sensitive to the (postcolonial) present. Pointing to both the past record of colonial travel and the present –she opens with 9/11 and foregrounds the Nepali Maoists' animosity towards Americans – Kincaid distances herself from both. This is the politics of *Among Flowers*. Kincaid arrives as a footsteps traveler in the wake of confident, mercenary colonial explorers, but seeks to establish herself as an anxious *individual*, eager only to find materials in her individual capacity, for her private garden. It was not, like Joseph Hooker's, a national project. Now, natural history, of which plant collection, cataloguing and exhibitions were integral constituents, preceded ethnographic and racial classifications, and emphasized 'nature' over 'culture.' The exotic was therefore the savage, primal and pre-modern other.²¹ By resisting focusing exclusively on the plants as exotic, by demonstrating knowledge about the plants while also being alert to the 'culture' – human presence, habitation, Maoists – around these scenic landscapes, Kincaid announces her clear departure from her predecessors. Kincaid tracks down

²¹ Knellwolf 16.

plants, encounters 'nature', but at no point does her (horti)cultural insiderness prevent her from aligning nature with culture.

Kincaid both recalls *and* enacts the history of plant-collection and thus embarks – and this is the third move/moment – on a process of what Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz term 'memory citizenship', where 'memory-work' or 'performances' of memory, regardless of citizenship status, situate the individual within the past, within histories of nations, races and ethnicities.²² Migrant archives of memory, they argue, constitute a new engagement, multidirectional and transnational, with historical pasts. Kincaid's constant return to Lancaster, Smythe and other colonial explorers suggests a conscious memory-work that situates her as a citizen of a particular kind of past and history, but does not guarantee a comfortable citizenship. It is a performance of memory that makes her a subject of the kingdom of colonial botany. Yet, her transnational mobility makes this citizenship complicated. She does not forget, she performs her memory citizenship and yet she constantly undermines this citizenship.

In the fourth and perhaps her most important move, Kincaid explicitly references her cosmopolitanism, having arrived at this via a not very comfortable route of uncertain travel, cultural insidership and memory citizenship. Kincaid admits being like any other American tourist, seeking souvenirs of her visit (167). In the passage I have cited as the epigraph to the essay, Kincaid foregrounds her garden ideal. But what is important is that she sees her Vermont garden as a *cosmopolitan* space, 'populate[d] ... with plants from another side of the world.' The process of 'populating' this potential garden is one of anxious cosmopolitanism.

Amanda Anderson in her work on cosmopolitanism has argued that cosmopolitanism is often the consequence of a tension between elitism and egalitarianism.²³ While there is an expression of planetary expansiveness in cosmopolitanism, writes Bruce Robbins, it is combined with an 'unembarrassed acceptance of professional self-interest.'²⁴ Such a cosmopolitanism resists national histories, parochialism and insists on a 'worldliness.' These tensions result not in detachment but in 'overlapping allegiances.'²⁵

First, Kincaid's memory performances as well as her First World tourist roles bestow upon her a citizenship that is elite. Yet, her alertness to locality and local dynamics make her quasi-egalitarian. Her interest in populating her Vermont garden is described in a tone that articulates in equal parts, First World empowered/enabled desire and localized anxiety:

We had in our possession seeds that, if properly germinated, would produce some of the most beautiful and desirable flowering plants to appear in a garden situated in the temperate zone; at the very same time we were in danger of

²² Michael Rothberg and Yasmine Yildiz, 'Memory Citizenship: Migrant Archives of Holocaust Remembrance in Contemporary Germany', *Parallax* 17.4 (2011), 32-48.

²³ Amanda Anderson, 'Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity', in Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) 69-92, cited from 73.

²⁴ Cited in Anderson 74-5.

²⁵ Bruce Robbins cited in Anderson, 'Cosmopolitanism' 77-8.

being killed and our dream of the garden in the temperate zone, the place in which we lived, would die with us also. At the very moment we were projecting ourselves into an ideal idyll we were in between life and death ... We walked away from the experience of spending the night with seeds of flowers we loved while all the time vulnerable to people who might not like us and decide to do something about it. (169-170)

Kincaid acknowledges that the purpose of this plant-collection is to build a garden in the temperate climes of 'her' country. This dream/ambition is however also tempered in the very next sentence with an intense awareness of the immediate location (the world of Maoist Nepal). This is the simultaneity of home and world, distanced from both.

Later, in a market she sees fruits that she recognizes: 'food that I, a person who grew up on an island not far from the Equator, was familiar with' (178). She however wishes to leave, 'our destination was home and the comfort and beauty of our gardens' (181). Ironically, when unable to leave because the airport is under siege and growing desperate, Kincaid and her companions 'were thinking of ways to get back here, ways to look at the landscape and find plants that would grow in our gardens' (184).

Kincaid constantly moves between First World safety and the security of her 'temperate' garden and the anxiety of populating it with plants from other parts of the world. Her allegiances are therefore multiple: First World, colonial history, postcoloniality and responsibility. What I am calling 'anxious cosmopolitanism' is the uncertainty that is at once derived from and haunts these allegiances. One does not ever get the sense that she is comfortable merely collecting seeds in Nepal, surrounded by poverty, for her Vermont garden. Neither does one get the sense that she is at home in the Third World landscape. Her longing for Vermont and its secure *secretum iter* – as opposed to the dangerous, 'wild', Maoist-infested landscape of Nepal – and her 'ambulant gloss' of predecessor travels seem to suggest a cosmopolitanism born out of an intense awareness of her legacies, discrepant locations and ethical responsibility.

With her empowered transnational mobility – even when she is marooned at the airport, where Maoists and soldiers are facing off, she is able to think of a return visit – and her imaginary geography of a globalised garden Jamaica Kincaid represents a new, if anxious, cosmopolitanism of the First World.

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