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Entangled Gardens: Heterotopian Relationality in Romesh Gunesekera's The Prisoner of Paradise (2012)

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes a relational conception of utopian entanglements that frames utopia in material environmental terms and focuses on gardens as exemplary sites where materialism and other discourses in culture and literature come together. It contextualises a piece of historical metafiction in a framework informed by heterotopia and recent theorisations of relationality in the face of an ongoing crisis of connection that encompasses human relations with the environment. *The Prisoner of Paradise* (2012) by Sri Lankan-British writer Romesh Gunesekera is a historical narrative set in 1825 on the island of Mauritius, which serves a diasporic microcosm that not only showcases transnational relations between Asia, Africa and Europe but includes the natural environment in a perspective that invited readers to approach connection as a challenge for the imagination. Gunesekera deconstructs western images of paradise, using gardens to problematize the human exploitation of the environment, other creatures, place, memory and representation. In Gunesekera's temporally displaced setting, gardens serve as spaces of escape in which human beings experience nature as an agent which ultimately cannot be appropriated. By metatextually criticising the misuse of utopian images, the novel reveals present-day crises of connection as the outcome of a failure to activate the transformative potential of the imagination.

Keywords: Gardens, environmental humanities, Heterotopia, relationality, Gunesekera, historiographic metafiction.

1. INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONALITY AND THE CRISIS OF CONNECTION

Even prior to the COVID19 pandemic, disciplines as diverse as psychology, neurobiology, pedagogy, systems theory, leadership and organisation, religion, and literary studies observed that societies across the globe are going through a crisis of connection (Cacioppo and Patrick 2009; Way et al. 2018; Scharmer 2018; Drichel 2019b, 2019a; Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010; Sturm 1998]:

> The decreasing levels of empathy and trust, and the rising indices of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation indicate a loss of connection at the individual and community levels. […] [W]e are indeed in the midst of a crisis because as the bonds of solidarity and cohesion weaken, our ability to address our societal problems and pursue our common interests is severely damaged. (Way et al. 2018, 1-2)

This condition, due to many factors ranging from colonialism to rapid progress in technology, cannot be improved by focusing on the social sphere of human interaction alone. It is the outcome of a

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longstanding disconnect, especially in western cultures, between human and non-human lifeworlds (Grün 2005; Casey 2001), which, as ecocritics such as Ursula Heise (Heise 2008, 22) and Timothy Clark (Clark 2015, 104) have noted, is among the causes of major threats in the present, most prominently, climate change. The key to reconnection lies in reframing human relations to the material environment:

> Human agency works by reflecting itself through meaningful connections with its environment. Human work in its generic sense consists of constructing mimetic representations out of the raw matter of the environment so that the human agent can see itself. This is one way of understanding the significance of the interspace between the individual and its environment: inside and outside disappear as separate locations and merge together in the creative tension of the interspace that both separates and joins them as reflections of each other. (Cooper 2005, 1690)

Envisaging such interspaces, utopian writings articulate the longing for a better place of meaningful relations. They moreover contain seeds from which change may emerge by reframing human interdependencies with nature. This claim is informed by Bradford et al.'s concept of 'transformative utopianism' which argues that 'utopian and dystopian tropes carry out important social, cultural, and political work by challenging and reformulating ideas about power and identity, community, the body, spatio-temporal change, and ecology' (Bradford 2008, 2). Interspaces for a renewal of human-nature relations are not only found in fiction: according to Michel Foucault, quasi-utopian experiences can be accessed through the space of the garden which he describes as "… happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity" (Foucault 1986, 23). The garden is key in the context of exploring utopian entanglements, not only because of the the actual health benefits it accrues (Oh, Park, and Ahn 2017; Skar et al. 2019), but also because, like utopia, it makes the workings of the imagination visible. Designed and shaped by humans, gardens in turn exert a (trans)formative influence on humans. This is true both for actual gardens and for written ones: from early creation myths on, gardens have been entangled with the imagination and with textuality (Pugh 1988, ix; Pollan 2002; Alexander 2013). Gardens stage encounters with a non-human otherness which cannot be fully comprehended but inspires desire to improvin place (relations). Whereas most utopian narratives are travel stories set in remote Elsewheres easily conceptualised as 'good', the garden activates a utopian impulse to work towards a better place in the Here and Now.

In this essay I explore a case where both plots collaborate: *The Prisoner of Paradise* (2012) by Sri Lankan-British writer Romesh Gunesekera is a historical narrative set in colonial Mauritius. The gardenesque island, a microcosm of social encounters, is subject to multiple projections, as characters who have migrated from the mainlands of Asia, Europe and Africa pin their hopes for prosperity on this location, metatextually confecting Mauritius into a space of growth. Gardens are central to the plot: they serve as spaces of encounter, commerce, and hope, but also escape. Gunesekera challenges western images of paradise as a space of innocence, using gardens to problematize repeated processes of exploitation of people and nature. This is underlined by intertextual nods to, among others, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817) and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). By metatextually criticising the misuse of utopian imaginaries, some explicitly derived from these intertexts, Gunesekera's novel reveals present-day crises of connection as the outcome of a failure to think beyond superficial hegemonies. In what follows, after unpacking the relational implications of the garden, I analyse Gunesekera's temporally displaced *tableau* to investigate how a metafictional utopian vision may help reshape the cultural narratives (Valdivia 2019) which continue to reinforce current disconnections.

2. GARDEN HETEROTOPIAS AS RELATIONAL SPACES

Gardens are a suitable focal space for this analysis of historical metafiction, as they are rooted in histories of colonial trade (Drayton 2000; Schiebinger 2004; McCracken 1997) while simultaneously expressing hopes for a prosperous future: 'Planting a garden is an act of anticipation. It is also an act of memory and settlement: those who make a garden look back to recollected forms and forward to

new growth that will become a special kind of place' (Holmes 2008, 3). Gardens are relational in their etymology, as "the word 'garden' itself comes from *ghordos*, an ancient Indo-European word for 'enclosure', and the same root is in 'yard' and 'orchard'" (Uglow 2004, 3). In an attempt to unravel 'the meaning of gardens', landscape architect Clare C. Marcus highlights their capacity to bridge major schisms of modern life:

> many humans passionately embrace the metaphor and the reality of the garden because it enables them to marry two modes of thought — intuitive/logical, right brain/left brain, feminine/masculine — and by so doing, to resolve certain inner conflicts that remain in the individual and the group psyche. We garden because that activity requires knowledge and intuition, science and nurturance, planning and faith. (Marcus 1990, 27)

The Linnéan idea of marriage and Marcus' key opposites, metaphor and reality encompass the physical space in connection with its symbolic, imaginary potential. Thinking beyond binary entanglements of reality and the imagination, Foucault suggests that in addition to utopia and dystopia we add a term, 'heterotopia(s)', to capture utopian experiences in everyday life:

> There are…, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault 1986, 22)

Gardens as sketched in Foucault's draft 'heterotopology' assume the distancing potential often associated with intellectual (Benda 1975):

> Exactly these disturbing qualities of heterotopias make them potent places of intellectual change. They are places where the old order of things is 'shattered', its 'syntax destroyed', where words and things no longer 'hold together', and which is consequently replaced by a new order. That is, heterotopias are places of 'paradigm' change, sites of new 'styles of scientific reasoning' (Barnes 2004, 574)

Gibson Burrell and Karen Dale point out that utopian gardens perform 'boundary-work': 'Every utopia attempts to secure the 'best' and obscure the 'beastly'. Every utopia attempts this boundary-work spatially. And so too does every garden' (Burrell and Dale 2002, 109). The garden constitutes a dynamic boundary and poses relational challenges, as connection must be approached as a dynamic process of continuous adjustment.

Gardens are also the most iconic representative of the Western creation myth referenced in Gunesekera's title. While "Eden continues as a touchstone in the minds of Europeans and Americans for every kind of benign place, moment, and action – past, present, and future – testifying to the hold the myth retains on the human consciousness" (Schultz 1985, xi), the captivity highlighted by Gunesekera belies a positive interpretation of the paradisal garden in the context of imperialism:

> Paradise begins as a geographical topos motivating European exploration and colonization, evolves into a myth justifying imperial discourse and praxis, and finally becomes an ironic motif responding to neo-colonialism and global capitalism [...] [T]he paradise myth is dialectical, serving to naturalize the contingent, fabricated values of imperialism, even as it is riven by the contradictions of an embedded utopian impulse (Deckard 2010, 2)

The garden as a figure of human control of nature is a material complement to this narrative. Literature is complicit not only in the ways in which it corrupts colonial subjects outlined by critics such as Gauri Viswanathan and Sara Suleri (Viswanathan 1989; Suleri 1993). It is also complicit in seducing readers into idealising, even 'idyllising' postcolonial retributions as a battle which is largely conducted on the pages of books.

In fiction, gardens, like other spaces, are confined to two functions-- they either serve as motif or setting. Whether 'realistic' and 'symbolic', the garden 'lends context to the events and characters' and

'usually helps the reader to understand the characters and their situation' (Howe 2010, 89). Such menial roles however fail to represent the garden's transformative potential as a vibrant source of cognitive development. Mieke Bal opens a third path: "In many cases… space is 'thematized': it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an 'acting place' rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes subordinate to the presentation of space" (Bal 1985, 95-96). As crucial growth processes take place in the soil (Sartiliot 1993, 5), gardens direct attention to the tensions between surface and the ground beneath. In keeping with recent rethinking of matter (Bennett 2010; Alaimo 2016), let us now dig into how relational garden heterotopias confront human beings with the substances required for growth and actual connection.

3. GUNESEKERA'S ENTANGLED PARADISES

The Prisoner of Paradise (2012) revisits a volatile moment in history as slavery is being abolished across the world, and colonial relations are in a process of being recalibrated. Mauritius is explored from the perspective of young Lucy Gladwell, newly arriving from England to live with (and be married off by) her aunt. The courtship plot unravels through a panorama of social gatherings, many of which staged in garden spaces where analogies are sketched between plant propagation, enslavement and marriage.

Gunesekera's rewriting of the paradise myth plays with the tensions of liberation and captivity. Gardens, nature, books and social relations form an intricate web in which the eponymous prisoner is caught, contributing to what Eleanor Perènyi terms "women's incarceration in the flower garden" (Perényi 2002, 261). From her first appearance on board a vessel named *Liberty*, Lucy is in search of liberation. Having grown up in the prosaic surroundings of a paper mill, Lucy is keen to embrace the freedom of a promised land which orientalist stories have led her to anticipate:

> When her aunt had recommended, six months earlier, that Lucy travel with her to Mauritius, Lucy had imagined a journey into Eden. She had often dreamed of places woven out of popular tales and romantic verse; she longed to cross the desert of Arabia, enter the palaces of India, the ports of the world from Turkey to Malaya where her father had sailed. (Gunesekera 2012, 13)

At first glance, Mauritius seems to deliver on such fictive promises: 'The first time she had read in Mr Moore's golden book of *Lalla Rookh* the bold assertion that 'nothing could be more beautiful than the leaves of mango-trees and acacias…' she had believed it, and now, within hours of landing, she discovered she was right to have done so' (Gunesekera 2012, 19).

Lucy's textual utopias clash with the historical context: abolition is in everyone's conversation, due to the impending economic and social consequences for all players converging on the island: disenfranchisement reroutes into more covert forms, and the exploitation of natural resources continues unabated. Upon disembarking, Lucy is unsettled by the spectacle of chained convicts, shipped in labour forces from India. Her prospects of freedom from social frills are equally quickly dampened as her chaperone introduces her to a line-up of dull gentlemen, none of whom conform to the standards set by poetry:

> Her hands trembled a little as she unpacked her books and put them out on the shelf next to the writing table: *Endymion, Rasselas, Oroonoko* and, especially, Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* — a delectable romance of a princess on an Eastern journey, in love with Feramorz the poet, a prince in disguise. A heroine who vicariously experiences adventures in verse and finally finds happiness in a royal Cashmere garden. (Gunesekera 2012, 24)

It is not until she sets eyes on her own Feramorz, Don Lambodar, the dashing interpreter of an exiled Ceylonese prince, that the way seems paved for a *bona fide* colonial romance across the divides of class and colour. Ultimately, however, the oriental garden in which Lucy finds herself proves a thornier grove than poetry has led her to believe, and her romanticisation of life in an exotic Eldorado leads her into entanglements where the boundaries between reality and fantasy fatefully blur. Despite the upbeat nature and name of Gunesekera's heroine, her story ends in a catastrophe, as Lucy is swept

to sea during a tryst, exposing the novel's affectation of a light mood as a ploy to challenge colonialism as a touristy trope confected for the entertainment of the time-travelling reader.

Throughout the narrative, gardens negotiate tensions between the harmonious surface and subliminal conflicts. Indian workers who have been on Mauritius longer than the British are campaigning to mark their belonging by erecting a place of worship, discouraged by the colonisers. Many of the French and English colonisers present are outranked by the residents of colour, some of whom are of noble birth. Lucy's aunt and uncle are the tenants of an Indian landlord. They do not own their home away from home with its statement garden, and are thus aligned with other individuals employed or in service while belonging to an ethnic group which colonial discourse identifies as the ruling class. These controversies explode in the novel's finale, when a hurricane destroys the gardens just as Betty discovers and avenges her husband's affair with a Black woman.

Gardens make visible what ideas power these social entanglements. Within the gardensque island three gardens stand out: firstly, the well-kept garden at Ambleside, the Huyton's home, serves as Betty's refuge from social obligations. Caring for plants is Betty's substitute for the children she never had. Plants are procured from the second prominent garden, a plant nursery, run by Mr Amos, a highly respected former slave. But it is the third, the Botanical Garden, which is the novel's key acting space:

> The Botanical Gardens had been nurtured as a haven — an island within an island. Foreign plants from all over the world — Ceylon, Polynesia, the Ivory Coast — had been imported, much as the people of Mauritius had been, but to a condition of care largely absent outside its walls and railings. The bushes that lined the entrance to the Gardens danced, fresh and lucent; the cannas proudly flapped their red and yellow speckled coxcombs in the breeze. (Gunesekera 2012, 97-98)

The purpose of botanical gardens in colonial locations goes beyond such niceties, as Richard Drayton shows: harbouring flora that proclaimed the alleged superiority of categorised European plants over indigenous ones, they not only functioned central hubs for plant commerce and scientific exchange (Drayton 2000; Kincaid 1999), but also constituted "theatres in which exotic nature was, literally, put in its place in a European system" (Drayton 2000, 183). *The Prisoner of Paradise* illustrates these tensions by juxtaposing the Hindu servants' campaign for a shrine with the quixotic ambition of the French Intendant to build a memorial commemorating Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's fictional lovers. Gunesekera thus uses the Botanical Gardens to raise metatextual caveats about the boundary between the imagination and reality-- an abstract interface between twenty-first century ecocritical sensibilities and the nineteenth century exploitations of humans and nature.

The gardens also enable an exchange of gifts. Along with letters, flowers constitute the main medium of exchange. In a nod to 18th and 19th century floral codes, flowers are associated with the platitudes of polite social intercourse where, to Lucy's frustration, language disguises true sentiment rather than generating the meaningful interactions she longs for. Lucy's first meeting with her love interest involves flower discourse as an ice-breaker, as Don Lambodar confirms her classification of Ceylon as 'the island of the fabled lotus' (Gunesekera 2012, 61). Relational undercurrents are reinforced by the parallels between flowers in bloom and marriageable young girls such as Lucy Gladwell:

> These blooming heroines are defined by a presentation that conflates a putatively bodily fact— the fact of being "in bloom"—and a social position: the fact of the girl's imminent insertion into a marriage plot. That conflation is underwritten by the most significant fact about the Linnaean system: the way his classificatory method terms the sexual reproduction of a flower marriage, a terminology that makes a horticultural fact a human fact, and by extension a human act (marriage) a horticultural, "natural" act (blooming). (King 2003, 4)

Garden discourse metonymically references the entanglements of humans and plants when sugar cane, one of the key commodities of Empire and a venture overtly associated with slavery, is frequently discussed as weakening the character. Poppy plantations have even more sinister connotations, as several hushed references to opium abuse indicate. The entanglements of captivity, the mind and addiction play out when Lucy and her aunt are assaulted by an inebriated driver while on an outing

with a Ceylonese nobleman, echoing Forster's iconic excursion from *A Passage to India* (1924). As in Forster's novel, this event becomes the turning-point that abandons hopes for a true connection across cultural divides.

After the languid social routines depicted in most of the narrative, the novel's final chapters speed up, culminating in an action-movie-like demolition of colonial culture: Port Louis is unceremoniously doused with a hurricane that strips away the gardens along with all vestiges of civilization:

> The flower beds on the edges were in shambles; the arches of blue and purple liana leading to the side gardens has been ripped to pieces; the gazebo had lost its decorative turret and the tulip tree behind it had come crashing down. The crowds of the other evening swam across the soft slow streams in his eyes. The garden had been bubbling with so much life — talk, music, food — but now looked as though it had been desolate for years. (Gunesekera 2012, 343)

Readers are shocked awake, as the novel's finale seems to leap across several centuries: Lambodar's impressions evoke documentary footage of the 2004 tsunami which ravaged several contemporary tropical paradises. In the storm's aftermath, Lucy and Don find themselves freed from social constraints, and on their tryst, Lucy disappears into the ocean. Her drowning is never confirmed, so her end can be read as full immersion in her romantic illusion as she re-enacts her intertextual predecessor, Virginie.

4. CONCLUSION

Gunesekera's fictional answer to present crises of connection is to reconnect with the past, to show that the repetitive and stagnant narrative of Eden has more prisoners than first meet the eye. Exposing the colonisers as trapped in an exotic tale of their own confection, Gunesekera's time-travelling colonial pageant raises the question of how to connect, which boundaries to draw and how to account for change. By presenting large parts of the narrative as a congenial holiday read fit to appeal to tourists *en route* to a tropical paradise, Gunesekera challenges the border between the imagination and experiential realism, exposing the act of travelling as complicit in neo-colonial exploitations of frail biospheres. In this context, gardens are good to think with: they illustrate the precarity of human connections across cultures and with a nature that refuses to comply with false niceties. In Gunesekera's historical romance, gardens are confected into a connective repository of histories and myths of rebirth and regrowth as well as acts of retelling and rewriting. By focusing on characters seduced by narratives and literally swept into a re-enactment, the novel exposes an aspect of stagnation in postcolonial permutations of colonial history: like cyclical nature, this narrative presents readers with a pattern of variations on a theme, locked in performative rather than substantial and productive relations. Gunesekera's characters illustrate the aporia of escape from the evolving shape and content of power relations and economic and emotional entanglements by withdrawing into heterotopian social games or into fictional idealisations. Ultimately the environment brings them back to the question of power and the consequences of all relations. Gunesekera uses plant commodities to underline how people are entangled with plant trade while signalling that freedom is achieved through economic means as well as mental decolonisation.

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