

# 'Gardenworthy': Rerouting colonial botany in Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*

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*Plants are as diverse as people. Some are polite, attractive guests you invite into your domain; others are nosy pests who creep in uninvited and take root.*

(Chicago Botanical Garden website)

*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 2005, 189)

Many plants considered prized additions to gardens over the last two centuries are embedded in a set of material and textual practices linked to the history of colonialism and plant-hunting in South Asia. What connects this history to contemporary gardening culture is a shared interest in domesticating foreign plants while still retaining an aspect of their exotic origins. This essay will investigate different textual practices used by plant hunters in South Asia to represent their encounters with the strange and unfamiliar, and consider how this has influenced the imagined and actual domestication of exotic plants in European and North American gardens. The *OED* defines an exotic, with reference to plants, as "introduced from abroad, not indigenous" but also "having the attraction of the strange or foreign, glamorous." My reading of Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005) [hereafter *Among Flowers*] attempts to account for the tension between conceptions of the foreign and the domestic that inform the desirability of collecting so-called exotic plants, and to consider what metaphorical implications this tension might have for reading Kincaid's own diasporic subject position in her travel narrative about plant-hunting in Nepal. I compare and contrast Kincaid's arguably counter-colonial narrative with early plant-hunting memoirs set in and around the Himalayan region, including Joseph Dalton Hooker's *The Himalayan Journals* (1854), Frank Kingdon Ward's *The Riddle of the Tzangpo Gorges* (1924) and,

more recently, Roy Lancaster's *Plant Hunting in Nepal* (1981). Specifically, I consider how these different plant hunters narrate their encounter with the Himalayan landscape and examine how they frame their perception of botanical specimens like the 'high alpine' *Rheum nobile* (noble rhubarb). This essay is part of a larger project that reflects on the role plant-hunting memoirs have played in the globalization of alpine plants and practices associated with rock gardening culture from the nineteenth century onward.<sup>1</sup> While plant-hunting literature and activities appear to be largely a colonial project geared toward advancing a scientific agenda and economic botany, as well as domesticating certain types of plants for European gardens, I demonstrate that narratives about these journeys are also fraught with anxieties concerning colonial authority. Reading these earlier plant-hunting texts in relation to Kincaid's account of her Nepal trip can provide the urban gardener with a worldly frame for understanding contemporary horticultural practices, pointing to their implication in colonial history, and disrupting popular attitudes toward gardening as a leisure activity pursued outside the bounds of cultural politics.

Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers* describes a three-week seed hunting expedition in Nepal during the fall of 2002. Simultaneously invoking and subverting the genre of colonial travel writing and plant-hunting practices, this book chronicles the experiences of Kincaid and her companions as they set out to gather the seeds of as many "gardenworthy" (Kincaid 2005, 115) plants as they can find during their trip. The term gardenworthy is used by Kincaid to refer to the kind of plants that can be easily cultivated in the cooler temperatures associated with gardens in Europe and North America. As Kincaid's narrative makes visible, however, the definition of what counts as garden-worthy is quite slippery, and involves a complex cultural negotiation not necessarily dependent on climatic conditions.

The use of the term is quite common in popular gardening books, magazines, and websites. Gardenworthy is used to describe the hardiness as well as the appropriateness of growing certain plants in particular climatic zones. When Kincaid first mentions this concept in *Among Flowers*, she describes how the botanists she travels with debate the best route for the trip, and she emphasizes that "[e]very square foot of terrain must be carefully pored over so that not a single garden-worthy plant is missed, the poor collector not knowing if he will ever be able to come this way again" (32). Here, "garden-worthy" appears with a hyphen that is subsequently dropped, something Kincaid suggests has to do with her growing sense of connection to the plantsmen's vocabulary. "Gardenworthy" Kincaid explains,

has a sweeping authority, a confidence in judgement that they, the plantsmen have. It's most likely that I, in trying to copy them, trying to enter the club so to speak, used it in that way. But my own way of saying it, still trying to borrow their confidence and authority would have used the word with a hyphen. The [initial use of the] hyphen would have been me trying to prop up my slender association with the whole enterprise (2007, email to the author).

The initial instability of Kincaid's use of "garden(-)worthy" in the story of her plant-hunting trip in Nepal can be read as an expression of her liminal status in relation to the activity. Indeed, she has used this word previously with a hyphen in her account of a seed hunting trip in China anthologized in her collection, *My Garden (Book)*: [hereafter *My Garden*]. A much less physically challenging undertaking than the Nepal trip, Kincaid explains that she and her travelling companions were bussed between plant-hunting locations over terrain that held very little interest for the group. She comments how,

For a very long time (or so it seemed to the botanists and to me, too—I was beginning to see things only from their point of view [...]) we saw nothing of interest [...] scrub and scrub and scrub (scrub as an entity holding nothing that the botanists thought of as garden-worthy, and that whole idea, 'garden-worthy' will eventually have its own enemies, its own friends and passionate supporters) (1999, 198).

Learning to see things from the perspective of the botanists and familiarizing herself with the "friends" and "enemies" of what counts as garden(-)worthy are things that Kincaid takes up with deeper interest in *Among Flowers*. In Nepal she describes herself as being initiated into "the club" of famous plant hunters and horticulturists (such as Lancaster, Hooker and Ward) who have written about botanical explorations in the same region she visits and with whose accounts she is well-versed. I would like to suggest, however, that Kincaid's entry into this world involves inhabiting the role of the explorer in a manner that seeks to appropriate and change, and not simply debunk, the terms for how the activity of plant-hunting is understood.

Of course, Kincaid's interest in gardening culture's colonial underpinnings has been a defining quality of her creative writing throughout her career. Her first novel, *Annie John*, for example, uses references to indigenous and foreign plants and trees (guava, *Psidium guajava*, and breadfruit, *Artocarpus altilis*, respectively) as a way of indirectly highlighting the impact of slavery and colonial practices on Antigua's cultural and economic history. Born in colonial Antigua in 1949, a descendant of slaves, Kincaid moved to the US in 1966, where she began her career as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. *My Garden* anthologizes Kincaid's personal essays about the history of colonialism and botanical exploration, her own growing interest in gardening culture, and places her attraction to these topics at the forefront of her current work as a writer. As some critics have noted, however, it is often an unsettling experience to read Kincaid's reflections on her activities and interests as a gardener. As Jeanne C. Ewert observes, "On first reading [...] *My Garden (Book)*: seems to present a fairly straight forward, and often engaged indictment of the colonial practices of appropriating, renaming, and relocating plants from their native countries to other parts of the world." Ewert and others have noted, however, "a closer look at Kincaid's garden [...] reveals the degree to which Kincaid herself engages in the very practices she criticizes" (2006, 113). While I agree that it is possible to identify parallels between Kincaid's and the colonial plant hunters' passion for gardening and exotic plant acquisitions, it is also impossible to ignore the "layered self-consciousness" (Nixon 2010, 10) of Kincaid's narrative, something that Rob Nixon regards as a defining quality of travel writing by Black postcolonial writers. Like the post-apartheid game park experience in South Africa that Nixon reflects on in his essay, "Stranger in the Eco-village," the contemporary Himalayan plant-hunting expedition could be described as "a spaced marked as non-coeval with the world around it and whose implication in modernity is suppressed" (8). Kincaid's entry into this "anachronistic space," (8) and her decision to narrate its pleasures and challenges while also foregrounding how her racial difference, "disrupts the smooth optics of tourism" (9) that characterize trekking and mountaineering culture in Nepal, setting her apart from the other plant hunters as someone who not only looks but is also looked at. One among many examples of this type of disruption in *Among Flowers* includes Kincaid's story of a Nepalese woman who was fascinated by her "braided-into-cornrow hair" (Kincaid 2005, 46). "She asked," recalls Kincaid, "if I could make her own hair look like mine. I did not know how to tell her that my hairdo [...] was made possible by weaving into my own hair the real hair of a woman from a part of the

world that was quite like her own" (46). The irony of the Nepalese woman asking to make her hair look like Kincaid's (described as already like the Nepalese woman's hair) is not lost on the author. Elsewhere along the route, Kincaid recounts how the unfamiliarity of her dark skin causes another Nepalese woman to wonder if she is wearing a mask (100). Numerous incidents like this throughout the text draw attention to Kincaid's unexpected presence and interstitial perspective within the group of plant hunters. Adapting Nixon's analysis of Ndebele's experience of the post-apartheid game park in South Africa, it is possible to read Kincaid's participation in the expedition as "point[ing] forwards and backwards in time" and "render[ing] visibly political the apolitical posture" of plant-hunting, colonial botany and contemporary garden culture "as natural sanctuary from politics" (Nixon 2010, 9). It is this unsettling narrative perspective, rather than a simple parodic mode in *Among Flowers*, that both interrupts and goes beyond readers' taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationship between nature and culture in the Himalayan environment, and terms such as 'gardenworthy'.<sup>2</sup>

The tension between critique of and complicity with colonial attitudes toward botanical history that characterizes Kincaid's reflections in *My Garden* intensifies in her account of her plant hunting trip in *Among Flowers*. For example, Kincaid's travel account is published by the National Geographic Society, an organization with a long history of domesticating 'exotic' places and people for American consumption. Similarly, she emphasizes her implication in American society and cultural anxieties when she explains that the trip was delayed for a year because of "*The Events of September 11*" (2005, 5; italics in original). "How grateful I finally am," writes Kincaid, "to the uniquely American capability for reducing many things to an abbreviation, for in writing these words, *The Events of September 11*, I need not offer a proper explanation, a detailed explanation of why I made this journey one year later" (5). The ironic, fleeting, and deliberately opaque reference to "*The Events of September 11*," as well as Kincaid's funding and publishing arrangement with National Geographic, place her account in an unsettling relationship to the history of European and American exploration, the history of colonialism, and contemporary American foreign policy. Throughout *Among Flowers*, Kincaid's narrative is informed by this instability—from various reflections on her Black diasporic subject position and her motivations for going to Nepal, to her perceptions of the landscape during the trip and its impact on her attitude toward her garden in Vermont. While in some moments Kincaid signals a link between her experience of growing up in colonial Antigua (only fully independent from Britain in 1981) with the effects of colonialism in South Asia and globalization in Nepalese society, at others she clings anxiously to her elite status as a tourist when circumstances around her appear threatening and unfamiliar.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, although Kincaid shares the affluent class position of her plant-hunting companions, her racial difference and diasporic status set her visually and culturally apart from the group and heighten the sense of uneasiness that characterizes her participation in the trip from its outset. In the midst of this ambivalent text, Kincaid's account of the group's search for the slippery notion of "gardenworthy" plants makes visible the muddled relationship between colonialism and contemporary plant-hunting and gardening culture, while at the same time trying to redeem something from these activities, what she refers to elsewhere as "this really normal thing called human curiosity"—a point I will return to below (Warner 2006, 54).

In horticultural literature, the word 'gardenworthy' usually functions as an adjective and refers to the ability of a plant to survive in a particular location and climate. It also serves to indicate if a plant is considered "suitable or fit for" (the most common definition of worthy) the garden as

opposed to 'the wild.' It shares a genesis with other similarly constructed and equally hazy modifiers like 'newsworthy,' but additionally has more practical connotations akin to a word like 'seaworthy.' On the iVillage GardenWeb website, for instance, one contributor to a forum on new varieties of *Heuchera* comments:

In years past, I've run myself ragged trying to get ahold of the most exciting new varieties of heucheras, heucherellas, and tirellas (other plants, too) even before they appear in the local nurseries. But I have to say this—I've decided to wait and see if the new varieties are garden-worthy. Maybe it's a tissue-culture thing, or maybe it's just the rush to scoop other horticulturalists, but many recent releases simply fail to live up to the anticipation—or fail to live (iVillage GardenWeb) .

In this assessment, the commentator is referring to both the plant's hardiness as well as its aesthetic qualities—s/he screens her purchases at the nursery according to the health *and* attractiveness of the plant, an attractiveness that partially hinges on the unusual or new. What counts as gardenworthy can also include a reference to the control a gardener can exercise over a particular plant in his/her garden. As another contributor to the same online gardening forum on the subject of "Looking for invasive groundcover for the shade" points out, "One of the drawbacks of gardening online is that as part of the great web community, we tend to forget differences in climates and can't put ourselves easily into another's growing conditions. What is invasive in one area of the country may be considered very gardenworthy and tame in another" (iVillage GardenWeb). Here, a foreign plant is deemed gardenworthy or not based on its level of hardiness in a particular climate—a delicate balance between being judged by the gardener as insidious or subdued in its growing habits. It is interesting to note that it was not until 1927 when the first map that attempted to assign 'hardiness zones' to different geographical areas appeared in Alfred Rehder's *Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs in North America Exclusive of Subtropical and Warmer Regions*. As even this early attempt to isolate and make claims about the effect of temperature on plant growth warns, "There are, however, many other factors besides temperature in winter which will influence the hardiness and growth of certain plants, as soil, its physical as well as chemical composition, exposure, rainfall, humidity in the air, shelter from cold winds" (Del Tredici 1990, 19–20). The multiple meanings and slippage between these different usages and definitions of the term gardenworthy is further evident on the Flora-for-Fauna 'Postcodes database' established by the British Natural History Museum (NHM). This database (an archive of information about the native plants the NHM wishes to promote for cultivation throughout the UK according to gardeners' locations) uses the term 'gardenworthy' as a guide for gardeners to gauge the suitability and desirability of growing different plant species in a garden setting. So, for example, under the category 'Garden status,' it rates certain plants as more gardenworthy than others. The glossary of terms used in the catalogue explains:

'Gardenworthy' plant species have been designated after consultation with botanists and horticulturalists, and are indicated in the lists by GW next to the common name. Obviously this categorisation is subjective, and should not be regarded as definitive—some gardeners may enjoy plants that are not listed as gardenworthy, and vice versa.

The Natural History Museum's decision to comment on the 'garden status' of native species, and the evolving viewpoints of the relevance of hardiness zone maps, reveals a kind of instability in botanical and horticultural authority that underpins its truth claims. It is the slippage between these different meanings of gardenworthy that Kincaid's narrative makes visible as she mobilizes it in her account of her Nepal trip.

Kincaid's self-ironizing investigation of what counts as gardenworthy can be tracked through her description of how she only felt truly engaged in the activity of seed-collecting in Nepal when she was at an altitude with a climate that supported plants she could grow in her Vermont garden. Daniel Hinkley and a Welsh husband and wife team, Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones, Kincaid's travelling companions and well-known horticulturists, plant hunters and nursery owners in the US and Wales respectively, are described as motivated in a similar fashion.<sup>4</sup> She comments that, when she was walking in the warmer regions during the trip (too warm for plants to grow in her garden in Vermont): "I kept my eyes closed, in a way, because the climate I was walking in was not the climate in which I make a garden" (Kincaid 2005, 41). On one such day, Kincaid describes the botanists and plant hunters as "especially [...] sad. They were not just sad, they began to sulk, and Dan complained to me about all that walking (two days) with no seeds to collect and Bleddyn complained to Sue (his wife) that there were no seeds to collect" (44). "We were still in the tropics," Kincaid recalls reminding them as much as herself, wishing she had remembered to bring an umbrellas to "protect herself from all that heat" (44). Just prior to this account of the group's sulkiness, however, Kincaid also recalls how pleased she was earlier in the day to recognize a locally grown vegetable, served to her at lunch; *Sechium edule* is a plant also cultivated on her mother's island of Dominica that Kincaid tells us she knows by the name of "christophine" (43). "It was the most delicious thing I ever tasted," (43) notes Kincaid, despite the fact that she remembers she "hated it" when her mother would serve it to her as a child. The multiple and contradictory references to the tropical climate, both familiar and surprising, delightful and frustrating, produce an ambivalent response in Kincaid's outlook on the environment; with the symbolic opening and closing of her eyes, Kincaid attempts to manage the foreign and familiar only to discover that what counts as "gardenworthy" is governed by the shifting location of what one calls home (45). The sulkiness of the botanists and plant hunters highlights their self-absorption and taken-for-granted perception of what is considered worth collecting, assumptions Kincaid's narrative proceeds to defamiliarize as her account of the trip progresses.

That a plant means one thing to one person and something entirely different to someone else is underscored by Kincaid numerous times throughout *Among Flowers*. Kincaid's friend Dan, for instance, is described as "furiously trying to photograph a bundle of fodder a man was carrying on his back" (48). What Dan considers "a garden treasure" (*Viburnum cylindricum*), observes Kincaid, is used as "animal fodder in its native land" (48). In another context Kincaid comments on how the porters build fires with junipers and rhododendrons "as if they regarded [them]...as weeds" (145). "But I am reminded again," writes Kincaid as she reframes her initial reaction to the porters' choice of kindling, "that every weed can be made into a treasure in the right circumstances" (145). Weeds versus treasures, the sadness of the plant hunters versus the practical attitudes of the porters—these contradictory botanical categories and affective responses are part of a series of binary understandings of the environment that Kincaid seeks to dismantle with her account of the trip.

In *Among Flowers* Kincaid seeks to challenge how the activity of plant hunting has been under-

stood, and to undo the authority by which the seeds of exotic plants are selected by botanists and horticulturalists for collection and taming in locations far from their native origins. "I was making this trip" Kincaid explains "with the garden in mind to begin with; so 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 wild, the strange" (Kincaid 2005, 44). The idea of "making acceptable" what is "strange" is something that Richard Drayton argues was a major motivation behind colonial garden culture in places like India. He describes the activities of gardeners in the imperial peripheries as creating "spaces to which Europeans might retreat from the strangeness of alien environments" (2000 183). The gardens they created, Drayton explains, "often encompassed areas of wilderness, making islands of the same forest plants which encircled the boundaries of civility. They were theatres in which exotic nature was, literally, put in its place in a European system. This spectacle of the inclusion of the strange within the familiar comforted the expatriates and impressed the locals" (183). Kincaid makes a similar observation about explorers' practices of renaming places they 'discover' in their travels. In her essay "In History" from *My Garden*, for instance, she speculates on the motives behind Columbus' naming practices during his Caribbean explorations. Imaging herself in Columbus' position she writes, "'Here is something I have never seen before, I especially like it because it has no precedent, but it is frightening because it has no precedent, so to make it less frightening I will frame it in terms of the thing I know'" (1999, 159). In the same essay, Kincaid tracks how 'what is familiar' is seamlessly transformed into 'what is reasonable' by the replacement of the common or local names of different plants with the widespread use of Linnaeus' Latin nomenclature. Kincaid represents this process carried out by early botanists as a gesture that "replaced these names with names pleasing to them; these names are pleasing to them because they are reasonable; reason is a pleasure to them" (160). What sets Kincaid's account of her participation in the plant-hunting trip apart from the naming and gardening activities of these earlier explorers and botanists is the pleasure she associates with strange and unsettling experiences. Instead of seeking an opportunity to tame or domesticate the unfamiliar environment, she states, "I want to be in the place where the garden is coming into being" (Kincaid 2005, 7). Kincaid represents herself as the novice in the group and attributes her initial interest in the trip (somewhat counter-intuitively in the context of plant-hunting) to her "love of things that are far away, but things I have no desire to possess" (7). Her uneasiness with the classificatory and acquisitive objectives of the botanists who accompany her in Nepal, their desire to place the plants they find "in a European system" (Drayton 2000, 183), is echoed by her repeated description of her sense of perceptual disorientation during the trip. When she writes about her experience of the group's first ascent, for example, she comments, "I cannot tell now exactly when in those first few hours of the morning on my journey that my understanding of distances collapsed" (Kincaid 2005, 36-37). Despite the fact that the trip followed a particular route as indicated by the map she includes in the book's opening pages, Kincaid continually describes herself as confused and "addled" (36) and unable to get her bearings in the surrounding landscape.

A comparison of how Kincaid and the plant hunters she reads, write about the plants they encounter reveals other departures in how she approaches the practice of representing the foreign setting and unfamiliar plants. One plant in particular, the *Rheum nobile*, or the noble rhubarb, is singled out for Kincaid's attention as a plant she anticipates seeing because of what she calls its "sheer unbelievableness" (2005, 132). She explains that she "had never before seen it growing,"

and writes, "as far as I know, it cannot be found in any garden" (131). Her prior textual relationship to the plant is emphasized by her comment that it can "only be found in books written by plant hunters and only ones who have been in certain areas of the Himalaya" (132). The contrast between Kincaid's written account of seeing *Rheum nobile* and accounts of other plant hunters suggest what could be called a (post)colonial mode for participating in garden and plant-hunting culture without simply rejecting it. As a formerly colonized subject who writes in a language that was initially used to induct her into colonial culture, Kincaid recognizes that it is the form through which she expresses her interest in gardening that will disrupt its imperialist legacy.

The bizarre appearance of the *Rheum nobile*, to anyone who has never seen it before, is captured in vivid terms by Roy Lancaster's depiction of his first encounter with the plant during his 1971 expedition to Nepal. In a chapter titled "Rhubarb Hill" from *A Plantsman in Nepal*, Lancaster describes how he and his fellow plantsmen come across a cluster of *Rheum nobile* plants on a snowy morning after being introduced to it by a porter in camp the day before:<sup>6</sup>

Gradually the snow thickened and visibility decreased [...] Then we found ourselves in a narrow defile and looking up we perceived dim shapes, solitary or in groups, which seemed to be watching our progress like squat inhabitants of some alien realm into which we had stumbled. Some of the 'inhabitants' appeared on rock ledges near at hand and we discovered to our amusement that they were merely columns of the noble rhubarb—*Rheum nobile* (1995, 109–112).

Lancaster initially describes the Tibetan rhubarb as resembling strange and unrecognizable figures who peer down at the plant hunters in an intimidating fashion. The threatening atmosphere is quickly dispelled, however, when he recognizes and classifies the plant with its Latin name. Ward's representation of his encounter with the *Rheum nobile* on the Tsangpo Gorges expedition in 1924 is rendered with even greater flourish, giving the plant an almost exalted status: "In the distance," Ward recalls,

we caught sight of a remarkable vegetable. This was a giant sorrel, not yet full grown, but forming a luminous yellow pagoda, about 60 cm high [2ft.]. It grows at a most astonishing rate, till it is about 2.2 m height; but early in the year as it was, we could count these crazy vegetables across the valley half a mile away, yellow candle-flames against the dark background. A month later, when full grown, they stood up out of the Rhododendron sea like lighthouses. The Tibetans eat the young leaves, and we tried to make a cauliflower-au-gratin out of the heart of one; it was edible but insipid (as quoted in Cox 2001, 124).

While Ward's description initially offers a somewhat enchanting view of the *Rheum nobile*, as luminous beacons reminiscent of temples and then, at maturity, lighthouses guiding boats to safe harbour, he also manages to undercut the wondrousness it first inspires in him, ultimately referring to it as a "crazy vegetable." Moreover, despite the Tibetans' appreciation of its culinary uses, Ward dismisses it as tasteless. "The rhubarb is eaten raw or cooked by the Tibetans," notes Lancaster in his account, "but gives the westerner stomach ache and in no way can it compare with the familiar companion of [rhubarb] custard" (Cox 2001, 108). Hooker's *Illustrations of Himalayan Plants* (which Kincaid quotes from in *Among Flowers*) describes *Rheum nobile* as "certainly the most striking of the many fine alpine plants of Sikkim; and though in every botanical character, as also

in the acid juice of the stem, a genuine Rhubarb, it differs so remarkably in habit and general appearance from any of its congeners, that at first sight it could not be recognized as one of them" (Hooker 1854, 95). In all three descriptions, the plant hunters first position the plant as entirely foreign and unidentifiable but then conclude their comments by recognizing and classifying it as "merely" a form of rhubarb. Both Hooker and Lancaster gather the seeds of the rhubarb but suggest it did not prove to be very gardenworthy. Hooker, for instance, concludes the entry on *Rheum nobile* in *Illustrations of Himalayan Plants* with the comment, "The seeds which I sent to Kew, grew and some of the plants lived two years; they should be planted in peat soil and rockwork, and kept very cool and damp" (96). Similarly, Lancaster reports that while extremely prized specimens from the same area, *Primula* and *Meconopsis*, introduced from seeds gathered during the same trip "may still be around . . . [the] *Rheum nobile* failed at Hilliers but grew for some years with Jack Drake's Inshriach Nursery in Scotland who offered plants of it for a while" (1995, 252). While the seeds of the rhubarb from other expeditions germinated and grew, the plant was considered too temperamental for the 'average' garden.

Erik Mueggler, who has studied how Ward translated his field notes from his expeditions into published memoirs like *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*, sees Ward's travel accounts as struggling to craft a particular "mode of presence to the landscape that would at the same time, help him disentangle himself morally and affectively from those among whom he travelled" (2005, 447). "As much as possible," explains Mueggler, "revision [of his field notes] erased the body from the process of perception" (467). Ward's adaptation of his trip diaries, Mueggler suggests, "sought to reconstitute the walk as *merely* perceptual, and as subject to definite rules for perception" (457; emphasis in original). This textual practice, Mueggler argues, reconstitutes the landscape into "a single, extended, continuous, and visible surface, representing nothing and concealing nothing; the observer as a solitary seeing body, unencumbered by sociality, admitting to no debts and no claims" (458). Ward's steel-nib pen, Mueggler explains, is transformed into an "optical instrument," "the friction-laden contact between nib and paper concentrating perception down to a single register: the eyes carried across a resisting topography of plains and gorges" (466). Ward's "relentlessly visual world" (466), therefore, essentially brackets from its realm the disruptive presence of sounds, affective responses, physical difficulties, and the exchange of goods or information that he might collect along his route. This practice of what Mueggler calls "absorptive wandering" (466), I argue, shares something with my reading of the other descriptions of *Rheum nobile* discussed above. Each of these written accounts illustrates a procedure for making sense of a strange and unusual plant: the explorer isolates it, describes and classifies it, making it visible in ways that render the frightening, familiar, the unsettling, reasonable. While Lancaster, Ward, and Hooker highlight the fascinating appearance of *Rheum nobile*, they also find ways to suppress and contain the wonder it initially inspires in them. Like Mueggler's description of Ward's treatment of the gifts he receives from Tibetans during the Tsangpo Gorges expedition (he always finds ways to dismiss their benefit to him), each of these descriptions of *Rheum nobile* "hold the walking observer free from social involvement with the [human and nonhuman] inhabitants of this purely visible world" (459). The porters may lead the sahibs to the Tibetan rhubarb, but the sahibs find ways to claim it for themselves.

Kincaid's account of her walk in the Himalaya, on the other hand, is anything but "purely visible." Throughout the trip she refers to her fatigue, her dependence on the labour of the porters, the threat of the Maoists, her fear of being attacked by leeches, and her sense that she

lacks an adequate memory and vocabulary to represent the experience of the trip. Though she eagerly anticipates seeing the *Rheum nobile*, she reports that she initially fails to see it "growing spectacularly" around her campsite near Topke Gola when she arrives late at night during a snow-fall (Kincaid 2005, 131). The next day, however, she describes how she was "awestruck" to see it "hovering above...growing solitary, erect, aloof, and still like little sentinels" (131). Here the *Rheum nobile* is characterized as first hidden in the night and then as watchful, cool, and detached when she sees it in the daylight. "What I was looking at then," writes Kincaid, "was its dried-up self full of seed. But neither Bleddyn nor Dan wanted to collect them because the conditions under which it will agree to bloom do not exist in an American or English garden. Bleddyn said that he had never heard of anyone being able to make seeds of it germinate" (132–133). In contrast to the botanists' earlier euphoria over the possibility of finding a new species of *Paris* with variegated leaves (114), only Kincaid is drawn to admire the strange qualities of the *Rheum nobile*. Opposite a picture of herself standing beside the Tibetan rhubarb with Thile Sherpa, she refers to it as "uncollectible," a comment on its lack of gardenworthy status (135). Kincaid's photograph and description of the plant foregrounds, rather than seeking to suppress, the role she has played in finding and representing it in her plant-hunting trip. She emphasizes the 'debts and claims' she has to both the colonial plant hunters and Sherpas who led her to this event. Kincaid's photo also reminds us that like the plants she encounters in the Himalaya, she and Thile Sherpa are descendants of people who have been objectified and assessed as gardenworthy or not according to the different economic and cultural imperatives of European exploration and colonialism in South Asia and the Caribbean. "British activity in the Himalaya," argues Sherry Ortner, "always consisted of that peculiar combination of economic, political, scientific, Orientalist, and 'sporting' interests that was characteristic (in different mixes, in different times and places) of the Raj as a whole" (1999, 26). The dependence of these types of colonial activities on the labour of Kincaid's and Thile Sherpa's ancestors is well known. British plant hunters relied on Nepalese Sherpas and other local communities to guide them through the Himalayan region and to carry back their collections of gardenworthy specimens and seeds for cultivation at home and in their colonies.<sup>5</sup> Plantation owners in Antigua used African slaves to cultivate transplanted crops such as sugar cane (*Saccharum*) to earn profits that fuelled the economic success of the British empire. Kincaid's and Thile Sherpa's histories bring them together in this photograph in an unexpected but revealing fashion: while Kincaid's success as a writer and her economic security certainly set her apart from Thile Sherpa, she is still "unable to inhabit colonial hybridity in comfort" (Spivak 2000, 345). "Nothing to celebrate," writes Gayatri Spivak about Kincaid's reflections on the ethical dilemmas of diasporic subjectivity in her garden writing and novels, "but a kind of intimacy with the other none the less, an enabling violation, the imaginative sedimentation of the civilizing mission" (347). The photograph of Kincaid and Thile Sherpa with the *Rheum nobile* captures the awkwardness of her presence on the plant-hunting trip, simultaneously colonial, but also "recognizing the violence of the relation."<sup>7</sup> In the Preface to a recently anthologized selection of Ward's plant-hunting writing, *In the Land of the Blue Poppies*, Kincaid refers to an earlier out of print collection of Ward's work that includes what she calls "an author photograph that is unequalled in the history of author's photographs."<sup>8</sup> Instead of an actual picture of Ward, Kincaid describes how the book jacket includes a "portrait of a Bhutanese porter carrying a suitcase" (2003, xiv). "At first," explains Kincaid, "the viewer will look closely at the man with his shiny bobbed hair framing his finely chiseled, high-cheekboned face. But then the name of the owner of the suitcase, in small

discreet lettering, comes to dominate the whole picture; F. Kingdon-Ward" (xv). In this assessment of Ward's "author photograph," Kincaid implies that "the world [he] inherited [from earlier explorers like Columbus and Hooker] had been made tame, had been subdued by these narratives" (xiv). This inheritance, suggests Kincaid in her reading of the image, lends authority to Ward's vision of the Himalayan landscape and its peoples, allowing him to unselfconsciously display his name on a suitcase, the burden of which is carried by someone else. In Kincaid's memoir of her own Himalayan adventure, she represents herself as incapable of such confidence and "divine recklessness" (xiv). Nowhere is the authority of Kincaid's perception of the landscape more eroded than after her encounter with the *Rheum nobile*. "Left to ourselves," writes Kincaid,

we would have been lost in this sea of rocks and boulders, for this landscape was as unfamiliar to me as the one on Mars [...] I found each plant, each new turn in the road, each new turn in the weather, from cold to hot and then back again, each new set of boulders so absorbing, so new, and the newness so absorbing, and I was so in need of an explanation for each thing, that I was often in tears, troubling myself with questions, such as what am I and what is this thing in front of me (2005, 135).

Here and in China her plant-hunting activities are described as bringing her to the verge of a "nervous breakdown" (1999, 199). Apart from the *Rheum nobile*, Kincaid's book has no other photographs of plants encountered during that trip. While she does include images of the porters and Nepalese living and working along the route, in typically elliptical fashion she writes, "I saw people and I took them in, but I made no notes on them, no descriptions of their physical being since I could see that they could not do the same to me" (77). Other images of Kincaid frame her at key junctures in the trip in mock heroic postures. One photograph in particular shows her holding up her digital camera and allowing a group of Nepalese villagers to view their own images on the display screen (168). Here and elsewhere, Kincaid works at undercutting and displacing her perception of the environment and people around her. "These photographs," Sarah Phillips Casteel observes, "at once perpetuate the standard visual language of exploration narratives and disturb this language by drawing attention to Kincaid's racial difference, [thus] heighten[ing] the sense of ambiguity surrounding her participation in the expedition" (2007, 126). While Kincaid stands out in the group as "someone of African descent" (28), her economic status and mobility prevent her from distancing herself from the other plant hunter's position of privilege.

Whereas Kincaid's travelling companions and the colonial botanists she reads endeavour to contain the challenge that the strange and unfamiliar represent to their authority, Kincaid's memoir of her own experience is much more tentative and emphasizes rather than seeking to suppress the failure of her account to capture any sort of objective viewpoint on the Himalayan environment. "In the beginning," writes Kincaid in *My Garden*,

The vegetable kingdom was chaos, people everywhere called the same things by a name that made sense to them, not by a name arrived at by an objective standard. But who has an interest in an objective standard? Who needs one? It makes me ask again, What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? And if so what should history mean to someone who looks like me? Should it be an idea: should it be an open wound again, over and over, or is it a long moment that begins anew each day since 1492? (1999, 166).

By positioning her narrative askew from the memoirs of other famous plantsmen, Kincaid's account of her trip begins to answer some of these questions. It probes the cultural assumptions behind terms like gardenworthy, highlights how cultural norms govern activity in the garden, and queries the maintenance of a boundary between the garden and the world. *Among Flowers* resists armchair travellers and garden enthusiasts who might wish to read it as yet another (colonial) travel narrative about plant-hunting. Instead, it expresses what Kincaid refers to elsewhere as "the ambiguity and duality in these things" (as quoted in Warner 2006, 54). When asked in an interview following the publication of *Among Flowers* to consider the parallels between Hooker's Himalayan plant-hunting expedition and her own, Kincaid states, "I wasn't going to be able to transform the world horticulturally—I couldn't imitate him doing that—but I certainly was imitating his curiosity, his sense of enjoying and living off it" (54). As Casteel points out, "Kincaid's primary intervention into the plant-hunting narrative [...] is to call attention both to its strong appeal and to its troubling reliance on structures of power that make the Nepalese and Chinese landscapes available for consumption by Western tourists, mountaineers, botanists, and prosperous gardeners such as herself" (2007, 126). Additionally, however, Kincaid's account of her activities also attempts to unearth the aesthetic, emotional, and epistemological suppositions shaping a curiosity she recognizes herself sharing with plant hunters like Hooker and Ward, and works to capture both her sense of unexpected familiarity and pleasant disorientation in response to her experience of the Nepalese environment. It is perhaps, in this sense, that Kincaid's text seems preoccupied with the (im)possible achievement of what Nixon describes as "a quest to rediscover the ecological ordinary—those quotidian interactions between humans and nonhumans that move beyond the racialized theatre of the eco-archaic" (2010, 11). The ambivalent performance of her role in the plant-hunting trip allows her to turn the colonial garden inside out, offering a subversive view of its origins, even while she attempts to redirect and decolonize its ongoing creation in the present.

#### Notes

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2. Sarah Phillips Casteel (2007) argues that Kincaid's plant-hunting writing "parodies New World exploration narratives" (123), but I argue that this assessment does not adequately capture the entangled history of gardening and colonialism that informs *Among Flowers*.
3. A significant portion of Kincaid's narrative focuses on the threat posed to the group's safety by the Maoist insurgency that was ongoing and escalating in Nepal at the time of her trip.
4. Kincaid writes about travelling with the same botanists on her plant-hunting trip in China in *My Garden*. Daniel Hinkley has published a gardening book, *The Explorer's Garden*, that emphasizes the plant-hunting aspect of his identity.
5. See Ortner's (1999) *Life and Death on Mt. Everest. Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering*, considered one of the most comprehensive analyses of how European exploration and mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayan region have shaped Sherpa culture and identity since the nineteenth century.
6. The 1995 publication is an updated and expanded 'coffee table' sized edition of the 1981 book, *Plant Hunting in Nepal*. All subsequent references are from the 1995 edition.
7. I thank Monika Kin Gagnon for suggesting this apt phrase.
8. While the title is not mentioned by Kincaid, it is John Whitehead's 1990 *Himalayan Enchantment: An Anthology*.

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