Cultivating empire: the gardens women write

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Abstract
Western culture invests gardens with powerful, if ambivalent symbolism. They invite us to commune with nature while delighting in how human hands have guided and controlled it. The Old Testament locates the origin of human life in a garden which simultaneously represents paradise and paradise lost. Paradise, whether on earth or in heaven, is, in Christian tradition, frequently represented as a walled garden with hardship and evil fenced out. But this is a double-sided image invoking both sexual wantonness and chastity, for gardens are also associated with the beauty and desirability of the female body. Because Eve's seductiveness was held responsible for exile from Eden, the paradise garden could represent the abode of secular love where a man and woman take their secret pleasure, or where worshippers of Venus indulge as a group in refined debauchery (Hughes 51). At the same time, through Biblical exegesis of the Song of Solomon, the enclosed garden also represented the Virgin Mary, that second Eve who helped repair the transgression of the first (Stewart 38). Such a garden presided over by the Virgin seated among a group of women saints became an image of female virtue and heavenly bliss.

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Cultivating Empire: The Gardens Women Write

Western culture invests gardens with powerful, if ambivalent symbolism. They invite us to commune with nature while delighting in how human hands have guided and controlled it. The Old Testament locates the origin of human life in a garden which simultaneously represents paradise and paradise lost. Paradise, whether on earth or in heaven, is, in Christian tradition, frequently represented as a walled garden with hardship and evil fenced out. But this is a double-sided image invoking both sexual wantonness and chastity, for gardens are also associated with the beauty and desirability of the female body. Because Eve’s seductiveness was held responsible for exile from Eden, the paradise garden could represent the abode of secular love where a man and woman take their secret pleasure, or where worshippers of Venus indulge as a group in refined debauchery (Hughes 51). At the same time, through Biblical exegesis of the Song of Solomon, the enclosed garden also represented the Virgin Mary, that second Eve who helped repair the transgression of the first (Stewart 38). Such a garden presided over by the Virgin seated among a group of women saints became an image of female virtue and heavenly bliss.

The garden served also as a symbol of nation whilst retaining its associations with paradise and the feminine. In Renaissance Europe, gardens as adjuncts to palace or manor house indicated social status and political power: “Pleasure gardens are seen to pertain to the king and to the court as outward signs of regal magnificence” (Strong 33). During the reign of Elizabeth I, herself identified as the Tudor rose, the cult of the Virgin Queen became invested with some of the garden symbolism once associated with the Virgin Mary. An “enormously diffuse horticultural image” developed throughout her reign as “the Queen, the kingdom, the spring, the garden and flowers became inextricably intertwined” (Strong 46). Shakespeare also represents England as a garden throughout Richard II, but the image is infused with anxiety, for the king himself has failed in his responsibility as gardener, and, poorly tended, “This other Eden — demi-paradise,” is reverting to wilderness:
... our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
Is full of weeds; her fairest flowers chok'd up,
Her fruit trees all unprun'd, her hedges ruin'd,
Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars. (III. iv. 43-47)

In the nineteenth century, this configuration of Eden, nationhood and garden is applied to empire and colonization. In Britain, some regarded the colonies as promised lands flowing with milk and honey where the poor might emigrate to lead a prosperous existence abroad (Lansbury 157-58). But, for British settlers of all classes, in countries where climate and landscape seemed menacingly alien, paradise was located in the country they had left behind. Susanna Moodie writes of Canada in her memoir Roughing it in the Bush: “The unpeopled wastes of Canada must present the same aspect to the new settler that the world did to our first parents after their expulsion from the garden of Eden” (251-52). Such imagery, however, was easily recuperable into imperialist myth. Sir James Stephen of the Colonial Office employs the same metaphor in 1856 when speaking of British colonists: “you can therefore all understand how it is that they make their way to the ends of the earth, finding the land before them as the desolate wilderness and leaving it as the very Garden of Eden behind them” (283). New colonies were represented simultaneously as existing paradises offering escape from a life of poverty in Britain and as wildernesses which colonists could transform into a paradise resembling the one left behind in the mother-country.

For many British colonists, gardens served as reminders of “home” either because of the English flowers transplanted in them, or because their exoticism marks an absence from all that is familiar. The speaker in Kipling’s poem “In Springtime” rejects his Indian garden blazing brightly “with the rose-bush and the peach”:

I am sick of endless sunshine, sick of blossom-burdened bough.  
Give me back the leafless woodlands where the winds of Springtime range —

Give me back one day in England, for it’s Spring in England now! (78) But, responding in his poem “The Flowers,” to comment in The Athenaeum that poems celebrating flowers from countries outside England can never ring true — “the dog’s-tooth violet is but an ill substitute for the rathe primrose” — Kipling also acknowledges that native flora of countries like Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand has the same emotional significance for colonists born there as violets and cowslips have for him. The poem links these four imperial nations with Britain and one another by combining into a verse bouquet plants indigenous to each:

Buy a blood-red myrtle-bloom,  
Buy the kowhai’s gold  
Plung for gift on Taupo’s face,  
Sign that spring is come —  
Buy my clinging myrtle  
And I’ll give you back your home! (191)

There was, of course, a literal exchange of plants proceeding throughout the empire, much of it masterminded from Kew Gardens in London. Botanical gardens had been established in Europe during the Renaissance and plants from the New World contributed significantly to them. Originally it was believed that reassembling these scattered pieces of creation might result not only in a living encyclopaedia of plants, but the recreation of Eden itself.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the motives behind the great exchange of plants between the colonies and Kew were economic and scientific. Kew “in close liaison with the Colonial Office, the India Office and individual colonial governments and settlers” agricultural societies “introduced agricultural, horticultural and forestry plants to colonies through their local botanical gardens which experimented to see if they would flourish there and, if they did, distributed them to the public (McCracken x).

Identification between flowers and women remained strong in the nineteenth century and, as Ruskin indicates, gardens appropriately symbolized a lady’s proper sphere:

This is wonderful — oh, wonderful! — to see her, with every innocent feeling fresh within her, go out in the morning into her garden to play with the fringes of its guarded flowers, and lift their heads when they are drooping, with her happy smile upon her face, and no cloud upon her brow, because there is a little wall around her place of peace ... (76)

Collecting, pressing and arranging flowers were accomplishments expected of young ladies and even a little botanizing was acceptable, although anxieties arose lest they become familiar with Linnaeus’ system of plant classification.
because of its sexual explicitness (Martin 31). Moreover, those who wished to study botany seriously faced the difficulty that most text-books were in Latin. Many middle-class women who emigrated to the colonies continued their preoccupation with flowers and gardens giving detailed accounts of local flora in letters and diaries. A few engaged in serious botanical study, like Catharine Traill in Canada who sent specimens of dried flowers back to England, corresponded with a professor of botany at Edinburgh University and eventually wrote two classic works on Canadian flora, *Canadian Wild Flowers* (1868) and *Studies in Plant Life in Canada* (1885) (Fowler 74). Georgiana Molloy, living in Western Australia in the 1830s, lightened the heavy burden of domestic toil with intervals of botanizing, also sending seeds and dried flower specimens back to England: “I cannot describe to you the brilliancy of the surrounding wilderness, and this year, when I ramble with my little children running like butterflies from flower to flower, every one I behold is fraught with the associations of those I have collected for Captain Mangles ...” (65). But, despite their important botanical work, these women had almost no say in naming the plants they discovered, nor, for the most part, did they have any plants named after them (Bennett 112).

For women colonists, flowers were important reminders of their former home. Catharine Traill is comforted to find on arrival in Ontario “as sweet a rose as ever graced an English garden” (65). Writing from Australia in 1861, Rachel Henning describes how, on visiting Bathurst, she is delighted to see briar rose growing everywhere, even though she realizes that here it is a noxious weed: “I saw it growing wild in the bush ... and rejoiced greatly as it is the only approach we have in this country to wild roses” (71). Catharine Traill is struck on her arrival in Canada by an absence of cottage gardens: “In Britain even the peasant has taste enough to plant a few roses or honeysuckles about his door or his casement, and there is the little bit of garden enclosed and neatly kept; but here no such attempt is made to ornament the cottages” (33). Once the Traills are settled on their own piece of land, she understands why: Our garden at present has nothing to boast of, being merely a spot of ground enclosed with a rough unsightly fence of split rails to keep the cattle from destroying the vegetables. Another spring, I hope to have a nice fence, and a portion of the ground devoted to flowers. This spring there is so much pressing work to be done on the land in clearing for the crops, that I do not like to urge my claims on behalf of a pretty garden. (140-41)

Gardens were a valuable source of food and women settlers played an important part in establishing and tending them, but even if flower planting had to wait, the new flower beds formed an important link with once familiar surroundings.

Requests for family in England to send “flower-seeds, and the stones of plums, damsons, ... pips of the best kinds of apples” (Traill 124) were commonplace. According to an historian of Australian gardening, the settlers tried to create in house and garden replicas of what they had left behind, often to be disappointed by the results in a different environment (Blish 58). Rachel Henning laments how in her south central Queensland garden, “the sun has burnt up everything” (153). Inevitably colonial gardens assumed a hybrid character since “a combination of ingenuity, native plants and painstakingly imported plants made for the most successful gardens” (Bennett 87).

For many colonial and post-colonial women writers, gardens, with their rich accretions of symbolism and their centuries of identification with women and the female body, have proved a useful motif for expressing issues such as colonization, the situation of individual women, national identity and the relationship between women and landscape. Katherine Mansfield explores the gendered nature of colonial experience in one of her New Zealand stories “Prelude,” set in the 1890s, which describes the prosperous Burnell family moving house from Wellington to a country retreat close by. The garden, orchard and farm adjoining the house carry different meanings for its new owner, Stanley Burnell, and the women of his household — his wife Linda, sister-in-law, Beryl, their mother, Mrs Fairfield, and his three young daughters. Stanley, pursuing economic advancement, is delighted with the good bargain he has struck, “his own house ... with its garden and paddocks, its three tip-top cows and enough fowls to keep them in poultry ...,” while, for the women, the garden is associated with fertile abundance and sexuality. The widowed Mrs Fairfield, for whom courtship and marriage are long past, appreciates the abundant fruit-trees and currant bushes: “I should like to see those pantry shelves thoroughly well-stocked with our own jam ...” (55). Her younger daughter, Beryl, anxious about her unmarried state, imagines “somewhere out there in the garden ... a young man, dark and slender, with mocking eyes,”
while Linda, for whom marriage involves repeated pregnancies, takes no comfort in the garden’s promise. She is drawn to the aloe which, like a ship, riding high on a grassy bank and flowering only once a century, seems to promise a longed-for elusive freedom, while its thorny leaves symbolise the resentment aroused by her husband’s sexual demands.

Gender entraps both young women, with Beryl longing for but unable to initiate the kind of marriage her sister yearns to escape from. This ambivalence is figured by the little girl Kezia’s exploration of the garden on her first morning in the new house. Even though more possibilities may lie ahead for her than exist for her mother and aunt, Kezia too is trapped, unable to navigate her way through the garden: “Twice she had found her way back to the big iron gates they had driven through the night before” (32). She also notices the garden has a double aspect, indicating to readers the dangers and delights sexuality holds for a young woman:

On one side they all led into a tangle of tall dark trees and strange bushes with flat velvet leaves and feathery cream flowers that buzzed with flies when you shook them — this was the frightening side, and no garden at all. The little paths here were wet and clayey with tree roots spanned across them like the marks of big fowls’ feet.

But on the other side of the drive there was a high box border and the paths had box edges and all of them led into a deeper and deeper tangle of flowers. (32)

The flowers in the “safe” part of the garden have come from England — camellias, syringa, roses, geraniums, verbena and lavender — whereas the “frightening” side evokes the New Zealand bush. In a story concerned with transitions, Kezia must eventually make the move to female adulthood with all its limitations, while the subtext points to a negotiation between Englishness and the local New Zealand environment.

Traditional associations between gardens, women’s bodies, Eve and nature have challenged some women writers to question long-standing assumptions. In her poem “Eden Cultivated” Lauris Edmond represents a figure who is both Eve and Mother Nature coming indoors from a New Zealand garden in late summer to fetch a preserving pan: “behind her a blazing February sky, / the first thistledowns, and the haze.” She is a figure of wisdom and abundance for whose offer of apples we should be grateful:

and wait — for how do you know, this time, if she will offer you one apple
or many, or possibly none at all? (32)

Judith Wright’s poem “The Garden” also represents Eve as an ageing woman, placing her among apple trees and flowers “of red silk and purple velvet.” The hot, refining light of a late summer’s afternoon is contrasted with night’s shadow cast by huge pines “where the black snake / went whispering in its coils.” Near the end of her life, the woman, like “a bee grown old at summer’s end,” has distilled sweetness and wisdom from her great wealth of past experience and, with “small bright bouquets reflected in her eyes,” embodies the garden’s colour and sensuous beauty. Simultaneously night’s good friend and his worthy enemy, she will resist death as long as she can while reconciled to her own dying:

and therefore my heart chose her, scarecrow, bag of old bones,
Eve walking with her snake and butterfly. (38-39)

Unlike the biblical Eve, blamed for bringing death to humanity, Wright’s character belongs in the garden along with the serpent, emblem of mortality and the butterfly, emblem of the soul.

But the garden image does not always generate such optimism. Many writers use it to represent personal space which women create within the limits society imposes. A male neighbour visiting Rebekah, heroine of Olive Schreiner’s novel From Man to Man, praises her garden — “What an astonishing blaze of colour!” — while she replies: “There’s a pleasure ... if you have a very small space, in seeing how much will live in it.” But when the man commends the virtue of such discipline, Rebekah responds: “If the hedges are too close round, they may kill the plants” (438-39). In a poignant short story, “Untitled Poem,” by Indian writer, Githa Hariharan, a small suburban garden represents the marriage between an elderly couple, the narrator, a retired salesman and part-time poet, and his wife Sarala. She now creates the garden she could only dream of when living in city apartments, while her husband, at last able to devote himself entirely to poetry, finds his slender gift has deserted him. The flourishing garden containing “mostly commonplace foliage that thrives despite changes in weather” (4) is contrasted with his flowery poetry.

“I have written for a lifetime about petals kissed by dewdrops and the shy,
unseen blossom in the heart of leafy bushes” (7). A rat regularly attacking the garden represents his despairing frustration which erodes the marriage. When the narrator’s best efforts to catch it fail, Sarala beats it to death with a stick as he recognizes the futility of continuing to write poetry: “He has left nothing for me to do but write an epitaph” (8).

Margaret Atwood uses garden imagery, to represent the social restrictions women experience and to make a political point. Offred, narrator of The Handmaid’s Tale, is Handmaid to a Commander and his wife, Serena Joy, in New Gilead, a future United States controlled by a fundamentalist Christian group obsessed with religious morality and human reproduction. Each month all three participate in a bizarre impregnation ceremony, designed to provide husband and wife with a child. In her hazardous, restricted existence, Offred contemplates Serena Joy’s garden:

I go out by the back door, into the garden which is large and tidy: a lawn in the middle, a willow, weeping cattails; around the edges, the flower borders, in which the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out colour. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they had been cut and are beginning to heal there.

This garden is the domain of the Commander’s Wife. Looking out through my shutterproof window I’ve often seen her in it, her knees on a cushion, a light blue veil thrown over her gardening hat, a basket at her side with shears in it and pieces of string for tying the flowers into place. ... Many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for. (22)

Initially the garden symbolises imprisonment, both Offred’s incarceration behind shutterproof glass and the limited scope permitted even the most privileged women, the Commanders’ Wives. Suffering inflicted by New Gilead is emphasized through details of the willow weeping cattails, fading daffodils and tulips resembling blood in a newly healed wound. As spring merges into summer, Serena Joy snips off dead flower heads, but her attempts to appropriate “the swelling genitalia of the flowers” are contrasted with renewed abundance where irises and bleeding hearts, “so female in shape it was a surprise they’d not long since been rooted out,” replace spring flowers in the garden, while the willow tree now insinuates thoughts of lovers’ rendezvous. The garden represents socially enforced restraints and the suppressed energy which thrusts against them: “There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly into the light, as if to point to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (161).

In Bodily Harm Atwood also uses garden imagery to indicate internalized repression. Rennie Wilford is haunted by memories of Griswold, the small Ontario town where she was raised, and of her dead grandmother who embodied its social mores and restrictions. She dreams of her grandmother’s cherished flower garden:

... here it is, back in place, everything is so bright, so full of juice, the red zinnias, the hollyhocks, the sunflowers, the poles with scarlet runner beans, the hummingbirds like vivid bees around them. It’s winter though, there’s snow on the ground, the sun is low in the sky; small icicles hang from the stems and blossoms. Her grandmother is there, in a white cotton dress with small blue flowers on it, it’s a summer dress, she doesn’t seem to mind the cold, and Rennie knows this is because she is dead ... (115)

The paradise garden image, which should signify spiritual joy and fulfilment, becomes transformed into an image of death. It points not only to female sexual denial but, equally significant in a novel much concerned with issues of Canadian identity, the narrow legalism and rigid morality of small town Canada which, it is implied, have been so important in shaping the national character: “In Griswold everyone gets what they deserve. In Griswold everyone deserves the worst.”

Patricia Grace also explores issues of cultural identity in her story about an old Maori woman, “Waimarie.” At first we see her as a mildly comic figure fussing over her intellectually handicapped brother and bullying him a little. As the story develops, however, we see that Waimarie represents continuity and her flower garden becomes an image of her connectedness to friends and family:

See all my portulaca, Harriet give me it from her old place but not the dark one, the dark one it’s from my mate down the road. She got a big one at the back of her place. The yellow one, it’s from Robert’s wife. And begonia? I get two when I’m in the
hospital and when I come home I stick them in the ground and they grow no trouble. That one, that one, I get them from the gala for the school, and polyanthus from the school too — red, purple, pink. But over here it’s all from the old place — kaka beak, gladdies, gerbera, hydrangea — it’s my mother’s flowers from the old place. (10)

The garden full of exotics, with only one native plant, kaka beak, represents the colonial process and its resultant hybridity. But the garden’s fertile abundance is also equated with Waimarie herself who is shown holding her family together in the face of cultural loss and disintegration through the power of Maori tradition with which she is associated and which she plays a significant part in perpetuating.

Gardens have a complex relationship with natural landscape. They may blend with it, assert themselves defiantly against it, or mark the ephemerality of human attempts to control it. Doris Lessing explores the relationship between colonization, landscape, gardens and female experience in her story “The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange,” set in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. It concerns two couples, Major and Mrs Gale, English settlers who have farmed prosperously for many years, and the De Wets, newly married Afrikaners. Although Major Gale considers Africa a “gaudy, easy-going country” threatening to undermine his standards of propriety and behaviour, he and his new employee, De Wet, appear largely closed off from the effects of the landscape, unaffected by its emotional resonance. Descriptions and images of landscape, however, help define the two women characters and their marriages.

Mrs Gale consoles her isolated existence by creating a garden which seeks to control the landscape by blending England and Africa. Tending it is her principal occupation and pleasure: “These were what she lived for: her flowering African shrubs, her vivid English lawns, her water-garden with the goldfish and water lilies. Not many people had such a garden” (68). The one natural landscape feature she appreciates is a mountain chain sufficiently distant for her to gaze at without threat. “They were her mountains; they were what she was; they had made her, had crystallized her loneliness into a strength, had sustained her and fed her” (72).

But her sense of a life under control is illusion and her emotionally precarious situation is indicated by the spot where she sits to look at the mountains.

...at her feet, the ground dropped hundreds of feet sharply to the river. It was a rocky shelf thrust forward over the gulf, and here she would sit for hours, leaning dizzily outwards, her short grey hair blown across her face, lost in adoration of the hills across the river. Not of the river itself, no, she thought of that with a sense of danger, for there, below her, in that green-crowded gully, were suddenly the tropics: palm trees, a slow brown river that eddied into reaches of marsh or curved round belts of reeds twelve feet high. There were crocodiles, and leopards came from the rocks to drink. (71)

The tropics represent regions of danger and sensuality Mrs Gale greatly fears. De Wet’s young bride, however, enjoys the river, easing her loneliness by going there every morning and dangling her legs in the water, horrifying the older woman who warns of crocodiles and bilharzia. Their different tastes in landscape indicate the social and psychological distance between them. Mrs Gale finds the young woman as incomprehensible as Africa itself: “Her mind, as far as Mrs Gale was concerned, was a dark continent, which she had no inclination to explore.”

But Mrs De Wet adjusts to bush life no better than her neighbour. Both husbands neglect their wives, concentrating solely on farmwork. Both are irritated by complaints of loneliness and neither assumes any responsibility for his wife’s happiness or contentment. Yet, because of differences in age and social class, the two women find common ground impossible. Mrs Gale takes comfort in her garden, Mrs De Wet in sexuality. In the end, Mrs Gale dismisses the De Wets as “savages,” categorizing them in her mind with the Africans. But the gulf between the races is greater still. Although Africans appear in the story, they are not individualized or named, reflecting how little white characters regard them. They are simply servants to be well trained in the house by Mrs Gale or treated with kindly contempt by her husband. The whites’ incomprehension of the Africans is comparable to the white men’s incomprehension of their wives. Wives are useful and necessary to run households and bear children just as Africans are necessary to work the farm which provides the whites with their incomes. The dangerous, incomprehensible landscape surrounding the farm and the white people’s houses indicates that neither the English couple who have settled there, nor the Afrikaner couple, born in Africa, really belong in the country.
From an indigenous viewpoint, garden and landscape may merge more easily. Aboriginal writer Sally Morgan describes how, growing up in Western Australia, she saw little difference between the garden and the swamp behind her house. Both are haunts for wildlife in whose ways she is guided by the traditional knowledge of her grandmother:

The early morning was Nan’s favourite time of the day, when she always made some new discovery in the garden. A fat bobtail goanna, snake tracks, crickets with unusual feelers, myriads of creatures who had, for their own unique reasons, chosen our particular yard to reside in. (14) Long-standing associations with Eden, the earthly paradise and its loss mean that garden imagery lends itself readily to representations of colonialism particularly because agriculture and horticulture were so essential to establishing settlements in newly colonized countries. Equally long-standing associations between gardens and the female body have meant that, for women writers, gardens and gardening are useful metaphors not only for expressing post-coloniality but also many aspects of female experience.

Note
Christopher Pest claims that the discovery of plants hitherto unknown in Europe led some thinkers to speculate that, after the Fall, the contents of the Garden of Eden were scattered throughout the world and that bringing the scattered parts of creation together in a botanic gardens would help recreate the original earthly paradise (9).

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Susan K. Martin

“there garden is much more forward than ours”: Place and Class in Colonial Australian Women’s Gardening

Analyses of colonial constructions of space in Australia sometimes focus on the grand narratives of colonial expansion. Journeys of “discovery,” “exploration,” and pastoral expansion apparently offer more satisfying trajectories for critical examination (Carter, Ryan). Even studies which do not follow such inevitably masculine figures as explorers or pastoralists sometimes bog down in the tedious details of such a minute and seemingly static practice of colonial appropriation as gardening. William Limes’s discussion of Georgiana Molloy’s quietly persistent gardening and botanizing pursuits in 1840s Western Australia veers away from such feminine tedium to pursue the journeys of her husband up and down the coastline, and to follow the sometimes vicious peregrinations of her neighbours, the Bussell boys (Lines 219-35).

Gardening is not generally regarded as a stirring activity. It is not always regarded as an imperial pursuit, either, but middle-class male and female gardeners in Australia were engaged in empire building in their garden building, even when it is figured as merely genteel leisure pursuit. Of course, as has been noted, definitions of class and colonial subjectivity are intimately connected (e.g. McClintock). Women’s involvement in the processes and rewards of colonialism has been considered in a number of contexts (Pratt, Mills, Bird, Giles). Many studies consider the way women were implicated in the colonial project through their engagement in “masculine” pursuits such as exploration (Mills), or through their connection to, and support of, male colonists. A more personal, “hands-on” enjoyment of the colonial appropriation and reallocation of space can be mapped through women’s gardening, a practice which reflects women’s responses to place, and their attempts to locate themselves as colonial subjects.

Gardens in colonial countries are sites where colonization is physically effected, as other fenced and cultivated places are. They are spaces where boundaries are asserted and ownership claimed. But gardens are also somewhat transient and elusive places on which to map colonization. They are built and