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Floating / Travelling Gardens of (Post)colonial Time

Abstract I: Questo saggio sui giardini galleggianti e viaggianti nella letteratura (post) coloniale contemporanea si apre con due immagini iconiche: l'isola-giardino di bio-plastica che salva Will Phantom nel mezzo di un ciclone in *I cacciatori di stelle* (Rizzoli 2008, ed. it.), della scrittrice aborigena Alexis Wright, e l'isola-giardino carnivora che non può salvare Pi dal naufragio, nel romanzo *Vita di Pi* (Piemme 2007, ed. it.), dello scrittore canadese Yann Martel. Questi giardini galleggianti e ibridi dell'Antropocene precedono i veri e propri giardini viaggianti di Michael Ondaatje e Amitav Ghosh. I quali, rispettivamente, nel romanzo *L'ora prima dell'alba* (Garzanti 2012, ed. it) e nella trilogia della *Ibis* (Neri Pozza 2008-2015) raccontano la storia di alcuni giardini botanici in Asia, e del trasferimento (*displacement*) di piante e semi, seguendo le implicazioni storiche ed economiche del colonialismo. Poiché, dopo tutto, i giardini botanici coinvolgono un senso molto particolare di "cura" (Robert Pogue Harrison 2009), e incarnano precisi disegni imperialisti di matrice scientifica ed economica (Brockway 2002; Johnson 2011).

Abstract II: This essay on travelling gardens of (post)colonial time opens with two iconic images of floating gardens in contemporary postcolonial literature: Will Phantom's bio-garbage rafter, which saves him in the midst of a cyclone in *Carpentaria* (2008), by the Aboriginal author Alexis Wright, and Pi's carnivore island-organism in *Life of Pi* (2001), which cannot save him from his shipwreck, by Canadian writer Yan Martel. These floating, hybrid gardens of the Anthropocene precede the real travelling gardens of both Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table* (2011) and Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilog*y (2008-2015), two authors who both indirectly and directly tell the story of botanical gardens in Asia, and of plant and seed smuggling and transplantation ("displacement") also hinting at their historical and economic colonial implications. For, after all, botanical gardens imply a very specific version of care, *Cura* (Robert Pogue Harrison 2009), while embodying a precise, imperial scientific and economic project (Brockway 2002; Johnson 2011).

In this essay I would like to approach the topicality of gardens in the literature of the (post)colonial world, and in doing so, I would like to start with a couple of iconic images. The first image surfaces from one of those novels that Franco Moretti would define as *opera-mondo*: *Carpentaria* (2008), by the Aboriginal writer Alexis Wright, Miles Franklin award winner in 2007. The novel

displays the almost unique dream-landscape of the sweet-waters lagoon and the sea-washed Gulf of Carpentaria, with its red claypan and green mangroves, with its dusty plains and winding rivers of turbulent waters that flood the area in the humid season. It also displays a Multinational Mining Company which is polluting the area with plastic garbage, while pumping natural resources as well as economic profits out of the country: all things blasphemous on that Aborigines' sacred ground. Towards the end of the novel, Will Phantom, a young eco-activist who is constantly boycotting the Mine with acts of arson, saves his life from the corporation's thugs and from a hurricane, when at sea, thanks to a very extravagant type of floating garden:

The island home was, give or take, a kilometre in length after the final unhinging of those parts which, after bidding, Adios!, violently crashed to the ocean floor. Flocks of birds came and went. [...] covered the entire surface in a thick fertilising habitat, where over time, astonishing plants grew in profusion. [...] A swarm of bees arrived. [...] All manner of life marooned in this place would sprout to vegetate the wreckage. A peanut that had floated for perhaps a decade landed one day and grew so profusely it became a tangle of vine-like stems reaching out over the surface to find crevices in which to sink. A single rotting tomato containing an earthworm settled in the newspaper-lined base of a plywood fruit box, and grew. Within a season, tomato plants inhabited the island like weeds. The worm multiplied into hundreds and thousands of worms. The worms spread like wildfire into every pokey hole of rotting rubbish and soon enough, a deep, nutrient-rich humus covered the entire island. Well! What have you? Peach, apricot, almonds, all grew. Guava, figs – fruit that came with the birds, stayed, and grew into beautiful trees. A wasted banana root survived for months in the sea until it settled on the island where it sent up one big fat shoot after another, in between a mango tree and the figs, then drooped with the weight of large bunches of fruits. [...] He was a practical man in a practical man's paradise. He had food, shelter, and his catchments of fresh water were always full to the brim (Wright 2008: 494-495).

Will is without any doubt a novel Robinson on a happy deserted island. He builds a shelter, he gathers drinking water, he creates lines for fishing and survives thanks to his Aboriginal expertise about nature. He desperately hopes to be saved or reach the shore. Only, the island is a hybrid of biological self-sustaining life and a rafter of plastic, wood and other debris of civilization. Half anthropic, half natural, the floating and precarious island is the perfect product of the Anthropocene and perfect definition of the term, that is to say, a man-made material culture that produces new geo-garbage-bio-morphic formations: "a floating island of junk" (Wright 2008: 502).

The second image that concerns an extravagant experience on a floating garden-island is to be found in the novel *Life of Pi* (2001) by Yann Martel, Man Booker Prize winner in 2002, and in the film derived from it by Ang Lee (2012), winner of the Golden Globe for its originality. Pi is a young Indian boy, surviving a shipwreck of a cargo liner, carrying his parents, his brother and the animals of their private Zoo¹. The liner becomes a modern mock-Noah's

¹ Zoos are part of an (Imperial) network of "animal trading", too, and of a "regime of extractive capitalism". The novel starts with this act of violence against animals, as they are transported on board a ship, for too long

ark. Pi, his family and their animals were moving from Pondicherry, in southern India, to Canada. After months of adventurous floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on a life-boat together with a Bengal tiger to be tamed and watched closely, Pi sees a green island, and soon thinks it is a mirage. Then he realizes it is a real green garden:

In the near distance I saw trees. I did not react. I was certain it was an illusion that a few blinks would make disappear.

The trees remained. In fact, they grew to be a forest. They were part of a low-lying island. I pushed myself up. [...] The trees were beautiful. They were like none I had ever seen before. They had a pale bark, and equally distributed branches that carried an amazing profusion of leaves. These leaves were brilliantly green. [...] The island had no soil. Not that the trees stood in water. Rather, they stood in what appeared to be a dense mass of vegetation, as sparkling green as the leaves. [...] this island was a chimera, a play of the mind. [...] an island, any island, however strange, would have been very good to come upon (Martel 2001: 256-257).

Its shore could not be called a beach, there being neither sand nor pebbles, and there was no pounding of surf either, since the waves that fell upon the island simply vanished into its porosity. From a ridge some three hundred yards inland, the island sloped to the sea and, forty or so yards into it, fell off precipitously, disappearing from sight into the depths of the Pacific, surely the smallest continental shelf on record. [...]. The fabric of the island seemed to be an intricate, tightly webbed mass of tube-shaped seaweed, in diameter a little thicker than two fingers. What a fanciful island, I thought. [...]. The smell of vegetation. I gasped, after months of nothing but salt-water-bleached smell, this reek of vegetable organic matter was intoxicating (Martel 2001: 258).

The monstrous, fictional island is a hybrid, too. Partly vegetal, partly carnivore, it shows both an exotic nature, for carnivore plants are usually to be found in tropical climates, and a kind of genetic mutation, that could well be the product of human activities affecting nature. Pi immediately understands that he has to leave that inhospitable and hostile island, preferring the company of a carnivore tiger to the permanence in a whole vegetal carnivore island-organism.

Let us consider that what happens here is not so different from what Amitav Ghosh sees as the epitome of the encounter between a human and another being:

It was a shock of this kind, I imagine, that the makers of *The Empire Strikes Back* had in mind when they conceived of the scene in which Han Solo lands the Millennium Falcon on what he takes to be an asteroid – but only to discover that he has entered the gullet of a sleeping space monster (Ghosh 2016: 3).

a journey, and anyway they all drown. Then, the novel explores the possibility of “friendship” between the two only survivors of the shipwreck, the tiger, with a man’s name, Richard Parker, and Pi. Although he manages to save the tiger and they both end up stranded on the shores of South America, the tiger immediately disappears into the thickest forest and Pi is left desperate at the idea that the tiger has been indifferent to his friendship all the time. Animals in *The Life of Pi* would deserve a thorough treatment, had not this essay be specifically devoted to vegetal life.



Fig. 1. "Floating Park"

Both literary floating islands are situated in the Pacific Ocean, the largest Ocean on earth and the most mysterious. It is well known that in the Pacific there is also the largest swirling garbage patch, a circling island mainly made of entangled plastic, that is slowly dissolving into micro-particles, dispersing and trickling down, towards the bottom of the sea, with still unknown consequences on marine fish and birds, and therefore also on human alimentation.

The two floating garden-islands met by the two characters in the afore mentioned novels are porous self-sustaining ecosystems which may be considered as variations on this theme of monstrous aggregations of both un-disposable, polluting anthropic matter and biological matter that are the new hybrids of our present and future. Of course, at a macro-narrative level, those novels are also re-writings and variations of the theme of Robinsonian adventures. Maybe, those floating islands are the new gardens of our Anthropocene: aesthetically ambiguous the first one, yet usable, beautiful and alluring the second one, yet deadly dangerous.

Actually, such a project about floating artificial islands does exist in the Rotterdam harbour and it is called "Recycled Park". In 2016 a project was launched to entrap plastic litter from the river, before it could get into the North Sea. Thus, with the moulding of the plastic into hexagonal bowl-like bases filled with humus and plants, the river has seen the birth of floating islands of bio-plastic-garbage gardens².

The first novel, *Carpentaria* is engaged with social, political and environmental concerns, for it explores the world of the Aborigines at war with both white Australians and with international multinationals. Both hostile forces are competing in (sacred) land grabbing, racist policies, and political and environmental injustice. *Life of Pi* is more of a *diver-*

² See official website: <http://recycledpark.com/news.html> (consulted on 20/06/2017).

tissement, for it is based on the post-modern model of the absolutely (un)reliable narrator and on his (in)credible adventures. Yet, it explores the possibility of survival on equal terms between a human and an animal, a man and a tiger, becoming part of the Oceanic food chain, at least for a while. Here, too, Amitav Ghosh's words echo in our minds:

Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive? As, for example, when an arabesque in the pattern of a carpet is revealed to be a dog's tail, which, if stepped upon, could lead to a nipped ankle? Or when we reach for an innocent looking vine and find it to be a worm or a snake? When a harmlessly drifting log turns out to be a crocodile? (Ghosh 2016: 3).

Both Will and Pi stick for a while to their marine floating gardens. Will Phantom luckily finds his island of bio-morphic garbage for he is hanging on some of its solid parts and comfortably settles on it. Pi, instead, sees the green island as a hope of salvation, but he is soon to be disillusioned.

The two well-known writers, Michael Ondaatje and Amitav Ghosh, although in different ways, have also explored travelling gardens in their works. Yet, the travelling gardens of both Ondaatje and Ghosh are not innocent enterprises. Rather, they show how gardens might become important scientific incubators at the service of the British Empire, promoting capitalist imperialism, economic profits and vegetal and human displacement, diaspora and environmental pillage, exploitation and systematic irreversible changes in the ecosystem.

One could agree with the critic Robert Pogue Harrison who claims that we humans are inevitably and "naturally" – but one could also say "culturally" – attracted by gardens. The scholar's poignant essay on gardens and the human condition introduces the opposition between history – "its rage, death, and endless suffering" – and human "religious impulses, our poetic and utopian imagination, our mortal ideals, our metaphysical projections, our storytelling, our aesthetic transfiguration of the real, our passion for games, our delight in nature" (Harrison 2009: ix). Even more daringly, he claims that:

More often than not in Western culture it has been the garden, whether real or imaginary, that has provided sanctuary from the frenzy and tumult of history. [...] such gardens may be as far away as Gilgamesh's garden of the gods or the Greeks' Isles of the Blessed or Dante's Garden of Eden at the top of the mountain of Purgatory; or they may be on the margins of the early city, like Plato's Academy or the Garden School of Epicurus or the villas of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; they may even open up in the middle of the city, like the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris or the Villa Borghese in Rome, or the homeless gardens in New York City. [...]. Gardens stand as a kind of haven, if not as a kind of heaven.

Yet human gardens, however self-enclosed their world may be, invariably take their stand in history, if only as a counterforce to history's deleterious drives (Harrison 2009: ix).

Harrison goes on to identify in the mythological figure of Cura the ancestor of Adam and Eve. Cura in crossing a river took some clay and moulded a shape, then Jupiter passed

by and infused spirit in it. They started disputing on who should give it a name, Earth stood up to claim her right to give it a name for it was made of her own substance. Saturn, who was called to act as arbiter declared that Jupiter should have the spirit back after the death of the creature; Earth should have the body back once the creature was dead, while Care had the right to name it for she moulded it first. Thus the name was *homo*, named after *humus* (earth) (Harrison 2009: 6). It is interesting to notice that the garden-island that enables Will to survive in *Carpentaria* has got some humus, thanks to the birds' excrements, while the inhospitable green island in *Life of Pi*, where Pi hopes to be able to survive, does not contain humus at all.

Then, Harrison proceeds by affirming that: "the fall from Eden handed Adam and Eve over to a regime of care and the so-called *vita activa*" (Harrison 2009: 9), of labour, work and action, borrowing the formula from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1998). Thus, gardens become proofs of our biophilia and chlorophilia, our need for enclosed spaces of repose, but also of creative expression. Harrison maintains that "if humankind has to entrust its future to anyone, it should entrust it to the gardener, or to those who, like the gardener, invest themselves in a future of which they will in part be the authors" (Harrison 2009: 37).

On the one hand, Harrison speaks of disinterested acts of gardening, which exclude profit, interest and commerce: "domestication, as well as the gathering and selection of species to obtain types with exploitable characteristics, are practices that come to fruition only after several generations, hence they cannot be explained by the need to procure alimentation or other immediate benefits" (Harrison 2009: 40).

On the other hand, botanical gardens combine "the pursuit of science and the aesthetic display of nature", the scholar Nuala C. Johnson claims (2011: 2). The botanical garden is, instead, in Lucile Brockway's terms "a historic institution with worldwide connections whose nineteenth-century expansion resulted in a greatly accelerated process of plant transfers with consequent ecological, economic, social, and political changes" (Brockway 1979: 449). After all, Nuala C. Johnson reports: "Gardens also attempted to gather as many plants from around the world as possible" (Johnson 2011: 4).

In spite of the fact that Harrison analyses only classical gardens for one's retreat and pleasure, indeed there are gardens created for profit and indeed there is a literature that deals with them. When thinking of the Royal Botanical Gardens of colonial time, for instance, one cannot avoid mentioning Virginia Woolf's description of *Kew Gardens* (1919), which combines a eulogy of pleasurable sites with hints at exploitation of tropical plants. Here, the author guides us readers to admire its flower beds in July. Woolf just makes a passing reference to the greenhouses where the palm trees and plants from the hottest climates are preserved: "the glass roofs of the palm house shone as if a whole market full of shiny green umbrellas had opened in the sun" (Woolf 1991: 95).

Similarly, an old man, one of the passers by "began talking about the forests of Uruguay which he had visited hundreds of years ago. [...] he could be heard murmuring about forests of Uruguay blanketed with the wax petals of tropical roses, nightingales, sea beaches, mermaids and women drowned at sea [...]" (Woolf 1991: 93).

Virginia Woolf allows herself only this reference to the tropics, while those palm trees – that after all characterize Kew Gardens exactly as a Royal Botanical Garden of the colonial

time – took a long journey, similar to the one recounted by Michael Ondaatje in his novel *The Cat's Table* (2011).

In that novel, three boys are invited to look not so much at a floating garden, but rather at a proper travelling garden. In their teens, on their voyage from Sri Lanka to England, they are led by Mr Daniels, one of the passengers and a botanist (with whom they share the cat's table), into the bowels of the ship. They all climb down metal ladders, and meet locked doors, they feel the draughts of air fanned by turbines and hear sounds of water being de-salinated after being drawn out of the sea, and then:

Reaching the bottom level of the hold, Mr Daniels set off into the darkness. We followed a path of dim lights that hung just above our heads. [...] Then we saw a golden light. It was more than that. As we came closer it was a field of colours. This was the garden Mr Daniels was transporting to Europe. [...] How big was this garden? We were never certain, because not all of it was ever fully lit at the same time, for the grow lights that simulated sunshine turned on and off independently. And there must have been other sections we never saw during that journey (Ondaatje 2011: 52).

This incredible garden hits both characters and readers as a surprise. To the boys, it represents one of the steps of initiation rites to life turning them from adolescents into young adults. The setting is the early Fifties, not the heyday of colonialism, when botanic gardens and stations were flourishing in Britain's overseas colonies from St. Vincent in the Caribbean to Christchurch in New Zealand, reaching a total of 130 establishments at the height of Britain's empire:

This flourishing of botanical sites and agricultural stations reflected a demand for empirical and theoretical knowledge about the earth's flora and in particular the development of economic botany in the service of widening imperial interests. They were also a response, however, to a burgeoning Enlightenment ideology of 'improvement' which as Richard Drayton has observed was 'a concern shaping activity at the empire's periphery as well at its centre' (Johnson 2011: 15).

Here, economic profits are involved too. And Kew (1759) "came to be regarded as the nucleus of Britain's plant exchange network and the central node in the practice of economic botany" (Johnson 2011: 6). Thus, Ondaatje, too, shows how Europe seems to maintain its interest in exotic plants and in new medicaments:

'Don't touch!' Mr Daniels said, pulling down my outstretched hand. 'That's *Strychnos nux vomica*. It has an alluring smell. [...] It's a strychnine. These with their flowers facing down are angel's trumpet. The ones facing up, wickedly beautiful, are devil's trumpet. And here's *Scrophulariaceae*, the snapdragon, also deceptively attractive. Even if you just sniff these, you will feel woozy' (Ondaatje 2011: 52).

Mr Daniels manages to surprise the boys, mesmerising them with his knowledge. Although he is a loose personification of Care/Cura, they end up calling him "Noah". He does

not satisfy completely their curiosity about poisons, but he provides them with some leaves they can roll into a bidi and smoke, in spite of their being eleven years old. His botany lesson becomes even more fun:

He seemed suddenly keen on lecturing us about palms from all over the world. He imitated how they stood and how they swayed, depending on heritage or breed, how they would bend with the wind in their submissiveness. He kept showing us various palm postures until he had us laughing. [...] 'Do the palm trees again, Uncle!' And Mr Daniels proceeded to distinguish for us more of the various postures. 'This of course is the talipot, the umbrella palm,' he said. 'You get your toddy from it, and jiggery. She moves this way.' Then he imitated a royal palm from the Cameroons, which grew in freshwater swamps. Then something from the Azores, followed by a slender-trunked one from New Guinea, his arms becoming its elongated fronds. He compared how they shifted in the wind, some fussily, some with just sidelong twist of the trunk, so they could face the strongest winds with their narrowest edge. 'Aerodynamics [...] very important. Trees are smarter than humans. Even a lily is better than a human. Trees are like whippets' (Ondaatje 2011: 54).

Another interesting example might be the botanical garden at Leiden:

In the early decades plants were obtained through the Dutch East India Company from its trading posts and possessions in south Asia and thus many plants of exotic provenance as well as of medicinal value were in the collection. The guide to this and other early gardens indicates a desire to expand the reservoir of plants from around the world, and, in some instances, to have the four quarters represent the four continents of the earth, illustrating their diverse bounty. [...]. As these botanical spaces were developing in Europe, colonial equivalents were concomitantly beginning to be established in Europe's overseas possessions. Imperial gardens, which could meet medicinal needs, would also importantly nurture economic botany and a move towards the development of a complex network of plant exchange between the colonies and home (Johnson 2011: 5-6).

Reinforcing this view, Brockway detects some historical cases, when new plants are uprooted, dislocated, transported and transplanted from one continent to another. The case of tea, a British monopoly but only produced in China till 1834, is exemplary.

The demand for tea was high, but how was the company to pay for it without losing precious silver to China? The answer was found in opium.

Opium grown in Bengal under the auspices of the British East India Company and auctioned by the company in Calcutta was exchanged in Canton for Chinese tea, which was carried in company ships to Britain. The trade was lucrative but dangerous, because opium was contraband in China. It had to be carried out through intermediaries – private British traders and Chinese smugglers – and the trade suffered interruptions by the Chinese authorities who were trying to suppress the use of opium (Brockway 1979: 455).

Thus, a great plant transfer occurred after the Opium War (1839-1842) at the hands of plant collector Robert Fortune who brought 2000 tea plants and 17.000 tea seeds from China to India. From that moment on, tea should not be bought from China, but could grow on British soil (Brockway 1979: 455).

This is just an example of the implications of plant transfers in colonial history. For, according to Nuala C. Johnson, it is true that:

Drawing on post-colonial perspectives, scholars have treated botanic gardens as 'contact zones' or hybrid spaces where links between European science and its empire have been arbitrated and where the conventional leitmotif of centre-periphery relationships challenged. [...]. This mastery over the intellectual domain of natural history was matched by a European hegemony over the geographical terrain of the globe through the acquisition (formally and informally) of overseas territories (Johnson 2011: 7).

It is exactly in this context that Amitav Ghosh sets his *Ibis* trilogy, which among other things also provides a history of the South Asian botanic gardens of the British Empire, also portraying some incredible floating and travelling gardens. He places there a young French botanist, who grew up in India in an adoptive family. When the British Mr Frederic Penrose sailed on the *Redruth* to the island of Mauritius to pay a visit to one of the most legendary Botanic Gardens, The Pamplemousses Garden, he received a shock for he only found "a wild and tangled muddle of greenery" (Ghosh 2011: 34). Since the death of Sir Joseph Banks, the last curator of Kew Gardens, Britain's own botanical gardens had fallen into neglect. Yet, Penrose hoped to find some rare plants there, in this garden where "African creepers were at war with Chinese trees, [...] where Indian shrubs and Brazilian vines were locked in a mortal embrace. This was a work of Man, a botanical Babel" (Ghosh 2011: 35).

Once Penrose arrived there, he was surprised in finding a man at work transplanting a little sibling of *Euphorbia*, which he was hardly able to recognize, taking it for a cactus. And when the young man showed him his botanical drawings, he immediately understood the boy was a woman in disguise: Paulette Lambert, the secret caretaker of the garden, this Adam/Eve in disguise, personification of Cura and daughter of Pierre Lambert, a French botanist and inventor of glass nurseries. Thus, Paulette is offered the job of her life: "A gardening job – except that it'd be on a ship. Ee'd have eer own cabin, all fitted out for a young lady" (Ghosh 2011: 56):

But it wasn't any of this that set the *Redruth* apart from every other sailing vessel: it was the greenery on her decks. Plants were not of course an uncommon sight on sail-ships. [...]. But the *Redruth*'s stock of flora extended far beyond the usual half dozen pots: her decks were stacked also with a great number of 'Wardian cases'. These were a new invention: glass fronted boxes with adjustable sides, they were in effect miniature greenhouses. [...]. The greenest part of the ship was the quarter-deck, here stacked along the deck rails, and around the base of the mizzen-mast, were rows of pots and cases. To provide additional protection for the plants, Fitcher had designed

an ingenious arrangement of movable awnings; these could be adjusted, as desired, to provide shade, sunlight, and protection from rough weather (Ghosh 2011: 72-73).

Plants were provided with plenty of fresh water and also composting was practised on board in order to produce plant nutrition. What may look like an eccentric ship, was in fact an efficient machine for profit. With its rudimentary technology, this ship is not very different from the modern liner of Ondaatje's novel. Both are meant to feed the botanical gardens of Britain, which were responsible for plant transfers and seed trade all around the world, for the institutions of "cash crops" like those of rubber, sisal and much else.

Kew Gardens, Lucile Brockway observes, had a crucial role in this project of "successful botanical imperialism" and promoted the transfer and development of two new plantation crops of exceptional value, cinchona and rubber. Kew Gardens sent plant collectors to the forests of South America to gather seeds and siblings of the cinchona tree, from whose bark quinine, used against malaria, was extracted. The seeds and siblings were shipped from South America to Kew, where a special heated greenhouse was erected, and from there they were trans-shipped to Asia, that is to India, Ceylon and Mauritius. But the Dutch took over the monopoly of cinchona from Java where they established very successful cash crop plantations. All this was possible thanks to indentured labour, new forms of slavery and the work of convicts. As a consequence, the South American market collapsed in favour of a plantation industry totally controlled by Europe, which produced a drug for European consumers only. The production of rubber underwent a similar destiny. It was one more typical resource of South America, that Kew Gardens together with the India Office took control of around 1837. Henry Wickham, a plant collector, managed to smuggle 70.000 *Hevea* seeds from Brazil. In Kew Gardens, writes Lucile Brockway:

Orchids were turned out of the green houses at Kew to make way for the rubber seeds. Of those that germinated, nineteen hundred young trees were sent to the Peradenya Gardens on Ceylon, which sent twenty-two specimens on to Singapore (Brockway 1979: 458).

The botanic garden of Ceylon was crucial for the study and development of such a crop. Director Henry Ridley, also called "Rubber Ridley" or "Mad Ridley," improved gathering techniques and the treatment of rubber. In Ceylon rubber replaced tea bushes, the same happened in Malay and soon the South Asian production and profits on rubber overtook the South American production. In the turn of few years Ceylon became the capital of coffee plantations. Plant migrations brought cheap labour force migrations in the form of indentured labour. Tamils worked in the plantations of Ceylon, while Chinese coolies were brought to Malay. After these enterprises, Kew Gardens had no direct influence on the smuggling of seeds and plants, but it remained a scientific authoritative source of information. Thus, its bulletins on the Mexican sisal industry immediately triggered interest in this cultivation and set the Caribbean islands as new large-scale producers of sisal fibres. All these types of activities are in line with what Robert Pogue Harrison calls the paradox of our age: "Thus we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of seeking to re-create Eden

by ravaging the garden itself – the garden of the biosphere on the one hand and the garden of human culture on the other” (Harrison 2009: 166).

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