

# Playing God in Small Spaces?: The Ecology of the Suburban Garden in South Africa and the Poetry of Mariss Everitt

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## Summary

This article seeks to address an apparent paucity of scholarly attention in two interrelated areas: a lack of detailed attention to the ecology of the suburban garden in South African urbanisation studies; and a dearth of attention to the suburban garden as locus and trope in South African literature. By briefly surveying urban-planning and related studies, and then focusing on the experiential and phenomenological dimensions of the garden poems of Mariss Everitt, the article hopes to articulate a space within which urban ecocriticism can take firmer root in local literary scholarship, and in future branch out to interdisciplinary urbanisation studies.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel wil 'n duidelike gebrek aan wetenskaplike aandag in twee verbandhoudende areas hanteer. Die areas is: 'n gebrek aan volledige aandag aan die ekologie van die voorstedelike tuin in Suid-Afrikaanse verstedelikingstudies; en 'n skaarste aan aandag aan die voorstedelike tuin as 'n lokus en klimaat in Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur. Deur kortliks 'n opname van stadsbeplanning en verwante studies te maak, en dan op die ervarings- en fenomenologiese dimensies van Mariss Everitt se tuingedigte te fokus, hoop die artikel om 'n spasie waarin stedelike ekokritiek sterker in die plaaslike literêre vakgeleerdheid kan standhou, uit te spreek, en in die toekoms na interdissiplinêre verstedelikingstudies uit te brei.

We were mightily surprised to find one of the loveliest and most curious Gardens that I ever saw in a Country that looks to be one of the most dismal and barren places in the world .... The Beauty of it consists not, as in France, in Compartments, in beds of Flowers, nor Waterworks .... By the disposition of the Walks this garden is divided into several indifferent big Squares, some of which are as full of Fruit-trees, and amongst them, besides Apple-Trees, Pear-Trees, Quince-Trees, Apricot-Trees and other excellent Fruits of Europe, you have also *Ananas*, *Banana-Trees* and several others that bear the rarest Fruits to be found in the several parts of the World .... The other Squares are sown with roots, Pulse and Herbs, and with some of the most esteemed Flowers of Europe, and others that we know not, which are of a singular good Smell and Beauty.

(Fairbridge 1924: 3)

Thus Père Tachard, visiting Simon van der Stel's garden in the Cape of Good Hope in 1685. His description initiates and foreshadows some key tropes in treatments of the small garden in South Africa's future – especially the sense of carving out an order of cosmopolitan beauty and fruition from an essentially hostile environment, one both indebted to and distinctly different from the garden order of the metropolises. Dorothea Fairbridge, who quotes the passage in her 1924 book *Gardens of South Africa*, continues this colonial ambivalence in certain ways, only to loftily dismiss it:

[L]et us cut ourselves loose from the thought that we can achieve nothing better than an inadequate copy of the gardens of other countries. Let us take example by all that is best in those gardens, in so far as they are suitable to South African conditions, but let us free ourselves from the convention that insists upon gardening after stereotyped models, regardless of fitness or chance of success .... [I]n spite of conventional ideals and happy-go-lucky methods, kind Nature sees to it that many Cape gardens are very beautiful. Where lovely things grow riotously in a setting of blue sky and sea, at the foot of a grey and purple mountain deep in Silver-trees and the rich green of Pines, criticism fades into a passion of delight ....

(Fairbridge 1924: 43-44)

For Fairbridge, as for most gardeners, no doubt, the “passion of delight” is central to the experience. What constitutes such delight is enmeshed in a matrix of imported imperial aesthetics wrestling with the impress of both non-European and indigenous species: an aesthetic, emotional and sensuous negotiation comes to constitute a peculiar sense of belonging in foreign territory. As a complex trope for “white” conflicts of belonging in southern Africa, the garden could scarcely be surpassed. Yet in literary studies, and in urbanisation studies more generally, the modern suburban garden has largely escaped attention. A neglect of Fairbridge's book itself is symptomatic, despite its evident worth as both a cultural and a literary object of interest.<sup>1</sup> This article hopes only to broach a rich but almost untouched field of ecologically orientated literary study in contemporary South Africa.

Many of our writers are suburban dwellers, and many of their stories and poems are set in suburbia. Though a comprehensive survey is beyond my scope here, a closer look at our national literature, I predict, will reveal the pervasive presence of the garden. Some writers revel in the suburban locale, others satirise it; some regard it as necessary taming, some as a valuable corner of wildness; some bemoan it for what Rian Malan called its “generic” character, Stephen Watson its “drab declensions” (quoted in Murray 2006: 2006: 49), or journalist Lionel Faull “the Panado-popping predict-

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1. The one major thesis on Fairbridge's work, by Peter Merrington, sidelines *Gardens of South Africa* in favour of her more politicised social engagement.

This article has benefited particularly from generous guidance and comment by Richard Ballard, Jeremy Foster, and Josh Kirshner.

ability of Kempton Park” (p. 12). Such deprecation is not confined to South Africa: as early as 1909 a socialist playwright, Louis Esson, grumbled that the suburban home “stands for all that is dull and cowardly and depressing in modern life” (Davison 1994: 110). Graeme Davison adds, however, that “suburbanites themselves display a disconcertingly high level of satisfaction with their way of life” (p. 110). The pleasure, status and security of possessing your own patch of ground, over which you can take full control and exercise your gentrification and your creativity, your privacy and your love, your exclusions and inclusions, seem for many irresistible. On the one hand, many might agree with gardening historian Anthony Huxley’s romantic view: “Our gardens are echoes of the primeval green world in which our ancestors lived and evolved, a world which we are all too busy destroying today” (Huxley 1986: 322). On the other hand we hear the seventeenth-century writer Stephen Switzer disparaging “those crimping, diminutive, and wretched Performances we everywhere meet with ... in Cleft Plants, Flowers, and other trifling decorations ... fit only for little Town-Gardens”, as opposed to the “Extensive Way of Gardening” associated with the French (Hunt 1992: 198); or Emerson perhaps ironically describing gardens as “one of those pernicious machineries which catch a man’s coat-skirt or his hand, and draw in his arm, his leg and his whole body to irresistible destruction” (quoted in Huxley 1986: 324).

The history of the garden elsewhere has been comprehensively researched, from Babylon and ancient Rome, through to the geometric formations of the Renaissance and 17th-century France; from the development of the English “natural” garden stimulated by “Capability” Brown to the colonialist functions of the “botanical garden” and, today, the eco-consciousness of healthy “green spaces”, parks and inner-city “wilderness” areas. Huxley’s *An Illustrated History of Gardening* (1983) might be taken as representative: it touches only tangentially on suburban small gardens in its final chapter, and does not embed its details very securely in broader urban-social dynamics. The modern suburban garden – which I take here to be an enclosed, private portion of ground tended largely for decorative rather than subsistence purposes<sup>2</sup> – has arisen out of a complex of historical factors: the democratisation of landownership with the decline and literal subdivision of the great landed estates of the upper gentry; the realignment of bourgeois capital, financial opportunity, employment profiles and tax regimens; health concerns and legislation; the advent of the automobile, electricity and water-borne sewerage; the flight from inner-city decay, industrial filth, or violence; and the delineation of societal classes, sometimes (as in, but far from

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2. The terms “suburban”, “small”, and “urban” gardens are no better defined in the literature I have found, than the notion of the “suburb” itself; the highly variable development and shifting balances between aesthetic criteria and food production, for example, deserve more intricate mapping than I can provide in this brief overview.

exclusively, South Africa) in conjunction with legalistic as well as unlegislated manifestations of racial consciousness.

The growth of the South African suburban garden has been, ever since Jan van Riebeeck and Adriaan van der Stel established their gardens at the Cape, both an icon of imperialism and a method of reformulating a sense of belonging for the European in Africa; both a mark of privilege and a mask of privilege, an exclusivist, even competitive, culturally sheltering enterprise. While inescapable, this matrix of “whiteness” is also more complicated; the South African garden has always been ineluctably cosmopolitan. The garden is no longer an exclusive preserve of whiteness, racial-spatial differentiation now partly overtaken by different forms of “social differentiation” (Beall, Crankshaw & Parnell 2008). In its ecological aspect (which is not securely divisible from its cultural aspect) the garden also lies in a troubled but creative interzone between “nature” and “culture”; between wilderness and the tamed; between agriculture and aesthetics, utilising, blending, critiquing and redefining all these categories. It is the nearest suburban dwellers can come – and often want to come – to unbridled nature, but it is inevitably a nature bound within severe strictures of wall, of design, and choice of non-human inhabitants. In many ways, it exemplifies that well-known expression of colonial ambivalence, Homi K. Bhabha’s conception of the “third space”. “We should remember,” writes Bhabha, “that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’” (Bhabha 1994: 38-39). The words “cutting” and “edge” have particular, if unanticipated, resonance in the gardening context; and the “people” here might now include the “ordinary” white suburban dweller, whose voice, it seems, is on the verge of being lost to scholarship. The concept of this interzone may also give us the critical leverage to transcend, without ignoring, what Susan Parnell and Alan Mabin have identified as a fetishisation of race in South African urban studies; to address complex interfusions of “exotic” and “indigenous” elements of gardening identity; and to explore more highly individuated and nuanced dimensions of gardening often lost beneath the impulse to generalise and homogenise.

As with so many originally utilitarian human activities, suburban gardening has evolved its own aesthetics and ancillary activities, its categories, competitions and industries, embodying both cultural and ecological values and effects. Sprawling away from the grimy centres of industrially driven urbanisation, these garden suburbs must now cover many hundreds of thousands of hectares, and have a concomitant ecological impact which is perhaps only now becoming evident. How much water do those gardens and pools consume? How much pesticide, chemical fertiliser, and automotive oil is leached into groundwater? How much topsoil is removed, paved over, recreated? What is the precise impact of garden-born, invasive species (the

water hyacinth being just one originally ornamental species which has escaped and become a subcontinental disaster)? How many species of wild animals, from mammals down to insects and even fungi, have been obliterated by suburban sprawl?<sup>3</sup> And how many benefit, as some do (witness the hundreds of articles and books about enticing indigenous birds and butterflies back into your garden)? What, indeed, is the precise scale of the ancillary book and magazine industry, the apparently inexhaustible demand for more “How-to” articles and glossy tomes on garden design catering for every niche (which I will call here “gardening literature”)? How economically important (and ecologically influential), exactly, are the mini-industries of nurseries, seed distribution, garden tools, hedge-cutters and lawnmowers, paving stones, concrete gnomes, hosepipes, custom-made trellises, paid family-specific gardeners and garden-service teams, the advertising and the transportation expenditures required for all of these? I have found no studies which tell us; suffice it to speculate that it is substantial.

The suburban garden, in short, is an important and potentially fascinating aspect of our national culture, ecology, and literature, ripe for study by the ecologically orientated critic. What is the function of the suburban garden as poetic space of belonging in contemporary South Africa? More precisely, what are the connections between the broad ecosystem that inevitably supports that space, encompassing the evolving of new ecosystems generated by and within that space, and the lineaments of the poetry that emerges from it? To put it another way: what does our poetry tell us about the ecology of the garden, about its particular constructions of wildness and culture, of nature and design and belonging, its negotiation between privacy and publicity, its politics and its creativity? Since most South African urbanisation studies concentrate on the mega-cities of Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg,<sup>4</sup> I want to focus on the suburbs of a smaller town – Grahamstown – and on the work of just one strongly garden-conscious poet from there: Mariss Everitt.<sup>5</sup> What follows cannot pretend to offer a com-

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3. See a recent *Mail & Guardian* article, “Gauteng boom leaves goggas homeless” (July 30, 2010: 13).
  4. See for example Freund 2001 (Durban); Beall et al.; Nuttall & Mbembe; Murray 2008, Tomlinson et al. 2003; Bremner 2010 (Johannesburg).
  5. Other Grahamstown poets offer possibilities, too, of course: Chris Mann, Robert Berold, Jennie Roberts and others have all written garden-centred poems. I intend in a parallel article to focus on another, Don MacLennan, against the backdrop of overseas rather than, as in the present article, South African urbanisation studies. I was reminded on a recent visit to the south-eastern United States how rare the enclosed suburban garden there is, where open lawn, with little more than strategically planted trees, is the norm. There are, then, specifically South African parameters to suburban gardens which such studies would serve better to delineate.

prehensive survey of suburban studies in South Africa, let alone elsewhere; nor do I wish to suggest that urbanisation scholars should necessarily have done something different to what they have. Rather, showing by somewhat stark contrast the gap between, on the one hand, what one might term rationalist-materialist suburban theory, and, on the other, the phenomenal experience of one, necessarily idiosyncratic, poetic suburban gardener, opens up some possibilities for symbiotic ecocritical studies which might fruitfully bridge that gap.

## Neglecting the Garden

*The Oxford Companion to Gardens*, as comprehensive an encyclopaedia as we possess, offers no independent entry on “suburbia” or “suburban gardens”; and in the two-page entry on South Africa (Jellicoe, Goode & Lancaster 1986: 522-524), does not venture into the modern (say, late-twentieth-century) garden at all. Even within our abundant “gardening literature”, Michèle Terblanche observes, “much of what is being done is not being documented”, and calls for “proper research on our unique gardens” (2008: 82). Her assertion is made in service of, and somewhat in tension with the cosmopolitanism evident throughout her own book on small gardens, of delineating the “genuinely South African garden” (p. 82). Nevertheless, Terblanche’s point stands: despite the proliferation of gardening literature, evident on the shelves of every bookstore, urbanisation studies scarcely take this literature into account. There is also a dearth of literary studies either of that work *as* literature, or (in contrast with extensive studies of garden representations in earlier periods of English literature) of the presence of the garden as environment and trope in other genres such as novels, memoirs and poems.

South African urban-planning and urbanisation studies generally have ignored the suburban garden. Alan Mabin notes that “[s]uburbs have been a silent presence in the widely disseminated ‘models’ of the apartheid city. [H]ow the suburbs happened is assumed rather than understood” (quoted in Hoogendoorn & Visser 2008: 75). A 1985 collection of essays, edited by Richard Haines and Gina Buijs, *The Struggle for Social and Economic Space: Urbanisation in Twentieth-century South Africa* (1985) is symptomatically “leftist”, and of its time, in focusing on distribution of capital, on informal housing, and on the fates of hawkers and sugar-factory workers: Foucauldian power, Marxian critique of capital, and feminism are prominent frames of theory, but ecology makes no appearance, and nor does the “white suburb” except briefly as a rather essentialised foil to the informal townships. Amongst the “surprisingly few” (Bickford-Smith 2008: 315) recent surveys of South African urban historiography, the overwhelming focus, both before and well after the overthrow of apartheid, is on the racial archi-

tectures, planning, and economic dimensions of our cities (Freund 2005; Bickford-Smith 2008). Neither of these latter surveys mentions ecological dimensions of urbanisation, not even as a future project, not even on a grand scale, let alone on the micro-scale of the suburban garden. Most recently, however, Susan Parnell and Alan Mabin have been arguing for a break away from what they perceive as methods “bound by racial fetishism” which have obscured many dimensions of urbanisation from view: the ecology of the small garden is one such dimension (Parnell & Mabin 1995).

Urban geographers and sociologists have been more adventurous in exploring ecological dimensions of our cities. Jacklyn Cock and Eddie Koch’s book, *Going Green: People, Politics and the Environment in South Africa* (1991), offers an early exploration but, also in line with prevailing anti-racist political and progressive sociological agendas, it focuses exclusively on the environmental problems affecting high-density townships such as Alexandra. Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell’s study of governance and social exclusion in Johannesburg, *Uniting a Divided City* (2008), never mentions the garden as one icon of such exclusion. Martin J. Murray’s *Taming the Disorderly City* (2008), concerned with the economics of renewal and regeneration in post-apartheid Johannesburg, not once indexes the garden as a factor in the “spatial landscape”. Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon has criticised Murray’s follow-up book, *City of Extremes* (2010), for tending to lose “the life histories” and “experiences of the city” in its undoubtedly insightful bias towards political economy rather than culture (Wilhelm-Solomon 2011: vii). André Czegledy’s chapter on the well-gardened northern suburbs, “Villas of the Highveld”, in *Emerging Johannesburg* (Tomlinson, Beauregard, Bremmer & Mangcu 2003), mentions gardens only once in passing. Even Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008), while more sensitive to aesthetics and including some discussion of creative literature, misses the suburban garden entirely.

Somewhat more relevant to my purposes – and symptomatically obscure – is a rare 1982 publication of the Sandton Nature Conservation Society entitled *The Sandton Field Book*, especially M. Cohen’s essay, “The Ecology of Suburban Gardens” (1982: 3-8). While the bulk of this little book, following then-dominant conservationist and wilderness philosophies, serves as a field guide to the flora and fauna of “wild” Sandton, in an introductory essay V.C. Carruthers notes that less than 2% of Sandton comprises designated “nature reserves”: the “role of the private garden in determining the extent of the natural environment is therefore extremely important” (p. 18). Sandton was touted in the 1970s as an example of enlightened peri-urban design, when Ebenezer Howard-derived “Garden City”-like plans were aired, the stated objective being “to provide the sophisticated services and facilities associated with the modern town, while retaining the open space, fresh air and greenery characteristic of country

living” (p. 14). As in so many other places, however, “development” and densification of residency has ensured, as E.J. Carruthers puts it, that “Sandton is well on its way to becoming a town of the type it has scorned, ‘another overgrown adolescent Reef town rapidly becoming an amorphous suburban sprawl’” (p. 15). *The Sandton Field Book* serves as exemplary of a certain kind of thinking about the garden’s “third space”: it is primarily a call to preserve “wild” elements and denizens within city limits. This arguably embodies a kind of “eco-essentialism” (Ballard & Jones 2010: 5), remaining therefore limited in its cultural explication of what people are doing in their individual gardens.

Also relevant is the eloquent study of urbanisation and “whiteness” by Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun*, though his garden focus is on the luxurious grounds designed for Johannesburg’s ridge estates by Herbert Baker. Methodologically, however, there is much to build on here. Richard Ballard’s articles on suburban identities in South Africa also explore the shifting demographics of formerly “white” suburbia, especially the retreat of many into “gated communities”. Ballard and Jones have unpacked the complex cultural dimensions of gardening, especially the advent of so-called “indigenous gardening” as an adventitious and now highly marketable aspect of gated communities in particular and of South African identity-formation in general. In situating these developments, they discern a “broad tension” between “global and hybrid models of nature in which landscapes are substantially altered by human intervention, and purist local models of nature, which idealize original landscapes” (2010: 3). The suburban garden, I would suggest, falls between and partakes, often quite unthinkingly, of both these models. Ballard and Jones also trace the historical shift from a dominant “Victorian gardenesque, calculated to look different from natural growth through the use of exotic plants”, such cultivation being regarded as a symbol of “successful whiteness” (p. 7), to the biodiversity- and conservation-orientated reinvention of the garden as more “natural” space.<sup>6</sup> Even the most private of our gardening poets are inevitably embedded in these histories, discourses and impulses, even when they do not explicitly address them.

Ballard’s work would be usefully amplified by reference to our literatures. Following Nadine Gordimer’s 1974 essay “The Idea of Gardening”, a short review of J.M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*, a small number of articles have been written, exploring mostly Gordimer’s own work, and *Michael K*. None of these, however, is about suburban gardens or gardening as such; Michael K himself, in fleeing the city to pursue a mode of guerrilla subsistence, is precisely the opposite of a suburban gardener. Rita Barnard’s

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6. It may turn out to have always been rather more complex: Dorothea Fairbridge pointed out that van Riebeeck considered plants brought from Batavia and other Eastern countries more likely to survive at the Cape than European species (1924: 4).



important book about the “politics of place” in South Africa, *Apartheid and Beyond* (2007), offers powerful insights in relation to the suburb-set works of Gordimer and Athol Fugard, but does not isolate the garden for especial focus. R.J. Balfour’s pioneering article glances also at Joseph Conrad and Karel Schoeman. Gardens depicted in the latter’s novels, Balfour claims, signify “an attempt by colonial-patriarchal discourses to establish a sense of Self as garden, by which the Other as desert or wilderness may be known” (1997: 123). As Balfour notes, and as the examples below show, this is complicated in practice. It is even more complex, I will suggest, than Balfour’s somewhat doctrinaire observation that the apparently “innocuous” practice of horticulture is “belied by the incipient patriarchal discourse of exploitation, possession and contempt for the space into which these [suburban] communities transplanted themselves” (p. 130).

Sally-Ann Murray has produced a provocative, if still tentative, examination of “indigenous gardening” as iconic of deeper identity issues and struggles in South Africa’s urban communities. She asks some crucial questions:

To what extent is gardening a humanly essential (and environmentally crucial) commitment to earth action that rightly takes precedence over blunt politics? Does “gardening” inevitably mean attending to – and over-diligently tending – an abstracted “Nature” while ignoring historical-political consequence? Does “gardening”, as an allegory for action in the world, necessarily lead writers and readers into realms of pleasurable indulgence remote from material forms of praxis?

(Murray 2006: 47)

One might quibble with these formulations: why should politics be “blunt”; and is not gardening itself a “material form of praxis”? Still, Murray usefully begins the application of her questions to current literary works, while leaving much interesting work to be done.

A concomitant neglect of the suburban garden as an urban element is evident in studies of Grahamstown itself. The half-dozen historical theses most widely quoted in studies of Grahamstown’s two centuries of urban growth uniformly ignore this crucial dimension of white suburbanisation (Gibbens 1982: 1982; Sellick 1983; Southey 1984; Torlesse 1993). H.L. Watts’s early PhD, “Grahamstown: A Socio-ecological Study of a Small South African Town” (1957), employs, as might be expected for its time, a rather thin and unworked notion of ecology. While noting in passing that a Horticultural Society was formed as early as the 1830s, and providing some useful statistical information on the evolution of erven size within the town, Watts pays no further attention to the phenomenon of the garden itself. Marijke Cosser’s 1992 thesis on “Images of a Changing Frontier” provides illustrations of the long garden plots between High and Huntley Streets

visible as early as 1820.<sup>7</sup> Cosser does not extend to discussion of these gardens in her text, however. Jill Payne's 1998 study of imported colonial aesthetics in the Zuurveld is useful for context but does not venture into the towns. Empirical evidence can be found in municipal records or the annals of the Horticultural Society, but this is not my purpose here. Suffice it to note that by the 1860s gardens and trees were a fundamental feature of the town's aesthetic and identity. Denizen George Samuel Wood "had a great interest in farming and gardening ... the garden of his beautiful home, Fair View, became the showpiece of Grahamstown" (Gibbens 1982: 90). When the Tree Planting Act of 1876 subsidised municipal tree-planting, Grahamstown was already renowned for its arboreal enterprise: "A Council motion of 1867 urged all householders by advertisement, to plant trees in front of their houses at their own expense, under the supervision of the board of works. Nothing raised council ire more than wilful damage to trees, which was a punishable offence in the Municipal Regulations" (p. 159). Rose-Mary Sellick notes that by the 1880s "the citizens of Grahamstown took pride in their British connections and suburban respectability" – which presumably included their gardens, since a flower show was well established (p. 174).<sup>8</sup> By 1900 one A. Lord could write "A Memorial Ode": "Stone upon stone/ They crowned their city's walls with towers/ And planted round about with careful hand/ The green memorials of their native land" (Southey 1984: 367).

Though almost all these studies detail the engineering of water supplies to Grahamstown, and note the advent of major droughts in almost all the periods they respectively examine, none explore the impact of water and drought on the garden. That it *was* – as it remains – a perennial concern may

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7. Amongst these illustrations are Chase's "View of Graham's Town, 1820" (Cosser 1992: 63), Foley's "View of Grahamstown from the South Side, 1823" (Cosser 1992: 64), and Huggin's "View of Graham's Town, 1833" (Cosser 1992: 66). Thomas Baines's "Fort Selwyn, 1850", and Burnett Stocks's "View of Graham's Town, 1877", both show a centre already well-treed (Cosser 1992: 78).
  8. The flower show culture continues. An advertorial, recently published ahead of the October 2010 Grahamstown flower show, outlined the categories for the competition as "small gardens, medium gardens, large gardens, and township gardens" ("Grow for it", *Makana Moon* 125, 19 March 2010, p. 12), thereby potentially reiterating the racial-cum-class divisions of apartheid which still prevail in the town. According to organiser Sharon Richner, it's fair to add, this was arrived at after some negotiation. Most township gardening is historically subsistence in nature, some along permaculture lines, but the formerly used category of "permaculture gardens" was itself deemed too exclusionary, so it was changed to "township gardens, "with the blessing of the isiXhosa speakers there, [who] didn't think the term would be seen as offensive" (Richner, pers. comm. 19 October 2010).

be exemplified by Harold Goodwin's 1953 poem, "Drought", which alludes satirically to municipal water restrictions:

I have six taps; I may from four to five  
 Use all of them to keep my plants alive,  
 Consuming much more water, I suppose,  
 Than if I used a single tap and hose.  
 The powers that be don't care, for as they view it  
 It's not the volume used but how I do it.

(Goodwin 1963: 27)

Creative literature such as poetry, then, can serve as useful evidence of dimensions of mental attitudes, social norms, and textures of individual creativity which are thus far largely absent from urbanisation studies. To move, as I do now, from such macro-scale studies to the intimacies of poetry is, in an important sense, to move from "space" to "place" – from a Newtonian and Cartesian paradigm of space as "homogeneous, isotropic, isometric, and infinitely ... extended" (Casey 1996: 20), to a phenomenological sense of "place" as experienced by the "lived body", simultaneously formed and (in)forming, materially created and imagined as a "reinvigorated *revenant*" (p. 20). While it remains necessary to contextualise the gardening activities and tropes employed by contemporary poets within a historically racialised urban landscape, it would be facile merely to disparage them as a means of escaping from such "reality". I want rather to investigate the dimensions that, in this case, Mariss Everitt's poetry *does* explore, not as ignorant of the "racial fetishism" of much South African literary scholarship, but as ancillary to it, and in some ways as a creatively resistant response to it – a poetry more concerned with the human universals of family and safety within an ecological envelope wider than the nationalistic or political.

### **Mariss Everitt's *On Gardening***

Mariss Everitt is a literary archivist and researcher (she produced the most comprehensive study to date of Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone* as a master's thesis through Rhodes University) who has lived in Grahamstown with her educator husband and three daughters for some twenty years. Though a much less established poet than, say, Maclennan or Chris Mann, her first collection of 25 poems, *On Gardening* (2008), is particularly useful for this essay. While it bears some cultural and attitudinal congruities with other contemporary poets, it is also necessarily highly individuated; after all, this is one justification for writing poetry in the first place. So for example, Don Maclennan's poetic treatment of the garden feels as much metaphorical or mythic as material, and the garden is evoked primarily in service to the

philosophical dimension of the poetry; in Everitt's case the poetry is palpably in service to the garden. While Maclellan's characteristically spare representations are not without nuance and detail, Everitt is more concerned with the processes, textures, experiences and meanings of gardening itself. There are strong overlaps in theme and image, but the fact that these two friends' approaches can be as different as they are is part of my point: not even the allegedly homogeneous suburban experience can be so easily essentialised or assimilated to fashionable theoretical models.

Everitt's garden today is the downhill rump of one of those long gardens established in 1820s Grahamstown between High and Huntley Streets, mentioned earlier. Notwithstanding the foundational history of this rectilinear, colonialist boundary-making and -owning, it is facile merely to assimilate present-day meanings of gardening to a model of, say, "patriarchal-colonial discourse". Indeed, Everitt and Maclellan's poetic treatments may both be characterised as informed and deliberate acts of resistance to being interpreted narrowly in this highly politicised mode. There is much more involved. Significantly, for starters, Everitt's volume is prefaced by a quotation from the feminist writer Clarissa Pinkola Estes: "The gardener is a cultivator of soul, a regenerative keeper of seed, soil, and root .... The gardener's function is regeneration". For Everitt, though arguably more traditionalist than feminist, portrays her roles as mother and wife as integral to the regenerative ethos of her gardening. In a modest and uncombative manner, she effectively reminds us that we are lacking phenomenological histories of the sensuous, and of love itself: such poetry is evidence – as if we ever needed it – that human lives are fundamentally driven by the tightly entangled needs for intimacy, textural richness, familial safety, aesthetic pleasure, meditative space, nurturing, and creativity of all kinds.<sup>9</sup> These motives are fulfilled or thwarted not so much in the interstices of theory-favoured social and historical movements such as race dynamics, post-coloniality, or urban planning, as ultimately constituting the very material without which such movements would not exist – as well as providing sites of resistance or idiosyncrasy within them.

We should be neither surprised nor disparaging that, in a collection of poems on gardening, the "pleasure in the doing of it" is paramount, though not wholly untroubled: "the feel of the earth *mostly* enough" (Everitt 2008: 6; my emphasis). Admiration for the miracle of growth sparks through frequently, as in "Take Heart" (p. 10), where "Clean blue flowers star-shining" bring "perennial pleasure"; their "selfseeding" will "fill/ Your garden and your heart". Sensual receptiveness characterises much of the pleasure: in "Staking" (p. 11), tomato plants spring "gaily" and "tenacious[ly]"; the poet "smel[ls]/ their fecundity, "taste[s]" their "summer salads", feels the stems'

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9. Everitt is an accomplished quilter as well, as evidenced by the cover design of the volume.

“hairy succulent” quality and the “heavy” fruit. Satisfaction arises from the act not so much of creating as of helping: clearing, staking, lifting a subject out of potential “blacken[ing] rot” into the “rampant” growth that brings joy. It is not simplistically the imposition of order upon chaos, though the emergence of “pattern” is part of it; pleasure also comes from the *limits* on control and the emergence of independent, even unpredictable new growth. In short, as Edward Casey has argued, being in “place” is kinaesthetic and synaesthetic (1996: 22).

Uncomplicated revelling in pleasure and beauty can too easily be derided as self-indulgent, irrational, or elitist in our cynical, inequitable times – but, whether manifested in gardening or some other form, such emotions are “prime motivators” in people’s lives (Milton 2002: 4). Everitt nevertheless (entirely non-cynically, often with a kind of gentle paradoxicality) injects an awareness of a number of inner tensions or complicating dynamics in the gardening enterprise. I want here to touch on just two interlocking areas. The first entails Everitt’s sense of history: on one hand of her own place in a long, inevitably European literary history of the garden as cultural artefact and trope; and on the other hand as one in a physically layered succession of local movements and settlements. Amongst these “settlements”, secondly, are those of imported plant species and their identity associations, about which there has been considerable debate.<sup>10</sup> A congruent aspect is Everitt’s awareness of the shifting balance between wildness and controlled nurture, the defining of which also raises questions of Africanness, of belonging and alienation.

Firstly, then, Everitt alludes in a number of poems to the centuries-old traditions of fashioning gardens. In “Take Heart” she refers to an ancient European (rather than local Xhosa) herbal tradition, the belief that “Borage is for courage./ This Mediaeval adage/ still speaks/ through its seeds/ across time” (2008: 10). She reaches even further back in the traditions to Roman conceptions of the “locus amoenus”, the title of one of her loviest poems (p. 12). In a more humorous poem she links the Roman “hortus conclusus”, the “secret garden”, with the aristocratic English landscape garden with space to build the eye-deceiving ditch known as a “ha-ha”,<sup>11</sup> characterising her own

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10. See, for example, Crosby; Comaroff & Comaroff 2001; Murray 2006; Ballard & Jones 2010.

11. The *hortus conclusus* was conventionally seen as neo-Edenic, and a *moral* space, as outlined by Henry Hawkins in his *Partheneia Sacra* (1633): “wherein are al things mysteriously and spiritually to be found, which even beautifies the fairest gardens; being a place ... wherein is no season to be seen, but a perpetual Spring ... where are Arbours to shadow ... from the heats of concupiscence; flowerie beds to repose in, with heavenly contemplations; Mounts to ascend to, with the study of Perfections; where are ... the flowers of all vertues” (quoted in Hunt 1976: 12).

diminutive, enclosed space as a pale shadow of these antecedents. In this diminution, it might be said, is encapsulated the whole history of suburban development: today, perhaps only here can the modern town-dweller “play god” (p. 8). However, outside, beyond and within the mechanisms of human control and nomenclature, the very mysteriousness of vegetable growth endows the poet-gardener with a kind of creative humility or negative capability: “the joke is on me” (p. 8). Culturally precise though this genealogy is, it is also a reminder that central meanings of garden enclosures long predate and reach beyond colonial and suburban impositions.

Everitt is nevertheless wryly keen to the natural and cultural complexities of her enterprise, acknowledging the implantation of foreign species and aesthetics as a problematic part of her mental and ecological heritage. In “African Garden” (p. 4), she recognises that she is fashioning something diminished and constrained in South Africa’s often rigorous conditions, which contradictorily harbour the abundance of “five floral kingdoms”. In attempting to construct something that belongs here, she eschews “roses” and will not “prune/ and spray/ to coax/ those soft blooms/ into this/ harsher climate”. She has to admit, though, that her “Englishness/ is exposed” in the aesthetic of the “stone pathways” she has laid “to curve/ into the illusion/ of some/ other place”. In “First Garden” (p. 5), a poem about learning how to garden in that “harsher climate”, she narrates her determination to “tame the virgin veld around the new brick house” (a formulation which might have feminists looking askance). Alien “petunias, pansies and cineraria” refuse to take root; she tries instead “indigenous seeds from Kirstenbosch”.<sup>12</sup> With “grim incantations” she finally produces a flowering which “blossomed brightly, defiantly,/ against the thorn trees and veld”. In this place, even those indigenous species, with their Linnaean names (“*dimorphotheca*, *osteospermum*, *senecio*,/ *doreanthus*, *arctotis*, *ursinia*”) seem “strange”; and it is only with the aid of compost that another batch of species (“*gazania*, *dietes*, *aloes*, *tecomaria*,/ *watsonia*, *plectranthus*, *clivia*”) can survive and amaze the gardener with “their willingness/ to take root and flower”. The lists of names are at once indicative of abundance, the poet’s accumulated knowledge of appreciation, and the systematics of nomenclature, both Latin and common.<sup>13</sup> While these are arguably the rhetorical equivalent of persistent “colonial” land-practices and possessiveness, here they are signs also of loving attentiveness to the materials of a craft.

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12. There is of course a complex history of the cultural meanings of such “botanical gardens” embedded here.

13. Compare Dorothea Fairbridge: “[L]ong lists of Latin titles are very bald and unlovely. Unluckily, few Cape flowers have the pleasant homely names of their English sisters, so the botanical names have to be used for want of better” (1924: 141).

In parallel with such intellectual heritage, the poet encounters more material, subterranean traces of previous inhabitants, and writes herself into an unfolding legacy of regeneration, enacting what Casey calls a place's quality of "gathering" (1996: 23). In "First Love" (Everitt 2008: 7), the poet relates discovering a drystone wall, half-hidden in a "profusion of black jacks and scraggly cannas"; despite the neglect, it is the evidence of "[p]ast care" speaking "through the pattern of stone,/ rocks picked and placed to interlock", that moves her. Now her present care interlocks with the old, and reinscribes the regenerative process which she sees herself ultimately handing on. The fragments of wall she refurbishes are not unlike the broken "relics" her daughter retrieves from the upturned soil of the new garden, an impromptu and textured archaeology of previous lives (p. 13). The only antidote to our consciousness of our own fragmentation, these poems imply, is the loving care accorded burgeoning life, the establishment of patterned artistry, the trimming of a hedge or revealing "a curve/ lurking beneath/ handfuls of weeds" (p. 12), and our openness to astonishment at what we have released into the world.

Above all, what undergirds historical continuity, justifies settlement, and parallels the meanings gleaned from gardening, is the formation of family continuities and nurturing of children. Several of Everitt's poems allude to, or are dedicated to, the three daughters who grew and matured along with, and in, this garden. Such continuity itself is hardly uncomplicated, however: the poem "Erythrina Eulogy" (pp. 2-3) implies that in some sense the poet came to gardening, or at least to her particular style of gardening, as a riposte to a strong sense of alienation from her father and his "ruthlessly neat" mode of mowing and excising tress which "made too much mess" – including her "special climbing tree", the loss of which drove her to spend much of her childhood "in the garden next door". Gardening and parenthood become for her intertwined activities of maturation, self-assertion, redemption and healing.

Running through the history of possessive settlement and settling-in, though, is an antithetical thread of mobility, marked by attachment to, then abandonment of, successive gardens – perhaps a peculiarly suburban, bourgeois form of mobility (see Ballard 2004): "At each new place we planted [a lemon tree]/ then moved on before it came to maturity.// This trail of lemon trees crosses the country." The poet imagines those trees bearing fruit "vicariously", while hoping that at last "the trail ends here" (p. 29). Nowhere in this collection is the oscillation between regeneration and loss more poignant than in the poem "Remembrance", dedicated to Everitt's late brother Gavin: "We moved on and I don't know/ if my small garden to you still grows.// But inside my head/ the herbed bushes flourish ..." (p. 24).

As the lemon trees evidence, Everitt's poems also reveal the influences of the literal transmigration of species across the planet in the process Alfred

Crosby famously termed “ecological imperialism”.<sup>14</sup> A range of commentators have questioned the knee-jerk conflation of nativism of plant species with nationalist or ethnic identity, and Everitt chooses to locate these facets within, rather than superseding, family and localised histories and dynamics. A number of poems nevertheless reveal the tensions – and the aesthetic symbioses – between alien and native species. A substantial number of foreign species make their appearance: flowers such as roses, daffodils, and petunias, and trees such as jacarandas and oaks, for which Grahamstown is well known. At times, these species are simply observed for their intrinsic beauty: the “luminous lilac” of “October Jacaranda” generates a straightforward “delight” (p. 18). At another point, the “invasive” status of a Brazilian pepper tree is noted – though even here this is not the theme of the poem, which is rather about the felling of a daughter’s childhood icon (the branch from which her swing was suspended); healing happens when the space is filled with another imported plant, lavender, for “calm”, the forgiving daughter says (p. 16). The primary theme of these poems is growth and succession, a subtler mode of history than that of political systems: “Will someone not yet born,/ sit here and wonder who planted/ this white stinkwood as I wonder/ what hands put the jacaranda/ into this patch of earth?” (p. 22). Thus while (in both Everitt and MacLennan) “immigrant” trees and vines bear homely fruit, European herbs provide folkloric succour, and particular colours and architectures assert the “English” element of identity in the suburban gardener, varying signs of indigenisation are recognised as having always been present.

In tandem with this necessary, inevitable and indeed valorised hybridity, the wild continually makes its presence felt. So-called “weeds” spring up; predatory birds pass through as prey species are attracted to a flourishing garden. In “The Goshawk” (p. 25), the poet watches as a perched raptor tears some prey apart: “Amid my gentle flowers, cruel nature stared/ straight through us”. The incident reveals that the garden is only partially enclosed and controllable after all, permitting “a vocalisation of anxieties and conundrums not easily addressed by politics-as-usual” (Murray 2006: 51); here the anxiety is more existential than about the political positionality of the white person on postcolonial African soil. MacLennan’s poems, even more than Everitt’s, allude repeatedly to these overarching powers of the natural, which are “mercifully beyond our making and control” (“Solstice”, p. 21): the garden is emphatically not merely an ordered space of patterned culture:

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14. It is distortive to analyse this one-sidedly in terms of white inhabitants trying to forge a comfortable place in a somehow antipathetic (post)imperial territory, though this is part of it; it is worth contextualising the interchange of species in its global reach, and noting that exactly mirroring debates about alien versus native occur in England – where a goodly number of oft-despised aliens are, ironically, South African (see Preston 2002).



“the force of history resides/ in biological power .../ and causes trees to flower” (“The Poetry Lesson”, n.p.).

Indeed, what Everitt’s poems reveal is not so much a wilful blindness to “politics-as-usual” as a covert assertion that such politics radically fails to consider or account for important reaches of both human and natural behaviour – ecosystems, or “ecologies of emotion”, to use Kay Milton’s term.

Gardens, then, for poets such as Everitt and MacLennan, are both enclosed and porous, both havens from social disease and sites of resistance to it, both spaces of individual creativity and palimpsests of historical belonging and disturbance – in short, heterotopias, “fertile site[s] of contradictions demanding constant renegotiation and reconstruction” (Willey & Barnes 1996: xv). For ecocritics, gardens’ “third space” or middle ground provides fertile resources for “efforts to encompass the terrain of urban environments” within ecocriticism, to “counteract the anti-theoretical bias of ecocriticism and its fantasy of unmediated contact with Nature”, and to modify Deep Ecology’s “fetishization of wilderness” (Bennett 2001: 46). But neither can gardens or their gardener-poets be homogenised. For these two poets at least, gardens are sites primarily for the generation of individuated love and of meanings which elude “theory”. In Everitt’s poem, “The Flower Bed”, a deft sonnet in which gardening and poetry as creative enterprises are paralleled, the meaning of the garden is felt rather than explicable: even (or especially) the philosopher cannot locate “the bottom of the garden” (p. 9). Edward Casey sums up:

Gathering gives to place its peculiar perduringness, allowing us to return to it again and again as *the same place* and not just as the same position or site. For a place, in its dynamism, does not age in a systematically changing way, that is, in accordance with a preestablished schedule .... A place is generative and regenerative on its own schedule. From it experiences are born and to it human beings (and other organisms) return for empowerment, much like Antaeus touching the earth for renewed strength.

(Casey 1996: 26)

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