

**‘An Old Vagabond’:
Science and Sexuality in Marianne North’s Representations of India**

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“There is nothing politically innocent about a nineteenth-century British woman painting rare tropical flowers and writing about her experiences. But there is nothing politically simple about it either” (Morgan *Introduction* xxxvii).

<1> Susan Morgan’s insightful remark concerns Marianne North (1830-1890), a nineteenth-century female traveller who employed the world’s flora and fauna as a means of visually and textually re-imagining herself. In an effort to address the complexities alluded to by Morgan, this paper explores North’s intensely vivid depictions of the natural world and suggests that these depictions bring to fruition the diverging aspects of her ambition in landscapes beyond the physical and ideological borders of Victorian Britain. On one hand she strives to become part of the British scientific establishment; but on the other hand, she is highly frustrated with bourgeois convention and Victorian ideologies and seeks to reject patriarchal imperialism. As a Victorian woman she struggles to give full expression to either mode of discontent; thus, it is suggested that her dissatisfaction emerges simultaneously in the representations of “other” spaces. Specifically, North constructs the Indian subcontinent as an Edenic vision of pre-industrialisation; however, this representation is not straightforward. The pre-civilised state that she imagines is forged in such a way that simultaneously celebrates freedom from, and conformity to, patriarchal authority. Thus, by focusing on North’s time in India, I will demonstrate that she inscribes a symbiotic self, that she simultaneously embodies both the voluptuous, untamed wilderness and the scientific, civilised metropole. Both these inscriptions allow her to displace the expressions of selfhood which were unacceptable to Victorian notions of femininity. As such, it is suggested that in the interstitial spaces of the outposts of empire the seemingly innocuous representations of plants were used by women to give voice to potentially disruptive aspects of their identity.

<2> After her mother’s death, Marianne North became a constant companion to her father Frederick. Together they travelled extensively and North was introduced to various distinguished members of Victorian society. Uncommonly for a young nineteenth-century woman, she mixed with experts from the arenas of science, art, literature and politics, including John Tyndall (1820-1893), Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), Sir Edward Sabine (1788-1883), George Bentham

(1800-1884), Francis Galton (1822-1911), Edward Lear (1812-1888), and Sir William Hooker (1785-1865). Like Elizabeth Gaskell, North's interaction with intellectually significant figures was to impress variously upon her later life;(1) she was aided by their written introductions when she travelled abroad, assisted by their hospitality, interested in their clever conversation and received both their professional and personal advice. One instance that stands out as being particularly influential was an exchange between North and Sir William Hooker: North records that during one of her frequent visits to Kew Gardens, Sir William gave her a hanging bunch of flowers, *Amherstia nobilis*, which had been named after Lady Sarah Amherst (1762-1838), a British female traveller who had been to India and gathered indigenous specimens.(2) In *Recollections* North describes the flower as, "one of the grandest flowers in existence. It was the first that had bloomed in England, and made me long more and more to see the tropics" (1:31). Her response exposes the incident as the possible genesis of future interests: not only does North note the importance of the blossom for British botany but she expresses a desire to see the place of its origin. Evidently, Amherst's botanical collection signified the possibilities available to nineteenth-century women who travelled and indicated the potential for women to contribute to scientific discourse.

<3>Soon after the significant encounter with William Hooker, the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Frederick North died; unsurprisingly, this had a great impact upon his daughter. The companionship she had shared with her father was the closest and most influential relationship North enjoyed in her lifetime;(3) yet, it is only after his death that she fully emerges as an autonomous persona. Interestingly, as noted by Barbara Ramusack, independent, single, British women travellers frequently shared the common factor of suffering the loss of their fathers at a relatively young age; this seemed to enable them to forge more independent careers (128). Perhaps in the absence of a close patriarchal authority, there was more freedom to express individuality. It is certainly undeniable that after the passing of her father, North enacts a subjectivity shift that rejects the feminine occupations of domesticity and philanthropy in favour of the realms of adventure, science, and exploration. Thus, on a superficial level, North seems an ideal candidate for the celebratory volumes of proto-feminists published by Virago; but she cannot be recruited unequivocally for such projects because, as this paper demonstrates, North's rejection of patriarchal Victorian ideologies is not straightforward or comprehensive.

<4>Immediately after the death of her father, North decided to journey around Europe until she had "schooled" herself "into that cheerfulness which makes life pleasant to those around us" (*Recollections* 1:38), and the impetus to travel was to remain with her for as long as she was physically able. She continually sought to reproduce the frequently mobile lifestyle and intellectual activity that she had enjoyed with her father, but in his absence she preferred to travel alone, staying with friends and acquaintances largely as a means to achieve her ambition of educating the British public about geography and natural history. Recalling her first lengthy solo journey in 1871, North writes:

I had long had the dream of going to some tropical country to paint its peculiar vegetation on the spot in natural abundant luxuriance; so when my friend Mrs S. asked me to come and spend the summer with her in the United States, I thought this might easily be made into a

first step for carrying out my plan, as average people have but a very confused idea of the difference between North and South America (*Recollections* 1:39).

In this passage, North expresses her desire to move beyond the drawing-room artistry enjoyed by many Victorian women. By depicting plants in their natural habitats she hopes to participate in a project of enlightenment regarding non-British spaces and states that the sole motivation for this mission is the lack of public knowledge in relation to geography and natural history:

I found people in general woefully ignorant of natural history, nine out of ten of the people to whom I showed my drawings thinking that cocoa was made from the cocoa-nut (*Recollections* 1:321).

Such pedagogical ambitions are reiterated after her journey to India in 1878. At this time, North began negotiations with Hooker regarding the installation of a permanent exhibition of her work within the grounds of Kew; thereby situating herself and her work within the hub of nineteenth-century scientific imperialism.

<5>North writes of her intentions to her long-term confidant Dr. Arthur Burnell (1840-1882):(4)

I should like to build a gallery close to the pleasure grounds (or in them) at Kew, hang my pictures and have coffee and tea for all the poor tired visitors—with a cottage attached to boil the kettle in—and a spare room for myself to go and sulk and paint in when I want rest and green trees. If Sir Joseph could find me a bit of ground I would build this—and leave it to him and future directors of the gardens (North, *Letter to Burnell 9 August 1879*).

Clearly desirous of a room of her own, North imagines a space to work in semi-isolation. But before she can begin work on this ambitious project, her initial negotiations bring her to the attention of the eminent Charles Darwin. Consequently, his daughter and assistant, Henrietta Lichfield (1843-1929) asked North to come and meet him:

I was much flattered at his wishing to see me, and when he said he thought I ought not to attempt any representation of the vegetation of the world until I had seen and painted the Australian, which was so unlike that of any other country, I determined to take it as a royal command and to go at once (*Recollections* 2:87).

And so in 1880 North proceeded to Australia, New Zealand and Tasmania.

<6>Upon her return, she continued with the plans for the construction of her gallery. Having gained Hooker's consent, North financed the building of a small museum. She employed James Fergusson (1808-1886), a prominent architectural historian, to design a space that is visibly influenced by the design of the Greek temples. Additionally, the physical structure indicates North's connection with the east through the incorporation of a veranda, which was viewed as an exotic feature of eastern architecture. The building itself became related to the subject of her paintings and works to create an overall panorama of the natural world. This idea is enhanced by the geographical arrangement of the paintings, which entirely consume the walls of the gallery

leaving free only a small section at the bottom; here North displayed various types of wood that she collected on her travels. Over one hundred years later, this exhibition space remains standing and is undoubtedly how she is best remembered. Yet, the gallery is only one aspect of her vast legacy.

<7>North also penned a massive manuscript detailing her expeditions, which was posthumously published in three volumes entitled *Recollections of a Happy Life* (1892); a year later a third volume followed, *Further Recollections of a Happy Life* (1893). Taken together, North's writings and paintings expose the complex inner struggles that she endured. It can be seen that her interest in natural history constructed for her a narrative subjectivity that facilitates her move beyond the geographical and ideological borders of Victorian society; this move works in two ways as it enables the displacement of repressed sexuality constrained by patriarchal ideas of femininity *and* it allows for the appropriation of power and authority endorsed by patriarchal ideas of imperialism.

<8>For many nineteenth-century readers, the landscape of colonial territories was perceived as a textual space that belonged to an imperial male author; this figure approached the physical terrain through a sexualised language of discovery and a rhetoric of power. Obviously such narratives were incompatible with idealised Victorian femininity. As a result, women travellers tended to treat topography in a more tentative manner. They were inclined to approach the geographical terrain of India in terms of its unknowability and indescribability, unless it could be made to conform to some preconceived image. Indeed, there were really very few attempts by women authors to describe accurately the unfamiliar flora and fauna of the colonies. Marianne North is a notable, although by no means isolated, exception. Constance Gordon Cumming similarly embraced the natural landscape in her text, *In the Himalayas and On the Indian Plain*:

On the high levels, at about 13,000 feet, are found common birch, gooseberries and strawberries—real strawberries—not the dusty, tasteless species which grow lower down. Below this grows the neoza, or edible pine (*Pinus Gerardianus*), a pine with silvery bark, and whose cones are full of long-shaped nuts, good to eat, which fall out when the cone is half-baked. At about 9000 feet you find magnificent deodars, which love a dry rocky soil, and flourish best where they can take root in the crevices of the granite rock, and there hold their ground for centuries, for they are slow of growth—slow and sure—for their timber is imperishable (333).

As Cumming and North demonstrate, the landscape of India could be accessed, imaginatively and actively, through the discourses of natural history writing.

<9>Ostensibly the activity of painting and collecting plants was not in itself a controversial activity for a nineteenth-century woman. In fact, Victorian women frequently became amateur auxiliaries in the botanical world, as did many members of the leisured classes. It was so common for the general public to participate in the advancement of natural history by collecting specimens for the different disciplines, such as geology, algology, conchology, and botany, that Kew's naturalists grew to depend on the work of the voluntary collectors and artists; Joseph Hooker acknowledges: "Science is not yet self-supporting; it requires the countenance of

amateurs no less than the severe studies of proficient to ensure its progress” (Hooker, *Illustrations* iv). Yet despite such admissions, throughout the nineteenth century there were increasing attempts to professionalise botany, a move which somewhat curtailed the extent of women’s participation in the discipline. Women could still acceptably undertake the study of naturalism, as long as it did not become tainted by commerce, or public and professional recognition. Gillian Rose explains that this marginalisation facilitated the exclusion of women from official and academic spheres:

While men claimed objectivity by denying their specificity and pretending to enact pure reason, women were ruled by the passions of bodies [...]. The fellows of the Royal Geographical Society did not seem able to admit that women, even white women, could produce reports of their travels which counted as geography, and that was the reason why they refused for so long to admit women as members: only the ‘objective’ gaze of white men could explore and describe other places in appropriate scientific detail (Rose 9).

Numerous professional institutions were obviously uneasy with the inclusion of women in their domain.⁽⁵⁾ Hence, it became necessary for most women writers of natural history to negotiate their public status by presenting their work as explicitly non-authoritative.

<10>Writers such as Amelia Griffiths (1768-1858) and Catherine Cutler (d.-1866) explicitly set their texts in opposition to the authorised and academic work of male naturalists. They both emphasised a narrative that accorded with the view that women in the world of science were “mere collectors” (Sheffield 30), choosing not to contradict the marginalisation of their pursuits because this enabled them to operate publicly in empirical science without presenting any overt threat to the dominance of their male counterparts and thereby attracting criticism. The result of this discursive manoeuvre was that women naturalists aimed their publications at a readership derived from the general public rather than from scientific circles (Gates 1998). Consequently a plethora of educational texts predominantly intended for children and other women were produced during the nineteenth century, a number of which contain their pedagogical motivation by drawing upon a Christian rhetoric; this seemed to validate the move to publication and shifted their function away from the masculinised realm of knowledge-giving. Thus, by negotiating the more masculinised aspects of natural history, botany could remain a comfortably “feminine” topic.

<11>In some respects, North consented to the supporting role assigned to women naturalists. By presenting her “discoveries” to Hooker for examination, she demonstrates her deference to the botanists at Kew and ensures that her peripatetic lifestyle and desire to paint plants in their natural habitats is continually authorised and observed by male authorities. At the same time, her decision to erect her gallery within the grounds of the Royal Botanic Gardens is a resolution which reflects her desire to be aligned with the scientific—rather than the artistic—world. Unlike other female naturalists who carefully negotiated their ambitions by couching their scientific work through writing children’s manuals or religious propaganda, North demonstrates a distinct desire to be regarded as part of the nineteenth-century upper-class botanical community (Morgan, *Place Matters* 122); she is even willing to pay for the privilege.

<12>In addition to the gallery at Kew, North's far-reaching ambition can be seen in her travel narratives as she assumes the authoritative gaze of the scientific explorer, a mode of viewing that was embroiled in the masculinised discourses of colonisation. According to Sara Mills, North's efforts to participate in the production of knowledge about the colonies for British people would implicate her in an imperial process:

[T]hose writers who produce scientific knowledge are fundamentally connected to European imperial expansion and the promotion of a view of the world that sees European activities as fundamentally civilising. Knowledge here is given the appearance of a simple neutral endeavour at an individual level, but in fact it is very much a part of imperialism; in this way, scientific knowledge can present itself as free from the taint surrounding the commercial and political expansion it underwrote. ("Knowledge, Gender, and Empire" 35)

It would seem that even seemingly objective descriptions are embroiled in colonial strategies, that even the apparent neutrality of the scientific observer is an imperialist manoeuvre. Thus, when North clears the landscape of all possible human interference to her investigation, it can be argued that India is rendered as a blank space that passively awaits the coloniser (Grewal 44).

<13>There is a notably lack of human presence in North's descriptions of the subcontinent and this can only be partially explained by the fact that she regularly ventured beyond the realms of heavily populated spaces. In fact, the absence of other people is a deliberate configuration that facilitates North's move to become an active agent as she can now emerge as the sole purveyor of knowledge. While performing this role her textual descriptions are curious and exploratory:

At last we came to the final climb over the hard volcanic rocks, and first to a splendid tree of the *Jonesia Asoka*, full of orange flowers and delicate young lilac leaves. The priest of the temple found me one fine flower growing through a honeycomb full of honey, which had been built round its stem. Now this was a very curious thing. Did the buds push their way through the honey and wax, or was the thing built quickly round them? I never satisfied myself which was the first perfected (*Recollections* 1:339).

In this passage, she allows the Indian priest to intrude upon her narrative because he acts as an assistant to her research, a relationship that maintains a sense of her own scientific authority. Naturally, some of the local people are much more aware of their surrounding spaces than visiting European naturalists, but because their knowledge is not recognised within the western method of categorisation, it is appropriated and then marginalised (Mills, *Gender* 73). Accordingly, North does not turn to the temple priest to answer her questions about the *Jonesia Asoka*. She employs him to locate the plant before sidelining his presence in order to record authoritatively the minutiae of the features of the various specimens; this information is then organised through the western systems of aesthetics, taxonomy and nomenclature, presumed by the Victorian public to be both objective and universal. However, as we now know, the west's classificatory schemes clearly sought to displace the vernacular and indigenous languages, which had already identified the local specimens (Pratt 5).

<14>North clearly participates in what is referred to as epistemic violence whereby the dominant culture confers European names upon plants from the east, a practice that is part of a larger process to expunge indigenous cultures and transform landscapes in accordance with western ideals, thus bolstering colonial projects of expansionism. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain:

To name a place is to announce discursive control over it by the very act of inscription, because through names, location becomes metonymic of those processes of travel, annexation and colonisation that effect the dominance of imperial powers over the non-European world. The control over place that the act of naming performs extends even to an ecological imperialism in which the fauna, flora and the actual physical character of colonised lands changes under the pressure of the practical outworkings of the European concerns with property, enclosure, agriculture, importation of European plants and weeds; the destruction of indigenous species; possibly even the changing of weather patterns (183).

The process of naming plants and places was seemingly another means of taming, controlling, knowing, and ultimately signifying ownership of (an)other landscape. This serves to reinforce for those in the metropolitan centre the authority that the west felt it had in the east; for example, Kew honoured Queen Victoria by naming the world's largest water-lily, *Victoria regia*, after her. (6) As European explorers, geographers and natural historians named their "discoveries" after themselves or a significant member of their society, they left throughout the outposts of empire indelible reminders of Britain's colonial presence.

<15>Beyond acting as imperial markers, these Eurocentric designations were somewhat arbitrary, particularly for the indigenous people. The fact that language contributes to people's perception of place and home meant that the western nomenclature conferred upon Indian flora and fauna adds to the erasure of indigenous cultures in favour of an imported and dominant foreign culture. One example we can use to illustrate this denial of indigenous identities through the dislocation of names is described by Charlotte Canning (1817-1861) in her discussion of the mountain that westerners now refer to as Mount Everest. Her meetings with the Superintendent of Calcutta's Botanic Garden, Dr Thomas Thomson (1817-1878), who had spent more than a decade exploring and collecting plants in the western and eastern Himalayas, had aroused Canning's curiosity about the botany of the Himalayas. Thomson had travelled extensively in the mountains around Darjeeling in the company of Sir Joseph Hooker and he was able to impart a great deal of first-hand information to Canning. For her, this North-Indian area held great appeal because of the unique vantage point it provided for views of the Himalayan mountain range:

The highest mountain in the world was to be seen from it – but a higher still 60 miles further has been discovered of past 29000ft. It was said to be without a name and the Geographers threatened to call it after the Surveyor Mt Everest, but nearer neighbours easily produced the local name and a very grand one: 'The Abode of the God' 'Deodunga' or 'Devadunga' – and another name which I forget also competes so we may hope the surveyor's [name] will be dropped (39).

Unlike North, Canning is in favour of maintaining the indigenous name already in local currency. Unfortunately, as we know, this title was rejected in favour of that which denotes the exploratory western male.

<16>Such shifts do not merely impose a foreign name upon a place that does not require it; they also dislocate the ideological meaning implied in the original Tibetan signification that characterised the mountain through a spiritual image which is in direct contrast to the connotation of ownership suggested by conferring a person's name upon the landscape. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin have explained that in the process of such displacement, language and place become disconnected (178). A lacuna emerges because an alien language that rejects local references is describing the place:

Language always negotiates a kind of gap between the word and the signification. In this sense the dynamic of naming becomes a primary colonising process because it appropriates, defines and captures the place in language (182).

To what extent North participates in such processes is important to our assessment of her subjective position in the colonies.

<17>Gates argues against women's participation in such colonialist strategies; she writes that, although women were gatherers, "namers they were not", and suggests that women naturalists like North were interpreters rather than taxonomists or originators (102). However, it seems to me that Gates's analysis serves to reinforce celebratory feminist criticism that sees women as somehow exempt from the imperial project, a position which continues the denial of their power and authority. Gates rejects overtly Mills's assertion that these women "produced a vision of the colonised country as a storehouse of random flora and fauna waiting for the civilising order of the narrator with her Western science" (Mills, "Knowledge" 41). But this seems a rather untenable position in the face of North's unwavering belief in her freedom to explore, collect and represent any specimen she chooses, not to mention her compliance with western knowledge systems. In actual fact, North actively endorses the scientific projects of nineteenth-century imperialism. She continually seeks out new and previously "undiscovered" plants, which she then presented to Kew, the epicentre of western botany. Moreover, she permitted her name to be conferred upon the five specimens she introduced to the western world: *Northea seychellana*, *Nepenthes northiana*, *Crinum northianum*, *Areca northiana* and *Kniphofia northiae*.

<18>Therefore, it can be seen that North's inscriptions of colonial spaces demonstrate a collusion in the imperialist strategies of the British empire. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that such pedagogical activities and ideologies of natural history can be read as a proto-feminist strategy to gain a semblance of power in an arena where she could feasibly assert herself. This speaks to her frustration at the boundaries of Victorian convention which not only constrained women's intellectual engagement but also repressed their sexual identities. In this way, North's botanical narratives, both visual and textual, construct India symbolically and symbiotically as an idyllic place where she can act out fantasies of scientific exploration, sovereign identities and sexual desire. India's relegation to the role of an imaginative repository

offers more than simply a playground for western imperialism, it is also an asylum for female sexuality.

<19>Thus, like the Romantic writers discussed by Nancy Paxton, North displaces female sexuality to the marginalised outposts of the empire; but atypically she does not locate such exotic eroticism within the women of the east. Instead she eroticises the untamed natural spaces of the wilderness, which she then aligns with her own energies. Rather than replicate the masculinised narrative, which sexualises the Indian landscape in order to penetrate it, North creates a space where her “primitive” and unrestrained fears and desires can be unleashed without criticism. In these moments her descriptions and visualisations of the subcontinent evoke images of a sensuous female body, emphasising a beauty and vitality:

The cocoa-nuts with their endless variety of curves, were always a marvel to me, how they kept their balance, with their heavy heads and slender trunks leaning over the golden sand, and within a few yards of the pure clear sea waves. The moon shone gloriously, silvering all the bananas and palm-trees, and the phosphorous glittered on the sea (*Recollections* 1:320).

The vision of India as a curvaceous and sexual woman is further supported by a number of North’s paintings, which have clearly invited comparisons to Georgia O’Keefe’s work (Guelke and Morin 315; Losano 22).

<20>However, as noted above, there is a remarkable lack of human interference in such moments of natural reverie. A relatively common feature of natural history writing as noted by Marie Louise Pratt (51), there are imperial motivations for this configuration: without local human inhabitants, the western traveller is uninterrupted in his/her exploration, “discovery” and naming of non-European spaces and species. The naturalist can pose as the voice of European authority and legitimacy because this will remain uncontested, a vision which undoubtedly appealed to western readers and imperialists (Pratt 52). In fact, it is arguable that this process of refusing an alternative perspective may have been particularly appealing to female naturalists as they were less comfortable with the authoritative posture required to assert western knowledge. At the same time, however, the clearing of the landscape serves another less-acknowledged purpose. In the primitivised rural spaces, not only does North view India through the eyes of a metropolitan empiricist, knowing and civilising the pre-industrialised and un-westernised areas of the subcontinent, she also views this primordial landscape through Romantic visions of a natural landscape that is not tamed or restrained. As such, she constructs India as an aesthetically idyllic place where she can act out fantasies of freedom, hence the symbolic impression of North’s paintings.

<21>The North Gallery bombards the senses with an explosion of colour and viscosity; there is little attempt at realism, a mode that is explained in her travel narratives. She acknowledges that she organised the landscape to focus on particular aspects, namely the flora and fauna, an aesthetic and informative arrangement that her painting of the Taj Mahal exemplifies. Unusually for nineteenth-century depictions of the iconic building, the mausoleum merely acts as a referential backdrop to the wild, natural growth, which immediately captures the viewer’s attention. The architectural structure and the figures in the foreground similarly function as

aesthetic adjuncts in a utopian landscape, their social and cultural histories are dissolved in favour of a tactile natural world (Ray 54). North erases the political, social, and cultural background from the visual image. As we can see, the Taj Mahal and the two Indian figures are rendered as timeless features in a primitive and dynamic landscape, seemingly untouched by colonial history. Yet, at this time, the mausoleum was already a major destination for European tourists. For the most part, North preferred to remain detached from the sites of British tourism; but, when she does encounter such places, she deflects her narrative from any human subject and focuses on a Romanticised vision of India's gardens, an erasure which also occurs in her narrative description of the monument:

I went that same afternoon to the Taj, and found it bigger and grander even than I had imagined; its marble so pure and polished that no amount of dust could defile it; the building is so cleverly raised on its high terrace, half-hidden by gardens on one side and washed on the other by the great river Jumna. The garden was a dream of beauty; the bougainvillea there far finer than I ever saw in its native Brazil. The great lilac masses of colour often ran up into the cypress-trees and the dark shade of the latter made the flowers shine out all the more brightly. The petraea also was dazzling in its masses of blue. Sugar-palms and cocoa-nuts added their graceful feathers and fans, relieving the general roundness of other trees. The Taj itself was too solid and square a mass of dazzling white to please me (as a picture) except when half hidden in this wonderful garden (*Recollections* 1:343)

India is viewed in terms of a painterly aesthetic, judged in relation to its compliance with artistic ideals that reject the frequently orientalisising responses to this building; rather than focusing on the spiritual or historical motivations of the imposing architectural structure, North's description delights in the vegetative garden, a pattern that is repeated throughout her narrative.

<22>Therefore, the marginalisation of human presence during the description of her visit to the extremely popular site of the Taj Mahal can be seen as an artistic construct, part of a broader myth of independence that her paintings and her narratives work hard to assert. During most—if not all—of her journeys in India, it can be assumed that North would have been accompanied by indigenous guides and porters; nonetheless, North strives to immerse herself in the landscape of India as they both struggle against the encroachment of the 'civilised' world:

I am such an old vagabond that I own to being delighted to be perfectly free again—staying with no one, having no fixed dates for going anywhere, and not even a servant to dog my footsteps—I sat on the bench at the top of the hill and waited for the clouds to roll their way upwards and thought with glee—there is no reason except hunger which need drive me down to the lake again—for hours to come—it was so grand there—the grand snow points piercing the clouds and making one think they would shake themselves free of encumbrances altogether (North, *Letter to Burnell* 27 July 1878).

The emancipation that North experiences in India's rural spaces is distinctly opposed to the feelings of restraint and rigidity that she experiences in British and colonial society:

Simla was very enjoyable in many ways but decidedly given to society and dressing and people kept as late hours as they do in London. Theatricals were the sage dome of amateurs and they did not begin till 10 o'clock and one did not get home till 1 — these hours did not suit me — it is stupid to keep such hours in such a climate for in spite of the height and cool air, the sun does not make exercise agreeable after 10 in the morning — and Anglo Indians seldom take it before — I used to go sketching at 6 — I generally had the place to myself. (North, *Letter to Miss Shaen 13 August 1878*).

North frequently and explicitly states her desire to be rid of social, familial, domestic and even religious obligations. Certainly it would appear that North's journeys were undertaken as a means of avoiding some of the more traditional aspects of Victorian society and she has no desire to replicate such social obligations in the hill stations of India. She is particularly scathing about the British residents in the subcontinent, especially the memsahibs, whom she characterises as frivolous and silly. She disparagingly suggests that their only pastimes are gossip, socialising and clothes, conjuring an image of the archetypal figure that has taken root in portrayals of Anglo-Indian society, as seen in E. M. Forster's Mrs. Turton and the caricatures of Atkinson's *Curry and Rice*.

<23>Furthermore, North displays great anxiety about the potential constraints marriage would exercise upon her personal liberty. Fortunate to have financial independence and security, marriage could have curtailed North's freedom, as it would most likely have required a relinquishment of her financial, not to mention personal autonomy. In her private letters to Burnell she frequently comments upon the lucky escape that she felt was had from the familial roles of wife and mother: "I have to thank you for one of the things I have tried all my life to avoid, i.e. being tied to an idle man!" (North, *Letter to Burnell 18 January 1878*). She expresses great scepticism at the entire institution of marriage and the relationships and roles it constructed, particularly as she witnessed them being performed in the Anglo-Indian societies in the hills. It is from one such hill station that she writes:

[Marriage] is a terrible experiment [...] for a man especially, as a woman is something like your cat and gets to love the person who feeds her and the house she lives in, but men, if they have brains, have a romantic idea of companionship in their wife and then discover they have no two ideas in common. [...] I pity the poor wife when she finds herself snubbed, and only a sort of upper servant to be scolded if the pickles are not right and then she will have to amuse herself by flirting with the most brainless of the Croquet-Badmintoners. (North, *Letter to Burnell 20 January 1878*).

North offers a scathing contrast to the idealised portrayal of the bourgeois principles of domestic bliss and marital harmony that permeated nineteenth-century narratives.

<24>However, at this time, life as a single woman was not necessarily any more liberating. Suzanne Le-May Sheffield explains that spinsters were "were enlisted to charity work, philanthropic concerns, education or nursing all with the same end in mind — the nurture and care of others" (84). In the absence of family members to whom they could sacrifice their time, health and money, spinsters were expected to be mothers and daughters to society (Sheffield 84).

Evidently North struggled to contain herself within the narratives of feminine passivity and duty, preferring to embark on ‘solitary’ adventures; she rejects hill station society in favour of the magnificent peaks of Kanchenjunga:

Kinchinjanga [sic] uncovered himself regularly every day for three hours after sunrise during the first week of my stay, and I did not let the time be wasted, but worked very hard. I had never seen so complete a mountain, with its two supporters, one on each side. It formed the most graceful snow curves, and no painting could give an idea of its size. The best way seemed to me to be to attempt no middle distance, but merely foreground and blue mistiness of mountain over the mountain. The foregrounds were most lovely: ferns, rattans and trees festooned and covered with creepers, also picturesque villages and huts (*Recollections* 2:28).

This painting, held in a private collection in the North family home, reveals an aesthetic appreciation of India’s distinct topography which seems uninterrupted by society or civility indicating a Romantic idealism where rural spaces are invoked as a welcome contrast to the metropolitan centre’s industrialisation, generally viewed by Victorian travellers as evidence of Britain’s advancement and improvement. In opposition then to contemporary imperialist concepts, North saw such transformations of the landscape as invasions upon her idyllic vision of India’s arrested countryside: “I was sorry to see the quantities of hideous factory chimneys and coal smoke, which were doing their best to make Bombay as ugly as Liverpool” (*Recollections* 1:336). She stringently rejects Deidre David’s image of the dominant Victorian figure seeking to clear the wilderness (28). Instead, North attempts to transform the natural spaces of India through art that is influenced by Wordsworthian philosophy and Romantic aesthetics (Guelke and Morin 320). And it is on these terms that she criticises Britain’s industrial encroachment upon India.

<25>Hooker read North’s Arcadian constructions as an outright condemnation of the colonial missions of “improvement” and “civilisation”; his preface to the *Official Guide to the North Gallery* (1882) emphasises the importance of North’s work for the preservation of plant species that were disappearing. Hooker states that she supports environmentalist ideals of preserving the natural landscapes of the colonised countries. But, while the imperial solipsism of the guide to North’s gallery did not link the destruction of such plants with Hooker’s and North’s participation in a colonialist mission, her removal of specimens from their original habitats, and her affiliation with Kew undoubtedly contributes to the disruption and eradication of the bucolic nature of the sites she represents.⁽⁷⁾ Thus, while Sheffield argues that North was attempting to persuade visitors to her museum that they should observe plants in their natural habitats rather than dislodge them from their own environments and place them in glass cases or glass houses (117), it must be noted that North explicitly encouraged the collection of specimens for the benefit of Kew (see *Recollections* 1:194 and 1:150). Therefore, it is suggested that North’s desire to preserve the pre-industrial state of India is largely an imaginative construct that is evoked at certain moments to enable the Romantic association between primitive life, freedom and paradise.

<26>The Edenic vision of an untouched and untamed landscape was not a straightforwardly positive move in late-Victorian discourses; it conjures Freudian notions of a natural state that had let go of repression and control, which led to the release of uninhibited impulses and behaviours,

holding associations with depravity, excessive behaviour, sexuality and a lack of civility (Brantlinger 195). It is precisely such connotations that held appeal for North. At the same time, she is unable to completely embrace this idea; she does not advocate a complete absence of control such as that evinced by the “savages” she finds in Brazil, who apparently require their natural instincts to be controlled by colonial forces such as slavery (*Recollections* 1:148).

<27>Thus we can see that the subjective representations of vagabond and imperialist come into conflict as North enjoys the freedom of India’s uninhabited spaces. Despite the strikingly imperial attitude evinced by her scientific posture, North also conversely emerges as a contrast to the Victorian purveyor of progress; this internal struggle has been identified by Antonia Losano, who finds that this shifting perspective is revealed in the difference between North’s symbolic painting and her more realist writing (23). She argues that although North’s visual representations are produced within a formal pattern of perspective, they are infused with the unpredictable and chaotic nature of the colonial landscapes, that her untamed inner feelings manifest themselves upon her paintings (22). Losano goes on to say that North controls such internal conflict in her writing, refusing to allow the undomesticated spaces of India to impose upon her ordered and “objective” narration (6). However, it is my view that this psychoanalytical reading can in fact be applied to both North’s painting and writing. Her textual representations of India’s landscape may be framed within a model of scientific investigation, but erotic language and sexual imagery occasionally break through an otherwise controlled surface narrative:

I went off to Narkunda—it was a most enjoyable expedition though I had some violent rain to go through, there were grand views between whiles and the whole long range of snow was magnificent in the sunset glow of the 5th, two great masses being crimson the rest in blue shade—all the vegetation is changed over that ridge and I went through the most glorious forests of the Smithiana Pine and some others with carpets of maiden hair and other exquisite green things under them and great snaking things poking their poisonous ears and tongues out above them—with a crown of beautiful leaves below. As the seeds ripen the leaves grow up and hide them from the eyes of the hungry birds (fact for Darwin!) there are also sky blue wood anemonies, forgetmenots like sapphires, and potentillas of all the brightest tints—but the pines are the grand glory of that road—with drooping branches and Virginia creeper running to their very tops, often 150 feet high—perhaps 200 (North, *Letter to Burnell 17 July 1878*).

In this passage, North shifts between the perspective of an exploratory male subjecting the landscape to scrutiny and analysis and a sensuality that is barely contained by a voice of scientific enquiry. The description renders the Indian landscape as typically female, but through a vibrant feminine sexuality that is in danger of intrusion by the poisonous yet tantalising phallus, perhaps symbolic of North’s own concerns about the interference of a male authority, emblematic of the patriarchal order of Victorian society.

<28>However, as Susan Morgan informed us at the beginning of this paper, such representations are not politically innocent. Gillian Rose demonstrates that in nineteenth-century discourse, women and nature invited the same kind of scrutiny (96), which allowed them both to be subjected to the same masculinised methods of colonialist surveillance. As Gates has argued, the

feminisation of a pre-industrial India is related to a wider Victorian association between untamed nature and the uncivilised and unrestrained woman, a construct which works to legitimise the controlling forces of patriarchy (Gates 1-11). Thus, North not only allows her inner passions to be revealed in India's topography, but as a scientific observer of its natural history, she simultaneously validates her alternate position of a masterful, imperial enquirer. By relegating the subcontinent to a "feminine" position, North can displace her inner tensions and also authorise her performance of a more dominant subjectivity; this brings about a struggle between these symbiotic positions, which is evident from the contrast between her tactile and luminous representations and her use of academic textual depictions of flora and fauna. The conflict is also seen by the dichotomy in her aesthetic model: North locates her gallery in Kew but departs from traditional scientific modes of observation and representation, as exemplified by Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708-1770). However, she also sets her work apart from traditional botanical illustrations through her use of oils. It is an unusual approach as it did not resemble either the scientific representations of botanical species, as rendered by Fitch and Hooker, or the feminised flower images of Kate Greenaway (1846-1901).

<29>Thus, superficially, North's interest in natural history and her botanical illustrations conform to the codes and constructs of nineteenth-century femininity; however, she disposes of many of the conventions that were to render those subjects suitable either for women, or for scientific institutions. Despite her wish to participate in the projects at Kew, she declined to compromise her artistic sensibility and produced an art form that was entirely original, consequently leading to some confusion as to where to situate her work, as Sheffield reports:

While the worlds of art and science had their reservations about North's style, it was North's ability to escape the confines imposed by artistic and scientific traditions that actually gained her the renown and respect she sought (112).

Wilfred Blunt takes a more negative view of the complex position that North seems to occupy in the minds of critics:

Indefatigable alike as painter and traveller, she scoured the globe for spectacular plants which she painstakingly recorded in oils in their natural surroundings. Botanists consider her primarily as an artist; but artists will hardly agree, for her painting is almost wholly lacking in sensibility. The disagreeable impression made by her pictures is enhanced by her determination to display nearly eight hundred paintings in a gallery barely capable of showing fifty to advantage. Moreover her work, being painted in oils, is almost unaffected by light and remains perennially gaudy (237).

What both critics do agree upon is the fact that North's plan for her paintings seems to have been entirely borne out by her own volition and ambition; in this way, they symbolise the inherent conflict that seems to exist within North's vision of herself. Along with her writing and travelling, such activities seem to allow her to *almost* transcend confines imposed by Victorian traditions.

<30>The inherent conflict that I have identified seems to exist within North's vision of herself and is exemplified by Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs of her. She apparently disliked the images because they seemed to present a "perfectly uninteresting and commonplace" person; also they "refused to flatter" (*Recollections* 1:315). Yet North's persona appears as anything but ordinary. In one particular photograph, Cameron evokes the iconography of religious paintings of female saints; yet it is perceptible that North is not comfortable with being posed in such a way. She records her unease at being dressed and her inability to seem "natural" (*Recollections* 1:315). While she attempts to look comfortable for the instrument of Victorian progress, her gaze looks beyond the frame of the picture, signalling her continual longing for new and interesting landscapes. What is perhaps most fascinating about this photograph is that the book on which North's finger rests is George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Rather poignantly, Eliot's novel tells the story of Gwendolen Harleth's longing for a life beyond the control of male authority; it tells of her struggle against the dominant forces of patriarchy and the strict social conventions of Victorian bourgeois society.

Endnotes

(1)Elizabeth Gaskell's family connections introduced her to many scientific people; but she was arguably most greatly influenced by her meeting with her distant cousin, Charles Darwin in 1851. His character, scientific theories, and global travel were reflected in her unfinished novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1864-6), particularly through the character of Roger Hamley (Litvack 729).(^)

(2)Lady Amherst, wife of the Governor-General of Bengal, returned to England after almost five years in India, with a herbarium of Himalayan plants, which she had collected and preserved herself. In honour of her work, Nathaniel Wallich named the Burmese tree *Amherstia nobilis* after her (Desmond 182).(^)

(3)David Allen (2001) suggests the importance of familial influence for women botanists in his study of female members of the Botanical Society of London. He argues that an impressively high proportion had a husband or a brother, or a father or an uncle, or at the very least, a cousin, who also had a well-developed interest in science, if not necessarily in botany: "Family stimulus, in short, was the crucial motivating factor" (243).(^)

(4)Shortly after North's arrival in the Indian subcontinent in 1878 she travelled to Thanjavur to stay with Burnell, a judge and eminent Sanskrit scholar. She carried with her a letter of introduction from Edward Lear, which described her as "a great draughtsman and Botanist and altogetheraciously clever and delightful" (Lear, Letter 159). North had previously met Burnell on the boat going to Java and she formed an immediate respect for him due to his evident

intelligence, demonstrated by the fact that he corrected her information regarding the *Amherstia nobilis* (*Recollections* 1:252). She goes on to describe staying with him as akin to “living with a live dictionary” (*Recollections* 1:327). Burnell clearly held a mutual respect for North, as he showed great interest in her occupation of painting indigenous plants. He proposed that they publish a joint work on the history of sacred Hindu plants. Unfortunately, despite North’s completion of the illustrations, this text remained unpublished. North wrote to Burnell throughout her travels; as a consequence of their mutual interest in natural history their correspondence is archived in Kew Gardens.(^)

(5)David Allen recalls that some scientific societies did in fact admit women, such as the Botanical Society of London. Of the four hundred members who joined during the twenty years of its existence, about a tenth were women. Although women were able to join this society, they did occupy a subordinate position to the majority males; they rarely published their findings or knowledge and were largely regarded as helpful contributors rather than autonomous authorities (244-250).(^)

(6)Ann B. Shteir notes in “Women and the Natural World: Expanding Horizons at Home” (2005) that this plant became a Victorian sensation after a plant explorer came across it in the Amazon in 1837. Apparently, the structure of the water lily’s capacious and deeply veined leaf became the model for Joseph Paxton when he proposed the architectural design for the Great Exhibition’s Crystal Palace (74).(^)

(7)This imperial solipsism is rather indicative of many writers at the time; W. H. Davenport Adams’s *Celebrated Women Travellers* (1883) similarly does not connect the act of colonial travel with an interference in indigenous life: “The old picturesqueness of the native life is fast disappearing under the pressure of Western civilisation, and we have reason to be thankful to those travellers who do their best to catch its waning features, and transfer them as faithfully as may be to the printed page” (445).(^)

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