

Article

“Modern Nature”: Derek Jarman’s Garden

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Abstract: The queer filmmaker, artist, activist, and gardener, Derek Jarman, when diagnosed with AIDS in 1986, turned to what may seem like an unlikely form of political and aesthetic expression. His eventually world-famous garden allowed him symbolically and aesthetically to address the political issues with which he had always passionately concerned himself: environmental degradation, nuclear expansion, homophobia, consumer culture, and AIDS. Each of these issues entailed a crisis of political response in the late twentieth century, and in the garden, Jarman addresses this crisis on a number of levels, but always as elements of a terminal condition without any prospect of a “cure.” Using literary analysis to examine the garden and Jarman’s writing about it, in addition to a cultural studies perspective to place these topics in a broad context, this essay undertakes a study of the garden’s codes and effects. Consulting Sarah Ensor and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, both of whom describe terminality as a temporality with its own powers and ways of being, I focus on Jarman’s efforts in what he acknowledges as a damaged, post-natural landscape. Rather than seeing crisis only as a moment of emergency, Jarman imagines other more reflective responses to crisis that, I argue, complement more interventionist approaches.

Keywords: garden design; environmentalism; queer; terminality; Derek Jarman

Wildly colorful and seductive, spilling over a starkly beautiful stretch of pebbled beach in the distant, otherworldly coastal town of Dungeness in England, Derek Jarman’s garden offers a defiant instance of pleasure and creative response in the face of terminality. “Terminality” generally refers to an incurable human medical condition; the eco-critic Sarah Ensor (Ensor 2016) has also recently used it to describe the current state of the natural world: irremediably damaged, but still alive. In doing so, she hopes to replace a salvific response to nature with a less totalizing, more adaptive response to environmental degradation. Both Jarman and his garden present exemplary images of persistent vitality in the damaged world: his own after a diagnosis with AIDS in 1986, when such a diagnosis was an inevitable death sentence, and the garden’s in the face of a new version of nature. He tended the garden until his death seven years later. 1986 was also the year of the Chernobyl disaster, and the period of the full brunt of Thatcher’s destructive policies (Ensor 2016; Jarman 1995). He bought this land, and its small fisherman’s hut (to be named Prospect Cottage¹), on a small piece of land in Dungeness on the southeast coast of England—the United Kingdom’s only desert (so designated for its low rainfall). To many, it seemed an eccentric choice for convalescence—a former military installation, a bleakly flat and pebbled stretch, and an area which was overlooked by a massive nuclear power station, then still in use. (Figure 1). The plot, nonetheless, became a garden, and subsequently, a famous garden.

¹ Likely a pun on prospect as “view” and as “future”.

The garden follows Jarman's lifelong aesthetic, erotic, and intellectual fascination with gardens across a range of genres and media; his film *The Garden* and his books *Derek Jarman's Garden* and *Modern Nature* portray this interest, and always in ways that connect it with homosexual desire and queer politics. Jarman also queers the garden by insisting on its repudiation of a "straight" gardening aesthetic, and by specifically associating it with sexuality; I will discuss both of these methods later in the essay. He called the garden "a memorial, each circular bed and dial a true lover's knot" (Jarman 1995, p. 55); for Jarman, mourning, and sex are not opposites. In a poem in *Derek Jarman's Garden* on the death of his friend Howard, he passionately recalls their sexual connection, a rare element in heterosexual elegy: "All night fucking you on the floor of Heaven [a gay bar]" (Jarman 1995, p. 69).



Figure 1. The power station through the garden, with crambe and valerian. Jonathan Crewe.

This essay focuses on the Dungeness garden and on *Derek Jarman's Garden*, the latter of which is both a how-to gardening book and a meditation on crisis. The book illuminates the garden, but the garden has its own ways to communicate. I argue here that the garden, like the book, is a text whose details signify and can be read. Though nonrepresentational, this intensively, if elusively, semiotic space responds, as do his many films, videos, paintings, and books, to the political cruelties of those years in the UK and elsewhere. Though very beautiful, the garden registers his pain and rage, as well as the joy he takes in planting. It forms part of a conversation about the rarely simple relation of the aesthetic to political work, to ideals of social justice, and to the anti-inertial and oppositional. In his prolific last years, Jarman's work in every medium, including that of the garden, addressed environmental degradation, and the abandonments and persecutions of gays and the poor. It insists upon celebrating the intense sexuality of queer culture in spite of AIDS and in spite of moralizing homophobic responses to the pandemic. His work considers how one might confront these politically. He also considers the ways one might memorialize those who died of AIDS and other disasters, and how to do so without making peace with their deaths.² Each of these issues entails a crisis of political

² Jarman never ceases to fascinate, and the outpouring in recent years of material about his work in all genres has been exciting. I found particularly moving and relevant three excellent studies that, like this essay, discuss the relation between Jarman's garden, his garden writing, AIDS, and environmental concerns: those by Sarah Brophy (Brophy 2004), Anahid Nersessian (Nersessian 2013), and Catriona Sandilands (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010). All, to some degree, see unresolved mourning as an ethical and political form of relationship, and all tentatively locate reparative possibilities in this response. Though my

response, and in the garden, Jarman addresses crisis at a number of levels, but always as elements of a terminal condition without any prospect of a “cure”.

Crisis is generally described in two related, but nonetheless distinct, ways: first, as a moment of emergency requiring immediate, focused attention; and second, as a turning point that makes what comes after it definitively different from what came before. Thinking of the second description makes it possible to imagine other, slower, longer-term, less obvious, more reflective, more creative responses that can—and, I argue, ought—to coexist with more interventionist forms of activism.

The eco-critic Timothy Morton sees a crisis response as necessarily conceptual: “[l]ike a deer in the headlights, thinking is paralyzed by disaster . . . such that ecological thinking and practice must entail dropping the imminence of disaster, with its resulting states of exception [in which civil norms are suspended]. This thinking would be non-disastrous both in content and in form”³ (Morton 2012). In effect, the first definition of crisis—as frozen suspension—abolishes time: it freezes everything in a single, panic-stricken moment. The other sense of crisis, which entails dropping the imminence of disaster, means restoring time and history, although in a perspective altered by the awareness of crisis. This principle is evident throughout Jarman’s work and is, in effect, the governing principle for his reflection on terminality, from the personal to the planetary. His reading of botanical, horticultural, herbalist, and historical authors was vast and era-spanning, and he quotes from it liberally. Throughout this paper, I will emphasize the textual and historical consciousness that characterize Jarman’s work on his garden.

Relatedly, Nersessian urges that instead of becoming “paranoid readers, agents of a ‘future oriented vigilance’ that forces then and that into a mimetic relationship with now and this” (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, p. 310), “we imagine speaking and acting from a place of uncertainty” (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, p. 325). Jarman was subjected to both kinds of crisis, the immediate and the transformative. His political, environmental, and personal losses were irremediable, but they could also generate new forms of artistic production and creativity and a renewed political commitment. Of the time since his diagnosis, he said “I have never been happier than in the last two years, entering into all these public debates” (Aston 2014). This creative energy could only be accessed within a certain relation to terminality. That relation would entail an awareness that life would end, most likely sooner than previously anticipated, and at a moment that could not be predicted, but at the same time, crucially, it would not dismiss the time remaining.

For Jarman, this awareness would entail something like what Eve Sedgwick described in her latest writings as “the bardo [a stage in life] of dying”, a (Buddhist-inspired) period that was definitely not the same as being dead and that could continue for an extended period (Sedgwick 2011). In a recent essay, “Terminal Regions: Queer Ecocriticism at the End” (Ensor 2016, pp. 41–61), Sarah Ensor points out that “[r]emarkably, Sedgwick’s body of work treats terminality not as an exceptional condition but rather as an exemplary one, and not as a realm defined by dwindling time but rather as itself a temporality in which alternate forms of relation and ethical investment can be developed” (Ensor 2016, p. 44). Ensor is discussing the fate of the earth and of individuals generally, but her arguments certainly apply to the AIDS politics that were a central concern of Jarman’s work, including his filmmaking, art, writing, and garden design.

reading accords with these analyses, my emphasis is different; I am here concerned with the way in which the garden can speak *as* a garden, and my emphasis is less on mourning, and more on what it means to live in the context of an approaching end. For an earlier work on the resistance to the resolution of mourning in AIDS elegies and politics, see my chapter “AIDS Elegies: Beyond Mourning and Melancholia” in *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Zeiger 1997, pp. 107–34).

³ He begins: “Our world appears to be on the brink of disaster, an appearance that is itself disastrous. The disaster of disaster is that disaster is everywhere, all the time: while on the one hand it appears obvious that disaster should be the exception that proves the rule of a generally non-disastrous world, in actuality no non-disastrous moment arrives” (Morton 2007).

Ensor further suggests that “environmentalists...would be well served not always to insist upon harm and weakness and vulnerability as phenomena that can be prevented”. “What if”, she asks, “rather than predicating environmental investment solely on trying to prevent harm—a tactic that often leads to our feeling like we have come to the problem too late—we acknowledged that relation, investment, and even improvement can be predicated on an acknowledgment of endings rather than existing in fear of or opposition to them” (Ensor 2016, p. 43)? Her argument can suggest the interconnectedness of AIDS politics and environmental concerns: “For not only is harm at times inevitable, but the immunitary paradigm that would seek to protect and prevent above all else also threatens to cordon off, insulating neighbors from one another, and from the forms of mutual assistance, shared vulnerability, and collective agency” (Ensor 2016, p. 54). “Rather than aiming to save, in other words, our task may be to train ourselves and each other how to steward within this terminal temporality” (Ensor 2016, p. 54).

My framework here is drawn from this recent environmentalist thought, but I am using it to think through the contemporary aesthetics and politics of gardens. The discourse of gardening is not the same as that of ecology, although it is a discourse that is increasingly responsive to and infused with environmental concerns. For Jarman, the fact of Dungeness as a Nature Reserve and a place of vastly diverse and plentiful flora and fauna, mattered very much, and he railed against overly managed gardens: “bad children, spoilt by their parents, over-watered and covered with noxious chemicals.” His sense of environmental damage becomes intertwined with his sense of the destruction being produced by AIDS. He refused, however, ideas of absolute human non-intervention: to an “ecological puritan” passerby who scolded him for transplanting a dog-rose from a nearby copse, he replied, “It’s a Dungeness plant. If the world stopped still and humanity ceased, who could tell if it had been planted by me or a bird” (Jarman 1995, p. 30)? His primary focus was on promoting species diversity: “[m]ine-craters are rich in plant life, which shows that meddling with the landscape works.” He kept bees, the key to plant survival, although he was not particularly interested in eating honey (Jarman 1995, p. 63).

To recapitulate, Jarman’s historical and textual consciousness participates in what Morton calls “dropping the imminence” of disaster, and the timelessness, in which only the present exists. He also believed that we are living in an era when nature has been irrevocably changed by human activities. The name for Jarman’s most influential journal, the one in which he recorded the simultaneous progression of his garden and his illness, got its name—*Modern Nature*—from a conversation with a friend, the controversial sculptor Maggie Hambling. “I intended to write a book about [the garden]. She said: ‘Oh, you’ve finally discovered nature, Derek.’ ‘I don’t think it’s really like that,’ I said, thinking of Constable and Samuel Palmer’s Kent. ‘Ah, I understand completely. You’ve discovered modern nature’” (Jarman 1995, p. 8).

If questions of political meaning and usefulness might seem incompatible with the idea of the private garden, one might take a cue from the work of Jamaica Kincaid, one of the most important novelists and garden writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. “Why”, Kincaid asks, “must people insist that the garden is a place of rest and repose, a place to forget the cares of the world, a place in which to distance yourself from the painful responsibility that comes with being a human being” (Kincaid 2001, p. 41)? What, then, might a garden be, if not a place to distance oneself from responsibility? Kincaid also wrote of Jarman’s garden that “[w]hen you see it for the first time, it so defies what you expect that this thought really will occur to you: Now, what is a garden” (Kincaid 2001, p. 41)? Kincaid adds that, on this visit, “you will also “be filled with pleasure and inspiration” (Kincaid 2001, p. 41). In what ways, then, can the response to crisis implied by a politically inflected garden also be part of a move towards communal human sustenance, even under the horizon of terminality (Brophy 2004)?

Dungeness is known as the “fifth quarter”, because, as Jarman writes, it is “at the edge of the globe” (Jarman 1995, p. 14). It is another world, not a utopia by any means, but an alternative, with something of the same status as a “third sex”, both rejected and prized. Jarman embraced this

generative otherness in life and art, particularly in his final years as he was struggling in health but full of passionate creativity. Like Kincaid, he poses the question, “What is a garden?” For both, the answer is political—though never at the expense of gardening.

Jarman’s garden, through its placement and methods, generates allusions to AIDS, war, nuclear power, the environment, and queerness. Its noncompliance with assumptions about garden aesthetics appears instantly. Plants are allowed to wander; weeds are as welcome as cultivars; and in contrast to what defines almost all gardens, no walls or fences mark the property’s beginning or end, a feature that makes some visitors uncomfortable: how close to the house may one venture?⁴ There is almost no soil. The garden makes use of negative space as much as it does of plantings, and some of the unplanted spaces are raked, as in Japanese gardens. Large, rusted iron spirals create the strong verticals that trees might provide in a lush setting: they previously bore barbed wire for the coastal defense installations. Jarman’s garden materials also include: the inhospitable shingle; plants that can thrive in drought, wind, and salt; driftwood and sea-smoothed long stones standing on end; detritus from fishing (including a wrecked boat) and from the sea-defense installations of World War II; and the views of the sea and the power plant. On one wall of the house, Jarman mounted stanzas of Donne’s “The Sunne Rising” (Donne 1977).

Jarman loved the dryness of the shingle and the lack of abundant growth for most plants. The authors of *Cultivating Chaos*, a recent book on postmodern, ecologically aware gardening, give Jarman a central place in their work, citing, among other aspects, the way that “[s]ome plants survive in Dungeness—England’s only official desert—because they can get the moisture they need from fog and salt spray” (Reif et al. 2015, p. 29). Kendra Wilson points out that “They’d flop in a well-tended border, but here they’re stronger and tighter” (Wilson 2015); they are contracted into density from searing sun and aridity, and nibbled by rabbits year-round. Jarman despised wasteful landscaping, especially in the matter of water-dependent, chemical-laden lawns: “I am so glad there are no lawns at Dungeness. The worst lawns, and for that matter the worst gardens, are along the coast at Bexhill in close and crescent. These are the ‘gardens’ that would give Gertrude Jekyll a heart attack or make her turn in her grave” (Jarman 1995, p. 7).

The objects in the garden, especially the stone circles, wooden posts, and iron spirals, create a framework for the plants. In part benign, they are “markers for plants that die down in winter. They also provide height—and perches for migratory birds” (Wilson 2015). (Figure 2) They support vines and act as decoration, but not without hints of danger and warning; hints of other, more sinister realities. His sister said that posts like these recall the barbed wire of the RAF camps that appear in all of his films, and that he associated with confinement (Temple 2003). He also placed mine casings among the plants. The broken boat at the side of the garden recalls private, tragic histories. Sharp objects lie everywhere, and the garden is not a place to fall and certainly not a place for children. In this respect, the objects suggest an installation representing pain. Here is a bowl of broken glass, gorgeous light catching on the shards; there a rusted pitchfork head, points threaded through hollow rocks and pointing up; heavy pieces of metal balance precariously against one another. Driftwood and other crudely shaped, strongly vertical pieces of wood echo the towers of the power plant beyond. In his house, as well as his garden, he liked roughness: crosses, amulets, henges, strange symbols, Christianity at its Druid edge. Jarman’s garden is not without its aggressions, but it is also vulnerable: unwallled, unguarded. No fences keep one in or out. Nothing is built to last forever unchangingly; Steven Dillon, discussing his films, notes that Jarman “creates a dialogue with monumentality in the use of rot and decay” (Dillon 2004, p. 200). Everywhere in Jarman’s garden, rust, lichens, and rotting wood testify to the potential beauties of decay.

⁴ Brophy writes with moving acuity of the complex feelings of discomfort, sorrow, and guilt she feels while approaching the house: “certainly my own journey to Dungeness has raised the questions of what needs, desires, and fears I bring with me and that shape my reading of the place” (Jarman 1994, p. 205).



Figure 2. Nuclear power plant through the back garden, with santolina, crambe, elder, and roses. Mark Rowlinson.

“At first”, Jarman writes, “people thought I was building a garden for magical purposes—a white witch out to get the nuclear power station. It did have magic—the magic of surprise, the treasure hunt”⁵ (Jarman 1985, p. 65). Surprise is what happens in scavenging, in allowing chance. Scavenging also carries anti-capitalist nuances. Very little cash changed hands to make this garden: it is the very opposite of conspicuous consumption. Jarman had to buy things occasionally—soil, plants—but he mostly reproduced his garden plants through cuttings and seed-culling, and assembled his sculptures from trash picked up at the water’s edge. In Thatcher’s Britain, this attitude alone was subversive, and it casts a glance back, as does the lack of boundary, to England’s charged history of enclosure. Of these disparate elements, he made an eerily beautiful space, with aspects of an AIDS memorial, Stonehenge, a graveyard for those lost at sea, and an anti-war and anti-nuclear protest site. Over the years, it has become a touchstone for a certain way of fashioning a garden, one that can encompass beauty and ugliness, the utopian and the apocalyptic. His garden evokes the worst products of his (and our) contemporary world: the detritus of war; the pollution by radiation, garbage, toxic chemicals; the need for memorials in the face of pandemic death. All the junk of civilization is lying there, as though after a nuclear holocaust, and the power station stands over it. But it is also a place of astonishing, improbable beauty and eroticism, an explosive blossoming of flowers, poetry, and art, where no soil for them seems to exist.

The scavenged garden creates a fascinating interaction between chance and design. Garden design is connected to a long history and ideology of taming nature, maintaining control; it implies an overall intelligent design, even a divine hierarchy. A loaded, charged, ideological history of design can create a resistance to its all-encompassing power of control. Chance and contingency are invited into Jarman’s garden design, and to some degree, into all his arts. The fact of the unintended, the unplanned, is an act of alliance with the irretrievably altered but still vital natural world, with a force beyond what can be accomplished by individual human will. At the same time, to acknowledge the power of chance is to relinquish the idea of human control over the future. The flowers that made up the garden

⁵ Jarman often returns to the topic of magic, and almost always in the context of queerness. “I think of the area of magic as a metaphor for the homosexual situation. You know, magic which is banned and dangerous, difficult and mysterious...Maybe it is an uncomfortable, banned area which is disruptive, and maybe it is a metaphor for the gay situation (Jarman 1985, p. 65).”

outnumbered the ones he planted; he almost always used plants that seeded themselves widely or spread rhizomatically: “I bought one [plan]t] ... and my one plant, with its bobbing pink heads, is now fifty. It’s going to leap about: it will soon be across the road” (Jarman 1990, p. 93). (Figure 3) As a result, the garden expands ever outward. Looking out, on a recent visit, at far-flung California poppies across the road from the cottage and garden, one of my companions smilingly named what he saw as: “Derek’s queer invasion” (McDonald 2016). Nothing has been definitively completed: the lack of boundaries lends an exciting unfinishedness that raises the questions of what it means for a work of art to be finished, in the sense of either “polished to perfection” or of “fully achieved”, or even “the completed work of a single artist”. This garden will never be finished while plants can still grow.



Figure 3. The garden in high summer, with California poppies and gorse at upper right. Jonathan Crewe.

Above, I quoted Ensor on the idea of terminality as allowing “alternate forms of relation”, and Jarman used the garden in this way. He made his garden, and his use of gardens in film, part of a rich communal experience. In an interview with Jarman, the BBC presenter Jeremy Isaacs asked what pleased him about keeping a garden. “Therapy”, he answered, “and new friends. People steal cuttings—I encourage them.” People come, he continued, “a much broader group of people than perhaps come to see my films” (Jarman 1993). The garden became, in fact, a queer pilgrimage site, as well as a necessary stop for any serious gardener. His friends came regularly, to visit and to help garden and to look after him; he shot films there. He also painted and wrote in the house. It was in the garden that the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a drag “sisterhood”, canonized him as Saint Derek of Dungeness of the Order of Celluloid Knights (Dillon 2004, p. 71). The garden became a center for gathering and collaboration, as well as for individual works of art during his life. It has remained a cynosure after his death—and after other, later deaths from AIDS. (On one of my visits to the garden, another visitor told me that so many gay men dying of AIDS had wanted their ashes strewn there that the soil had been in danger of becoming too alkaline. I have not been able to verify the story, but whether apocryphal or not, it is telling that such a rumor exists.)

The garden has also been the topic of an ever-increasing number of book chapters, articles, and web pages; academic, literary, and horticultural. Across their range, but especially in queer and environmentalist contexts, these tend to exhibit strong feelings of identification with Jarman’s garden work. In Paul Russell’s 2004 novel *War Against the Animals*, for example, an HIV-positive garden

designer discontentedly muses on his current project, remembering his earlier, politically idealistic garden aspirations. “I wish I could make something like that garden Derek Jarman built. The one in the shadow of a nuclear power plant” (Russell 2004, p. 98). “All summer, for some reason, he’d been thinking about [it], that simple fisherman’s cabin set amid desolate shingle decorated with magic circles of white flint, gray pebbles, red bricks smooth-washed by the tide; sculpture devised from driftwood, old tools, cork floats, anything the stormy surf cast up... In all his successful, fatuous career of twenty years, he’d never planted anything as brave as that strange little garden (Russell 2004, p. 281)”. The wilderness writer Robert Macfarlane describes his reverent visit to Dungeness, where he and a friend constructed a vulnerable tribute: “Rough circle of poles and spires, pushed down into the gravel—an homage to Derek Jarman’s driftwood garden on Dungeness. Our henge would last as long the next high tide” (Macfarlane 2008, p. 261).

Jarman was an eager visitor to other gardens; his final excursion was to Monet’s garden at Giverny, when his sight was failing, as Monet’s had, perhaps presenting a bond with the earlier artist for Jarman. (In respective photos, Jarman and Monet are wearing what look like the same heavy glasses.) He called it “the shaggiest garden in the world” (Pencak 2002, p. 353), high praise, as he said of Christopher Lloyd’s famous garden, Great Dixter, that “it was shaggy: if a garden isn’t shaggy, forget it” (Jarman 1995, p. 41). (I can’t help thinking that Jarman liked the description for both meanings of the word “shag”.) He disdains the tidiness of gardens managed by the National Trust, Britain’s conservation charity: “[they] must have a central nursery, as all their gardens look like that” (Jarman 1995, p. 41). While Jarman’s garden breaks with conventions of beauty, creating its own, it nonetheless inherits and selects from the styles of the previous centuries.

Rejecting the high maintenance, exotic-plant-centered, bedding-oriented garden style of the mid-nineteenth century, the garden looks back to earlier, Romantic ideas of gardening, in its relative naturalism and its mingling of native planting and focal oddities, such as built or statuary features. He repeatedly evokes the paradigm-changing garden writer Gertrude Jekyll, who, with William Robinson, brought a greater naturalism to gardens in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her “observations about the use of color in gardens”, he said, “are nowhere more apposite than here (Jarman 1995, p. 14).” Thinking of Jekyll’s minutely planned gradations of color along formal borders, I was baffled by this remark. The landscape architect Bill Noble, however, suggested that Jarman was probably thinking of her principle of offsetting hot or garish colors with white and silvery gray plants (Noble 2016). Desert that it is, Dungeness particularly welcomes the resinous, drought-resistant plants that come in all silvery shades of green. (These also, however, create patches of humus in which some other, more nutrient-demanding plants can live.) Native horned poppies, valerian, bugbane, elderflower, and dog rose grew there as well, in addition to the weeds that he loved; campion, mallow, scabious. Jarman introduced other plants that would thrive on aridity, mostly from the west coast of the United States: California poppies, orange and yellow; santolina; lavender; cistus—plants for dry climates. He also added some unlikely moisture-loving transplants, like foxglove and daffodil.

His methods, like his flowers, spread. Influential gardeners were themselves influenced by the Dungeness garden. In her book about gardening on gravel, Beth Chatto describes a visit to Dungeness with Christopher Lloyd, with the surprise of happening upon Derek Jarman’s garden and then the gardener himself. The two veteran and highly influential garden writers were spellbound. “Inevitably we botanized, noses to the ground as we wandered around, marveling at such plants as could survive the seemingly hostile conditions...More beautiful, indeed spectacular, than I have ever seen before, were colonies of Sea Kale, *Crambe maritima*, their stout branching flower stems supporting large bouquets of pea-sized seed cases. Most attractive, they never set seed like that in my garden” (Chatto and Wooster 2000, p. 12)! She is astonished (and annoyed) at what can succeed in his garden, particularly “foxgloves and Wood Sage, *Teucrium scorodonia*, flourishing where, to my mind, they had no business to be, since normally they are found on the edges of woodland... Looking up, I realized we were in someone’s garden, though there had been no barrier to cross, only near by a small fisherman’s cottage, its wooden walls painted black, the door and window

frames canary-yellow” (Chatto and Wooster 2000, p. 12). “Having seen plants growing in such a hostile environment, I came away from Dungeness with renewed determination to go on with my experiment” (Chatto and Wooster 2000, p. 12).

Jarman’s own experimentalism always finds sources in earlier art and history. Despite his interest in the historical, an ambivalent relation to the past characterizes Jarman’s art in general. William Pencak sees Jarman as rejecting “nostalgia for a ‘merry’ old England whose poor laws, enclosure, imperialist ventures, and Industrial Revolution are conveniently forgotten” (Pencak 2002, pp. 167–8). His historically-based films heavily revised the stories they told. He nonetheless rejected the geometry and abstraction of modernist gardens. “[Jarman’s] garden design style is postmodern and highly context-sensitive—a complete rejection of modernist design theory. He disliked the sterility of modernism; he despised its lack of interest in poetry, allusion and stories” (Turner n.d.). He expunged what was conventional, what was unimaginative, in all his arts, without worrying about whether he had the training or the materials. Somehow a robe from the previous film could be pressed into service; a piece of driftwood with a necklace made of stones, or a coil of rusted chain could become focal garden statuary. In this way, he was an inspiration to younger artists, who delightedly took up his practice of using Super 8 for film because it was so easy and cheap (Tezuka 2011, pp. 108–9).

Not every kind of art can be created in this way, of course, but Jarman believed in and contributed to a healthy biodiversity in art, as well as in the garden. His traditional art training at Slade was later altered and energized by the queer and punk modes prevalent in his politically, sexually, and aesthetically radical world. Messy, ugly, scavenging; self-reliant, angry, open; those modes could perhaps democratize the art world, while overturning its conformities. They rejected the conventionally pretty, marking it as a form of social acquiescence.

If gardens are semiotic, then their legible signs are not only the overall look or design a gardener creates, but also the methods, aesthetics, and the specific details of gardening. (Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6) Jarman hints at such an encoding in his film *Jubilee*, in which Elizabeth I speaks to John Dee, her occult advisor, of “the codes and counter-codes, the secret language of flowers” (Jarman 2011, p. 76). Codes in the context of this garden suggest queerness, among other things. The giant sea-kale *Crambe maritima*, for instance, participates in such coding (Figure 7).



Figure 4. A small henge. Jonathan Crewe.



Figure 5. The barbed wire post spirals. Jonathan Crewe.



Figure 6. Side garden, with dill, santolina, elder; sculptures; Donne poem on wall at right. Mark Rowlinson.



Figure 7. Crambe. Jonathan Crewe.

A mound of huge, crinkled leaves that develops sprays of flowers and pods, the crambe plant survives because of its extremely long taproot to the water table. Though no one would call this plant pretty or elegant, it displays a rough splendor, and it grounds the garden, creating a repeating motif, and becoming Jarman's signature plant. In *Derek Jarman's Garden*, his photographer, Howard Sooley, makes it a central feature. One set of photos shows the crambe in every stage of development; a following photo shows Jarman lying with his crowned head resting on one, the leaves creating a kind of crown of thorns. Two pages follow of the plant in full bloom, before displaying a close-up of the seed-pod and blossom (Jarman 1995, pp. 14–17). I observed crambe being taken up in the 90's by queer gardeners, in garden magazines, and among people I knew; its strangeness became a queer point of pride, and a coded message. This kind of encoding establishes a queer commentary on conventional horticultural beauty and propriety, and a queer language of gardening. It also refuses the traditional hierarchy of plants, with cultivated roses and other labor-intensive, expensive plants at the top. Therefore it comments on the power relations of gardens as different as Sissinghurst and Versailles. It instances survival against the odds, and is perhaps a resourceful reach to creativity and the erotic, with that impressive (twenty-foot long!) taproot (Jarman 1995, p. 18).

In *Modern Nature*, Jarman writes that “[f]or those in the know, the *alfresco* fuck is the original fuck” (Jarman 1995, p. 84). The garden itself is a sensual retreat for Jarman and his queer circle. The Donne poem on the wall makes sex triumphantly central, and Jarman's selection makes the poem available for same-sex identification: he quotes the first stanza and the last five lines, leaving out all those that specify gender.

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run? (Donne 2011, p. 80)

Facing the sun, this saucy address chides “him”, protecting the house as a lover's retreat while directing the sun's, and the poem's, male erotic glow to the landscape outside. *Derek Jarman's Garden*, too, associates the garden with the erotic. Jarman creates a teasing and seductive nursery rhyme for his partner, H.B: “Lizards you are bent not straight/Lizzy the lezzy is quite the best...”; the rhyme is juxtaposed on the page with images of a lizard on HB's muscular arm, and then a lizard *tattoo* on his other arm (Jarman 1995, p. 107). He quotes a local proverb: “When gorse ceases flowering, kissing goes out the window” (Jarman 1995, p. 21). He dislikes the garden at Hidcote Manor, “known to us as Hideouscote, which is so manicured that not one plant seems to touch its neighbor” (Jarman 1995, p. 41). This remark sheds light on the closeness and interweaving of Jarman's own plants in his “shaggy” garden. He repeatedly states that plants are sexy: “valerian... I have always loved this plant. It clung to the old stone walls of the manor at Curry Mallet which my father rented in the early fifties, and grew in the garden of the bomb-damaged house at the end of the road which the airman Johnny, my first love, took me to on his motorbike, with my hands in his trouser pockets—so valerian is a sexy plant for me” (Jarman 1995, p. 53). Perhaps the erotic allure of valerian (red, pink, and white), so comparatively abundant in this part of England, formed part of Jarman's original attraction to the site.

The kind of paranoid readings that Nersessian discusses can prompt fantasies of purity (ecological, horticultural, or artistic), and of human control over events, that can usurp the place of important political action or of a considered ethics. They imagine a static reality, as I have suggested above, one denying a terminality that, as Ensor reminds us, everyone shares. Jarman instead engages with forms of mobility, of uncontrolled proliferation: nuclear power and the AIDS virus on the one hand, his garden's rhizomes and self-seeding plants on the other. Fascinatingly, Jarman brings together nuclear power and a very intimate sense of AIDS as contagion and social fact in the garden. He is developing a new idea of gardening and of being in nature, one that does not attempt to manage the risk or provide a solution. Instead, he offers an idea of the terminal as a condition to be lived, even exploited, and to be shared. Aesthetic, vitalizing, community building, the garden is an instance of the power of creative play, of joint effort: a form of solace and pleasure, not of salvation.

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