DEDICATION

To my mother,
Beryl Anita Gibbs-Roux,

My husband,
Jacob Wetmore Bishop III,

My son,
Reza John Edward Bishop,

And in loving memory
Of my grandmother,
Dicy Velma Gibbs.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to thank my husband, Jake Bishop, whose ability to generate a bibliography is nothing short of genius detective work.

I send special thanks to my mother for not just years of support and encouragement, but also for the invaluable assistance down the home stretch, and for enduring Kinkos on my behalf.

I would like to acknowledge the Chairs of my department who have played a role in my successful completion of this, my highest achievement to date: Simon Gikandi, Anton Shammas, Tobin Siebers, and Yopie Prins.

I would also like to thank the cast of characters who have comprised administrative staff in our little Tisch Hall home: Vicky Davinich, Suzanne Olsen, Chris Luebbe, Sonia Schmerl, Meggan Joy, Paula Frank, and Nancy Harris.
It was a balmy Indian summer day, typical of Midwestern Septembers, during the first week of my first year in graduate school at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I was invited to a cock<e>tail reception that evening with the faculty of the Program in Comparative Literature, its returning students, and my cohort of seven new additions to the program. I recall both my excitement and nervousness at the prospect of being among those who were to be my peers and teachers for the next few years to come. After my first few days of signing up for classes, learning my way around the campus, waiting in line to buy books and course packs, and looking around town for a part time job or two, I was filled with anticipation at this evening’s activity. I felt very much like the filmic debutante awaiting her coming of age ball. I couldn’t wait to meet the cast of characters that would play lead and supporting roles in this new act of my life’s story, one which would require of me the demanding role of playing a scholar convincingly for seasons and seasons of episodes.

My journey to grad school had been neither swift nor sure, and I had tremendous fear of what this new experience would entail, how it would change me, and whether I had the mettle to do and be what would be required in this new place. I was—at that spoint—an interesting hybrid of hippie beliefs, urban dreams, and overachiever work ethic, rolled into a charismatic if confused ball that might fall under the heading of “seeker.” I was searching for language that my undergraduate years had not afforded me,
a level of dialectic and discursive acumen that would help me articulate my thoughts, most particularly around issues of race, gender, class and culture. I was also searching for meaning in my own life which, after finishing college, had become more and more mundane. Life, I was finding, was not an endless exploration of ideas, a constant unraveling of mysteries and weaving of tales, it was often something far less passionate and vital.

Perhaps most importantly, I was a spiritual seeker of sorts, searching out a philosophical and metaphysical framework upon which I could base my life and my goals, an orientation from which I could view the world. From an early age, I had been interested in the deeper metaphysics of the world around me. I remember voluntarily going to church with friends of my family, for what reason I’m not really sure, though I think it had something to do with wanting to make sense of the world around me. I chose to be baptized at 18, behind which again I cannot recall my logic. I knew, perhaps, that there was more going on than what I had been taught to see.

So off I went, down tree-lined Michigan streets in late afternoon, to my welcoming reception for this new adventure that would surely change my life. As the canopy of verdant leaves cast its shadows across my excited form, I realized that I too was green, fresh-cut, and unripe. I don’t think I will ever have another moment like that in life—where I am so blessedly ignorant, so aware of my own ignorance, so excited by the infinite possibilities ahead of me, so observant of myself and my surroundings, so mindful of my own words and actions, so blown away by the words and actions of
others—as my first year in graduate school. I know now that I embodied what is known in Zen Buddhism as “beginner’s mind.” In his book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki affirms that “in the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few” (21). I began my journey of many miles with unsure, uncalled-for feet wending their wobbly way in party shoes.

I mingled with my peers, met my professors, had a glass or three of wine, then rolled up my sleeves and began the nebulous and quite unexpected process of defining myself (through conversation with the afore mentioned parties): as a scholar, as a woman of color, as a Black scholar, as a colorless and genderless being, as a soul, as a practicing heterosexual, as a middle class heterosexual soul of color. I was awkwardly tagged as American, as Caribbean-American, as African-American, as Black American, as cosmopolitan, as world-dweller. My identity was constructed unwittingly and off the cuff, for I became these things more in response to assumptions, questions, projections and derisions directed toward me by my peers and teachers than of my own volition. With each passing moment I became less and less sure of who and what I actually was.

But the party progressed. The chair of my department began introducing us, one by one, to the merry band of scholars. *So and so is a specialist in Ketchuan language and literature with a Masters from such and such... Mr. so and so comes to us with a Masters in blah blah from such and such school... So and so hopes to study postcolonial lah-di-dahs and blah-zi-blahs...*
I noticed a twinge of anxiety welling up in me. I had no real credentials just yet. Wasn’t that what I was there to get? I didn’t know what Ketchuan was, and I wasn’t sure I really knew what some of those other things were. I wasn’t even sure what I knew or didn’t know anymore. Oh Jeez, I thought for the first of many times in my graduate career, maybe I’m not like these people! It didn’t cross my mind that my peers might have been feeling similar (or different) anxieties and inadequacies, or not even been aware of the naming ceremony taking place.

When he finally got to me, I mustered a discomfited smile. Nicole comes to us from Amherst College, though she has spent the past two years in the workforce in New York (this was already an egregiously generous depiction. My time in New York had been spent floundering about, working as an administrative assistant, teaching briefly at a school for troubled teens, ditching that to become a 1940’s style cigarette girl in the nightclubs, and eventually taking a job as a sales rep for a beer company. I put the “irk” in “work” and turned it to “shirk,” so to speak.).

Her bachelors is in English and French and she expressed an interest in studying, “non-normative literature.” A light chuckle moved through the crowd at the “non-normative” part, and I wasn’t sure why. Now I realize that the language simply fell outside of comparatists’ usual jargon and perhaps sounded naïve and underscored my unindoctrinated rawness. As a beginner, comparative literature and school in general still held all possibilities, whereas for those there it had already taken some shape, sometimes in limiting or conflicting ways. Had he said that I was interested in employing Eastern
metaphysical precepts and feminist methodologies to explore strategies for pragmatic
critical reading of texts that tell stories of marginalized peoples toward the goal of
liberation, I’m sure the response would have been different. But I didn’t know how to
say that yet.

Regardless of the reason why, I was crestfallen after these giggles and guffaws. I
felt like the butt of an inside joke, where everyone was on the inside pointing and
laughing at me on the outside.

Go figure, the girl interested in studying marginalized people felt marginalized
herself yet again.

This one moment really did set a tone for my graduate experience. At first this
was to my detriment, where I felt I did not measure up and perhaps I had no place at the
university. Half way into first semester, I had what felt like a nervous breakdown, but I
realize now was more of a spiritual one. My spirit was broken. I had no faith in myself
and my ability, no faith that the Universe had brought me to this place on purpose, no
will to push on. The workload was insurmountable, and I was certain that no other
graduate student on the planet (let alone in my classes) felt the same way. I was left only
with my fears, my stress, my loneliness, and my painful certainty of inadequacy.

And then three strange things happened to me! I’m not completely sure of the
order of them, but they all conspired to teach me a wonderful lesson, without which I
may not have made it through even that first year, let alone my second, third, fourth,
fifth…
One was *I fell in love*. What a wonderful gift to have happen to me at that moment. How delicious and sedating was love’s elixir! How amazing was the way in which love’s drunken stupor mandated a complete reconfiguring of my priorities!

Whereas first semester I would literally sit in the company of others and think “This is not so much fun that I should be here instead of reading,” my second semester was spent truly basking in the company of others, staying up until all hours of the night talking, playing cards, watching movies, and most importantly, remembering that I was alive and human and connected and caring by being completely head over heels for someone. I learned to skim books, articles and essays, to continue to do my best, but without the guilt and self-doubt previously associated with what my best was. School became the thing that filled the hours between when I would drink him in again, which was a lot better than it being the crushing blow to my spirit that it had been. What being in love taught me was that there were things out there more important, more urgent, and more wonderful feeling than what I had previously been allowing myself. Love helped me put everything in a different, equally imbalanced, but much more delicious perspective. I glimpsed the ways in which my own beliefs affected and at times created my reality.

Another thing happened to me—*I began to read “holistic” books*. I had begun to feel in graduate school that I no longer took much pleasure from reading. It was “institution food,” given at steady intervals and “good” for its consumer, but completely devoid of the colors, textures and flavors that made its consumption exciting. But I started to find time to sneak in books by Thich Nhat Hanh and Wayne Dyer, to explore
the philosophy behind yoga and to wrap my mind around Buddhist concepts. My exploration of the precepts guiding these different belief systems might at first seem too far off the beaten path of scholarship to merit discussion in an academic forum. But it is my belief that they actually enable different relationships to texts, and new ways reading and deciphering multiple oppressions. They take up the important job of learning how to perform self-care (and other-care). They offer different paradigms, etiologies, ontologies, symbolism, and mythologies, thus providing both the substance and structures for completely different interpretations of life and its events. In other words, I changed my practice from reading books I didn’t want to read to reading books that excited me.

The third important thing that happened was that I found my academic sangha, or community—consisting of two important mentors for my scholarship and my career. These were two very different scholars, and they were fulfilling two very different needs that I had at the time. One, Santiago Colás, was able to single-handedly validate my counter-current thoughts and my own challenges as a being being in the world. He handed me the resources and tools that would come to be central and integral to my life, my work, and my being. Further, he challenged me to explore what was most vital, passionate, and alive in myself, rather than simply following the herd, regardless of outcome. For this I owe him the world, but I hope he will settle for my sincere gratitude.

The other, Frieda Ekotto, showed me that it was possible to live the dream I had of scholars and their lives. She was a striking figure with long dreadlocks and an unmade face, clad in cosmopolitan linen suits at the beginning of the year with her passport still
tucked in her briefcase. She went to conferences in Cuba, dined and drank wine with virtually every celebrated African filmmaker on the planet, and even interviewed luminary Aimé Césaire. She was basically a badass, painting her life in bold strokes of her own brush. As I got to know her, I came to see that her life and her work were brilliant works of art being created, negotiated, and expressed outwardly. She became a role model in many different ways, as well as an advocate and a friend. For this she has my deepest thanks and my loyalty.

With these new events, shifts, and resources, my own non-normativity soon turned to an advantage—at least in my eyes. I knew that I was different from my peers in learning style, interests, expectations, and goals, distinct in thought, word, and deed. Hence, it stood that I would have to “do” grad school on my own terms and in my own unique way. It has been an amazing exploration. I have gotten to study languages, literatures, cultures and philosophies of Latin American, African, and Caribbean peoples. I have read some of the most important scholarship on race, gender, class, spirituality, metaphysics, philosophy, and psychology ever written. I was able to complete a certificate in Women’s Studies, which exposed me to invaluable methodological and epistemological foundations for my work. I have nourished and come to know my soul and soulfulness through delving deeply into the ideas and practices of Buddhism and theories of self-help, self-care, and self-improvement. I spent time in intentional communities in the U.S., Brazil and, unwittingly, in Guinea Bissau, Africa as part of my explorations. And though still restricted in some ways by the limits of language itself, I
am as best equipped as I can be to begin my work of creating, negotiating and expressing some of the truly fascinating ideas I have been fortunate enough to explore inside and outside of the academy during my tenure as a graduate student.
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ABSTRACT

TAking OFF MY GLASSES TO “SEE” JAMAICA KINCAID: TOWARD HOLISTIC SCHOLARSHIP IN LITERATURE

by

Nicole Aimée Bishop

Chair: Frieda Ekotto

Holistic reading is a methodology which emphasizes the organic, functional relation between parts and the whole. Reading holistically turns our gaze inward to better understand the world around us. From this standpoint, we are all interdependent. Therefore, an individual’s efforts to understand and master the self reverberate into our families, societies, and beyond. Building on Buddhist concepts of interdependence, non-duality, beginner’s mind, and non-attachment, the Buddhist practices of mindfulness and meditation, as well as the psychological constructions of Dr. Richard Gillett regarding the creation and maintenance of beliefs, holistic reading is done for self-exploration, rather than to explain the perceived “other.” One method of reading holistically is described in this dissertation; namely, reading the same book repeatedly, then using meditation to access the richness and depth that might not be accessible even in a thorough initial reading. In this text, I conduct three holistic readings of My Garden (Book): by Anglophone Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid to discover what new insights reading in this manner enables.

The Buddhist concept of “beginner’s mind,” which means approaching any given thing as if for the first time, functions as in integral aspect of holistic reading. By examining
some of the many cultural changes over the past half century, it becomes apparent why we need the kind of internal space provided by beginner’s mind at this juncture in American history. Identifying the beliefs that gird this cultural structure enables the individual to begin to harness and mindfully choose her own beliefs. I describe its function and significance, and what it might add to the academy.

Finally, seeing the trope of race as a sociopolitical construct and a lived experience, Buddhism’s construction of interdependence offers a more liberatory paradigm. The ways in which the contemporary Western academy still serves its racist patriarchal foundations and its scholarship frequently reiterates and re-inscribes dominant narratives and norms, has lived consequences for those it marginalizes. The lens of race uses stereotype to become self-proliferating and self-perpetuating. By contrast, holistic readings of Kincaid engender new ways of imagining blackness.