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Gardens, Landscapes, Wilderness

Ways of seeing ourselves

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In 1992 I was travelling with Japanese university students through western New South Wales, heading for Alice Springs. The houses, street lights and electricity poles were far behind and the only sign of human presence was the bitumen road, stretching as far as the eye could see. One young woman confided she was getting frightened at the emptiness. I realised she might become more so when we reached the inland with its vast expanses of red sand stretching to the horizon. I sat with her, explaining how Aboriginal people would see this landscape. For them it could not be uninhabited, wild or remote. They were connected to every tree and hill, brought into being by the same spirits who brought them into being. What looked alienating to her was intimate to them, albeit a different intimacy from that of a Japanese garden. By the time we reached the desert she could celebrate seeing a landscape through a different cultural lens. I found myself asking questions about these differences.

Gardens are one way in which, as human beings, we mediate the relationship between our human social selves and our non-human world. Gardens, whether they are for flowers or vegetables, tidy or untidy, large or small, include animals or not, are all *humanised* landscapes: they are shaped not only by people's actions as they dig and tend the soil, but also by their imaginations. What all gardens have in common is that they are a cultural product. Through gardens we domesticate the wild, we produce food, we gaze out onto carefully crafted landscapes of visual and perfumed delight. Gardens are useful when they provide for the growing of vegetables and fruits, or allow children to play in their safe confines. They are beautiful when they are full of colour, of pleasing design. They allow time to be spent outside in changing seasons and provide dedicated space for individual or personal pursuits. They contrast, implicitly, with spaces that are untamed, unproductive, wastelands or wilderness. Beyond the gardens are places which are often unknown, perhaps fearful, or that lack the intimacy of a garden. They also contrast with spaces that are humanised but are set aside for very different purposes, such as towns or cities as commercial centres.

Fish traps are found in rivers as well as coastal areas. The pools formed allowed people to scoop up the fish they required, letting others escape. Fish traps need regular attention, especially after floods.

Facing page

Illust. 2

Fish traps. Aboriginal people worked with their landscape, shaping it to meet their needs. Practices included fire-stick farming, seed planting and storage, and trapping fish and eels. This photo of fish traps on the Darling River was taken by Henry King in the 1870s.

We imbue our environments with meaning, we act on them and within them, and we shape them to suit our understandings, desires and needs. We recognise places that are safe or dangerous, beautiful or untidy. Gardens are a springboard for exploring why, and how, people of different times and places have humanised their world, making it possible to live within very different environments. To look at the why and how of gardens is to ask what kinds of persons, in what kinds of environments, have created them. It is also to question what is meant by 'a garden'. How we as human beings think about and act on and within the world around us, whether in bushland, desert or the urban spaces of Sydney or Darwin, tells us something not only about what we understand about those environs but also how we think about ourselves. We do not just live in spaces: we act on, shape and transform spaces to create landscapes imbued with meaning and value. How we do so depends on the constraints and possibilities of specific spaces and ecologies, as well as the ways in which we understand the relationship between these and ourselves.

What better place to explore these ideas than Japan, where exquisitely designed, peaceful gardens, and equally well-ordered rice paddies, contrast with both urban density and the densely forested mountains whose cascading streams carve out steep valleys. How different from the landscapes of Aboriginal Australia, where the stunning but harsh contours of a continent wracked by poor soil and cycles of drought and flood might seem to have little to tell us about gardens. Yet, both in Japan and among Aboriginal peoples of the Australian continent, the spaces people look out onto, the vistas they confront, are humanised, shaped in imagination and practice in varying ways that are responsive to the different challenges each space poses for human social life. An insight into the cultural ecologies of Japan and Aboriginal Australia provides a window into how people conceptualise and act on their worlds to create gardens of particular kinds.

GARDENS AS WAYS OF CONTROLLING SPACE

A landscape is a vista, all that one can see from a given vantage point, that is understood and valued in a specific way: it has been humanised, brought into consciousness in specific and distinctive ways that are shaped by the various cultural histories of the world's peoples. To look out and see a landscape as a garden, a wilderness, a harsh land or a beautiful view is to tap into specific values and understandings. For all human beings, this humanising of space is an essential part of living safely and productively.

Gardens are particularly controlled ways of acting on space, in which people actively seek to manipulate natural flora and fauna or start from scratch, cultivating desired flora in place of that which is undesired. Gardens may be of any size, and may or may not blend or connect with the wider environment of which they are one part. The term garden often seems more intimate than the notion of landscape but we also speak of landscape gardens, which may be large and perhaps not all visible from one place. They may be entirely cultivated or use the natural contours of the earth

in their design: the garden might be small but designed with the vista beyond it in mind, drawing distant mountains or foliage into its design. To the question ‘What is a garden?’, the English philosopher David Cooper responded,

... while it is a reasonable ambition to provide [a definition of ‘garden’], it is quite wrong to suppose that, without one being furnished, we do not understand the term and do not, in a perfectly acceptable sense, know what gardens are. We possess the knowledge that enables us to—and indeed, largely consists in the capacity to—distinguish gardens from those bits of the world that are not gardens. ‘Garden’ is an entirely familiar term, and nearly every English speaker knows what it means. Pressed to say what I mean by the term, my response would be ‘The same as you who are pressing me mean it—so you already know what I mean.’¹

As Cooper says, English speakers could be expected to share understandings of what is or is not ‘a garden’. But what of people from other cultural traditions? Do all peoples of the world have something they might call a garden? Is garden a word that can easily be translated into any language? Cooper answers a seemingly unproblematic question but one which holds the key to understanding other perspectives: how do we distinguish gardens from ‘those bits of the world that are not gardens’? This question reveals that a garden is an idea embedded in a way of thinking, in specific cultural assumptions. To examine whether the idea of a garden is universal, we need to understand the criteria by which people distinguish spaces, and how they relate to them. The spaces that are not gardens are thought of in various ways, but what values, beliefs and practices make this space a garden but not that space. These are ideas I explore in order to understand the relationship between people in a given cultural world and how they understand the spaces within which they live.

In the Anglo tradition, the word ‘garden’ originally meant an enclosed area, akin to the term yard, but in contemporary English ‘garden’ is a more pleasing word than ‘yard’. A yard has connotations of industry, such as a timber yard, or even the more untidy or unsightly notion of the back yard. In contemporary Australia, however, the words garden and yard may be used interchangeably.² Gardens denote spaces set aside, usually for the cultivation of plants but they may also enclose animals, birds and insects. If large, they tend to be called parks, especially if managed by governments.

GARDENS AS HUMANISED SPACE

There are two concepts embedded in the idea of a garden. Both reflect ways in which space is humanised, which is to say that space and people are being connected, brought into a meaningful relationship. First, a garden is a space in which people are able to exercise control. They may fence it, tend it, confine certain species within it and prevent others from entering: an unwanted plant is defined as a weed; unwanted fauna are pests. Weeds and pests resonate with untidiness, signs of insufficiently humanised spaces, or wilderness, beyond human control. It is this notion of purposeful human action that conveys an intimate relationship between the person who crafts

the garden and the objects, flora and fauna within it. A garden is a known, intimate space, whether functional, full of food plants, or aesthetic and contemplative. It is brought into consciousness in meaningful ways. Gardens need tending, they need to be maintained. This usually requires skills that have to be learnt, and can be a highly skilled undertaking. This control of space points to a specific relationship between people and their non-human environment, a way of understanding and acting designed to produce a socially valued outcome.

Second, a garden is owned. The legal owner may be an individual, a set of villagers, or a government but there is also a sense of ownership as work: a gardener employed by a property owner might see the garden as hers in the sense that she makes decisions about it, acts on it, has responsibility for it. Each garden is demarcated both from the gardens of others and from spaces humanised and controlled in other ways, such as a city or a foreshore. Systems of ownership and demarcation tell us something about social relations in a given society. Different relationships are commonly represented in material terms: by enclosing one's garden to limit or prevent access. Beyond one's enclosure is different space, different persons. Enclosures gather things into them and they exclude. As Cooper remarked, what is beyond the garden is as important to understanding it as that which is enclosed: what is excluded, and why, defines what is included. The desire might be to exclude or impose limits on people (neighbours or enemies), weeds, pests or wild animals, all of which pose a threat of some kind.

The original etymology of yard or garden refers to an enclosed space, from *geard/gard* (Anglo-Saxon), *gart/gard* (High German), *gardr/garthe* (Norse). It comes into English as garden via Old French *gardin* (now *jardin*) and is found in place names such as Gartcosh (the hollow/foot of the yard), Stuttgart (formerly Stuetengarten, an enclosure of horses). Every enclosure forces a boundary, which is always a relationship between what and who is on one side and what and who is on the other. Boundary markers may be features of the landscape, such as creeks, rivers, the summit of hills or the edge of a forest. Commonly, they reflect political or legal relations: fences to protect or defend; walls to withstand pressure, whether of invaders, water or earth. The Latin term *palus*, from which we get paling fences, referred to the stake that marked one's territory. Within the pale lived those who were civilised and safe. To be 'beyond the pale' was to be outside one's home. This remains a colloquial moral expression to refer to behaviour by a person deemed uncivilised, unacceptable and outside agreed social standards:³ he or she is not 'one of us'. Ways of marking of a boundary are thus statements about the inside and the outside, about social, political and legal relationships. This leads to a third characteristic of gardens: they imbue moral and spiritual sentiments.

Different from, although often linked to, the ideas of controlled and owned space is the humanisation of spaces as moral and spiritual landscapes. English speakers often contrast gardens with wildness or wilderness: areas that are presumed to be natural in the sense of uncultivated and not owned, or areas beyond the pale of the civilised.

Wildness may convey various perceptions: danger, disorder or the unstoppable force of passion. Gardens symbolise order and civilised (social) human activity. If they are unkempt or uncared for they prompt negative comments from neighbours. The garden, of whatever kind, remains space that is meant to be tended, kept clean and tidy, orderly. An untidy garden reflects poorly on its owners. The moral imperatives are about the necessity to create order and civility out of chaos and to maintain it.

Morality is closely linked to sacredness: places may be understood as sacred or profane, good or bad (perhaps evil), safe or dangerous. Themes that shape concepts of the garden often inhere in long-standing mythological associations. A place might be physically dangerous (unsafe) or spiritually dangerous (filled with a powerful spiritual presence). The Garden of Eden was a sacred space enclosing God's people. The aesthetic and secular gardens and parks of Anglo tradition have their origins in English churchyards. Burial within the palings of the Church's consecrated grounds ensured the soul's passage to heaven and graveyards were places of comfort where people communed with distant and recent ancestors.⁴ Overcrowding meant graveyards became increasingly ugly and in the 1850s Thomas Miller influentially proposed that cemeteries should be places

. . . where people could walk through a land littered with tokens of affection and people could show that their love for the deceased existed beyond the grave. Miller's proposal thus placed equal emphasis on the mourned and the mourner. With proper Romantic attitude, he mixed three of the principal concepts of Romanticism, the beautiful, the picturesque and the sublime, with the park-like atmosphere of an English country garden.⁵

The new cemeteries became spaces for reflection, contemplation and memorialising, leading to the public park as an artefact of urbanisation linked to romanticist ideas of quiet rest for the dead, and then modernist ideas of public health.⁶ In a secular society, people distance themselves further from death by making the cemetery more park-like.⁷ Instead of joining life and death in a liminal space, the old church cemeteries turned into spooky areas, to be feared by children and caricatured at Halloween. In time, public parks no longer served as gardens of the dead and became green spaces set apart in and around urban areas for people to enjoy. Rather than mediating life and death, they now mediate concrete urbanity and 'nature'.

GARDENS IN JAPAN: ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

I turn now to examine these ideas of garden as enclosure and sacred space in the Japanese context. Japan has become famous for its ornamental gardens and, although they have been transported throughout the world, they have a cultural and ecological history specific to Japan. Inspired by Chinese tradition, it is unlikely they could have developed their unique characteristics and meanings in any other region. This stems from the relationship between the garden and what lies beyond it.

The Japanese archipelago is a chain of islands which constitute a young and volatile land mass, highly mountainous and constantly threatening. Earthquakes are frequent:

violent and damaging ones are common enough to be in everyone's memory, while small tremors evoke fears of 'the big one' on a regular basis. In recent years the Japanese people have developed quake-proof buildings; their gas and electrical appliances turn off at the slightest shudder, and there are public instructions everywhere on what to do in an earthquake. Volcanoes contribute to this sense of contingency: they can change a landscape overnight. The small volcanic lake of Shinmoedake, which featured in the 1967 James Bond movie *You Only Live Twice*, no longer exists after the crater was filled with new lava in the 2011 eruption. The vast plains on which the city of Tokyo is built comprise layer upon layer of lava flows from Mount Fuji: fertile but volatile.

Many Japanese villages are constructed on the narrow strips of flat land that make up a river's banks. The rivers flow through steep mountains and on the lower slopes, overlooking the village, are steps of rice paddies and other forms of agriculture. Whole hamlets and villages, and significant sections of cities, can be swept away or buried under the mudslides that are reported each year in one region or another. The steep mountains exacerbate the effects of heavy rainfall, along with volcanic and earthquake activity as well as warm ocean currents in coastal areas.

The cultivated paddies are humanised landscapes that separate villages from the mountains, but they cannot always protect villagers from the dangers of the mountains. In Shinto cosmology, every expression of life is animated by its *kami*, its spiritual life force. There is no distinction made between the *kami* of human beings, alive or dead, and the *kami* of animals, flora or land forms. All have their *kami*. The *kami* of the mountains ensure good soil and abundance; displeased, they may also wreak havoc. Mountains contain life-giving and death-bringing force: they are spaces of great sacred power. This shifting, unpredictable landscape has shaped Japanese cultural practice and belief over centuries. Tourists visiting Japan can express dismay that the historic castle they are looking at has been rebuilt, possibly several times: it is not 'original' or authentic. This is a cultural value that reflects an understanding of a landscape as permanent, solid, dependable. In Japan there is the continual awareness of the impermanence of life, the knowledge that one must continually make the effort to keep going, keep rebuilding, be thankful for what one has each day. This is captured in various Japanese proverbs: If you stumble seven times, get up eight; afterwards is too late for regrets; wake from death and return to life (come out of a bad situation in a sudden burst of energy); to keep going is to reveal strength; after the rain the earth hardens (things will become firmer than they were before); the country is in ruins but there are still mountains and rivers.

For centuries in Japan, villages were the humanised safe and calm areas, surrounded by cultivated rice fields, beyond which were the unruly mountains. People were cultivated, serene in their public persona, in contrast to unruly animals (including those people who were seen to behave like animals). The mountains were not only the source of earthquakes, volcanic activity and mud slides. In the past, they also

contained feared wildlife such as bears, boars and wild cats. A sharp distinction was and continues to be made between people (refined, cultivated human beings) and wild animals. To be accused of being like an animal is an insult. As a symbol of the contrast between animal and human, the image of hairlessness became valued. The bodies of people who were subject to discrimination of various kinds were often depicted as hairy and those who did have a lot of body hair were unfortunates. After Buddhism and a prohibition on eating meat were introduced into Japan, people who worked with animals, such as tanners, were categorised as an untouchable caste, Eta, the filthy people, whose descendants are now known as Burakumin.

The ambiguous status of animals also meant, however, that they could mediate between the human and the powerful world of the spirits. The rituals of the Ainu people of northern Japan provide a glimpse into this relationship. Each Ainu village kept a bear in a cage—wild yet domesticated. By taming the wild, the bear mediates the relationship between the wild and unpredictable, between the known, humanised, safe world of human daily life and the dangerous mountains and their wildlife, and between the world of the spirits and the ancestors and the inhabitants of this world. The wild (spirits, symbolised by the bear) can be controlled, pacified, rendered benign. Among the Okinawa of southern Japan, as in mainland Japan, sacred groves (*utaki* and *uganju*) are found in the hills and forests, spatially mediating between people in the villages and the most powerful spiritual locales. Unsurprisingly, key themes of daily life across the Japanese archipelago were safe/dangerous, civilised/animal, ordered/disordered, calm/turbulent. These themes are reflected in the Japanese garden.

In the twelfth century, Japan's Kamakura (1185–1333) period, Buddhist belief and practice introduced from China meshed with Shinto belief about the cultivated and the wild to produce the unique Japanese garden. The first Zen landscape garden is understood as having been created by the monks at Kenochi Temple in Kamajura, founded in 1251, but the person attributed with their spread throughout Japan was Zen Master Musou Kokushi 夢窓国師 (1275–1351). Other famous designers followed, including Kobori Enshu 小堀遠州 (1579–1647). Zen practice focuses on meditation to remove the distractions of the world and thus to gain insight. There are various Zen arts which also serve to focus the mind and eye, of which gardens are one. They are thus a means by which to discover one's true Buddha nature.

The meticulous designs of the Japanese garden create beauty and calm. Zen gardens are an art form designed to heighten one's senses through the art of artlessness.⁸ They may create the impression of vast landscapes using small spaces, achieved through skilful placement of plants, rocks and waterways. They create a landscape as natural in appearance as possible but in miniature and highly stylised. Bonsai, the art of growing even huge trees in miniature, creates the visual illusion of space.

The gardens are invariably enclosed but they often blend with the spaces beyond the garden, seamlessly linking the enclosed with the unenclosed. Landscape gardens can be flat (*hiraniwa* 平庭) or have mountains (*kasan* 仮山) or, more commonly

Illust. 3

In Japanese gardens each tree, stone and plant is carefully placed and tended so as to create an atmosphere of natural beauty, calm and seasonal colour. This garden in western Japan has a small dry stone garden within it. The fence and paths are woven into the design.

today, artificial hills (*tsukiyama* 築山) that are sometimes modelled on real mountains (*kasansui* 仮山水), an idea of Chinese origin. These might be miniature or high enough to climb to provide a vantage point from which to view the garden. Mountains are the resort of the immortals so regularly featured in gardens. This is a way of symbolically mediating between the safe and the dangerous: the threatening physical and spiritual world of the mountainous regions is brought into the controlled sphere of the garden.

Gardens do not always use plants: stone gardens are a feature of some Zen Buddhist gardens. The *karesansui* 枯山水, dry gardens, based on rocks and raked sand, are seen as quintessentially Zen. They are designed to be viewed as one would a painting, usually from a seat positioned at some point in or on the edge of the garden. While these are called landscape gardens they are not like recreational parks. Many are small and fenced off so that only viewing is possible. Dry gardens are not accessible as this would disturb the sand and stones, carefully crafted each morning if weather has disturbed them or a different effect is sought. They are an experience of serenity.



Knotting a bamboo fence is an art in itself. Knots are important symbols of relationship and longevity, with different types of knot appropriate to different contexts. Not only tranquillity but also permanence and stability are symbolised in a garden, a taming of the unpredictability and trauma within the beauty of the landscape beyond the garden and village.

Another type of garden is known as *tsukiyama* 築山, hill and pond, a common type being the tortoise and crane garden. The tortoise and crane are fortuitous animals which denote long life and happiness in Japanese cosmology and many *tsukiyama* gardens feature two islands, each representing one of these sacred animals, along with a third island representing eternal youth. The *chaniwa* 茶庭, tea garden, was introduced from China with the tea ceremony. The ceremony is held in a tea house which guests access via stepping stones, creating a narrow pathway through the garden. This short journey is a liminal space, removing one from the bustle of the world into the meditative quiet of the tea house. As in shrines and temples, there may also be a *tsukubai* 蹲踞, a stone water basin for guests to purify themselves before entering. The disorder of the world is subdued through purity and calm.

Much has been written about Japanese gardens but the point I wish to draw out here is that the garden mediates between people and the wider world around them. The tranquil, orderly, highly refined and disciplined garden of Japan symbolically protects from the unruly, threatening and unpredictable environment within which Japanese social and cultural life has developed over centuries. It is a statement about the world as well as about what people value in themselves. When exported as a form of garden design, it may continue to look beautiful and evoke calmness but its role as a symbolic mediator between people and their need to control the physical and spiritual turbulence of a specific life may be lost. The Japanese garden represents the ultimate form of human control over their world: it provides calm, order, purity and nurtures an intimate and safe connection with the spiritual forces that animate all life. These small gardens are a refuge, an oasis, the eye of the storm. Like the rice paddies shielding the village from the mountains, they separate order from disorder.

ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA: THE MOST HUMANISED LANDSCAPE IN THE WORLD

How differently Australian Aboriginal people think about the order of their world. In fact, it may seem strange to speak of gardens in an Aboriginal context when, for most non-Aboriginal Australians, the landscape prior to British occupation did not look humanised or cultivated. This misconception was based on both a different way of seeing and a refusal to see. The difference pointed to different beliefs about what a landscape is in relation to human beings; the refusal stemmed from the British strategy of appealing to this apparent lack of cultivation to justify their colonisation of Aboriginal country.

Historically there have been significant disruptions to Aboriginal peoples' understandings of themselves as persons within their environments. Differing experiences of colonial incursions have led accordingly to various modifications in contemporary understandings and practices but these will not be my focus here. Rather I seek to explain why I regard Aboriginal peoples as having had gardens, when gardens are understood as humanised spaces which are enclosed, owned and sacred. This means turning to their understandings of the relationship between human beings and country.

No land mass could contrast so much with Japan as Australia. Earthquakes are few and relatively minor; earthquakes or tremors are barely noticeable and have only rarely been felt in residential areas. It is also a very flat continent, with 0.1 per cent of the land mass below sea level and 38 per cent below 200 metres. The most recent volcanic eruption was in Victoria 4,500 years ago and several older ones are remembered in Aboriginal mythology. In New South Wales there has not been one for twelve million years. With only one mountain range of any significance, the Great Dividing Range, which runs north to south on the east of the continent, most of the country west of this line is arid or semi-arid. In the desert areas, the occasionally flowing rivers flow into salt lakes. The inland rivers of the continent's only drainage system, the Murray–Darling, are slow and meandering, with evaporation rates much higher than precipitation rates. Rain does not fall regularly except in the cyclonic patterns of the Wet and the Dry in the tropical north. Across this vast continent, the ecologies differ



Illust. 4
One of the most sacred of all creator spirits is the Rainbow Serpent. Visible in the sky after storms, it links the sky (rainbow) and the earth (serpent).

New South Wales Riverina, the pattern of drought and flood was common. Social life was lived in patterns of dispersal into small groupings and large gatherings when conditions allowed. To manage the ways in which these cyclical patterns impacted on seasonal change, Aboriginal people created vast and complex networks of

The Rainbow Serpent is both a giver of water and life, and an angry destructive force when it unleashes violent storms. The rainbow is the end of that anger as the life-giving sun returns. Each tree, with everything in the landscape and in the skies, belongs to the same totemic system as people. Implements such as boomerangs, spears and carrying baskets are made only from a tree associated with one's own totemic life force.

greatly, from inland and even coastal deserts, to scrublands and resource-rich riverine areas. The iron content of the stunning red soils of central Australia makes them barely arable, while coastal areas are lush. However, the continent shares the southern oscillation cycle referred to by scientists as El Niño and La Niña, in which long periods of drought are followed by rainfall so heavy it turns small streams into raging torrents. Even in the relatively well-watered drainage area of the

interdependence that were vital to their long-term survival. This also meant, whether one lived in desert, tropical rainforest, riverine or semi-arid country, that intimate knowledge of the impact of weather and climate on the sources of water and foods, as well as of how to maximise resources within different conditions, was required. Varied ecologies produced local variants on an overarching system of belief and practice which is referred to in English as the Dreaming.

The Australian environment is fickle and variable but in a very different way from that of Japan. Aboriginal people had many strategies for dealing with drought: dispersal into smaller groups, relying on underground soaks, moving upstream or downstream, travelling less and putting ceremonies on hold. Strategies for dealing with floods were social: land had to be vacated; it could take more than a season to recover its productive capacity, and neighbours were needed with whom one had rights to reside. Once recovered, the bounty of the land would be plentiful and social life reinvigorated.

The fickleness of climate led Aboriginal peoples to develop extensive and intimate knowledge about their ecosystems and the effects on these of climate and weather. What was harvested and where in response to rainfall led to extensive agricultural activity, planned accordingly,⁹ as well as travel to places where different crops and animals would be in greater abundance. They were not nomadic if this means wandering in hopefulness: they were strategic travellers who knew when to move so as not to deplete resources, and where to go and in what conditions to maximise them. In times of plenty, ceremonies could bring people together in the hundreds and even thousands. Aboriginal land management and agricultural activities, which augmented hunting and trapping of animals, game birds and fish, although well recorded by Lourandos¹⁰ in particular over many years, are only just coming to public attention through the work of writers such as Gammage¹¹ and Pascoe.¹² The desire to primitivise the people they mercilessly colonised and in many places all but exterminated meant the British ignored these understandings and technologies—and to their own peril. As the British tried to turn the continent into a clone of English pastoral life, they destroyed the river systems and intensified desertification, creating ecological degradation and devastation that Australians are having to contend with today.

It is not an easy task to sustain human life and a fragile ecology at the same time, and to allow its reproduction over tens of thousands of years. Aboriginal people managed this through an understanding of themselves and their landscapes as intimately connected in spiritual, social and material terms. The cosmology of the Dreaming understands all life as an expression of completely interdependent life forces, of the creative spirits who brought and continue to bring all forms of life into being. Rather than a sharp distinction between human and animal, human and landscape, earth and sky, all things are brought together in kin-based relationships, what is known as a totemic system. Every human being is brought as a unique individual into the visible, known world by the ways in which spirits act through the landscape. One's spiritual



Illust. 5

This image depicting part of the harbour of Port Jackson and the country between Sydney and the Blue Mountains was painted by Major James Taylor. He was a topographical draughtsman in the 48th Regiment who arrived in New South Wales in 1817. The vista from what is now known as Observatory Hill includes Aboriginal people. They are shown living away from the construction and clearing of European industry.

and human life force is conceived as emerging from the land—often its waters—and entering a woman: the impregnation that leads to conception is both spiritual and physical. The child born will know its conception site and its birth site as those parts of the landscape which brought it life as much as its parents brought it life. The beliefs and practices associated with conception, birth and attachment to place differ in their specificities from one part of the continent to another, but what they have in common is

this intimate understanding of the permanence of the landscapes through which the spirits continually activate and enliven the impermanent nature of the lifecycles in which humans, animals, plants and seasons come and go.

Every Aboriginal person, depending upon where in the continent's ecology they belonged, whether riverine, desert, coastal or tropical, was brought into a vast store of knowledge encompassing astronomical, botanical, zoological, hydrographic and physiological, with specialists in certain areas, such as medicinal knowledge, midwifery, the storing and sowing of seeds at certain times, or what clouds told about rainfall. They lived according to an epistemology, a system of knowledge, based on experience. The details were passed from one generation to another through observation and participation, direct teaching, stories, songs and designs; and through being able to read the sky and the activities of animals and plants. It reflects the

Many sketches by British artists in the early days of Sydney show a peaceful coexistence between local people of the Eora (south side) and Guringai (north shore). This belies the trauma brought to this landscape by disease, violence and dispersals. The British also brought technologies that completely transformed this landscape into a very different set of meanings. Generations later it is often the case that older Aboriginal people, even when they, too, have grown up in today's streets and high rises, are able to visualise the pre-concrete landscape, the land imbued with the force of their creative spirits and their ancestors. The early relative harmony of Aboriginal and British coexistence would not last. Although Watkins Tench, a mariner on the First Fleet, took pains to understand Aboriginal people's relationship to their land (Tench 1789), it would be another 150 years before Aboriginal people gained a sufficient voice to be able to claim their country and speak of its meanings.

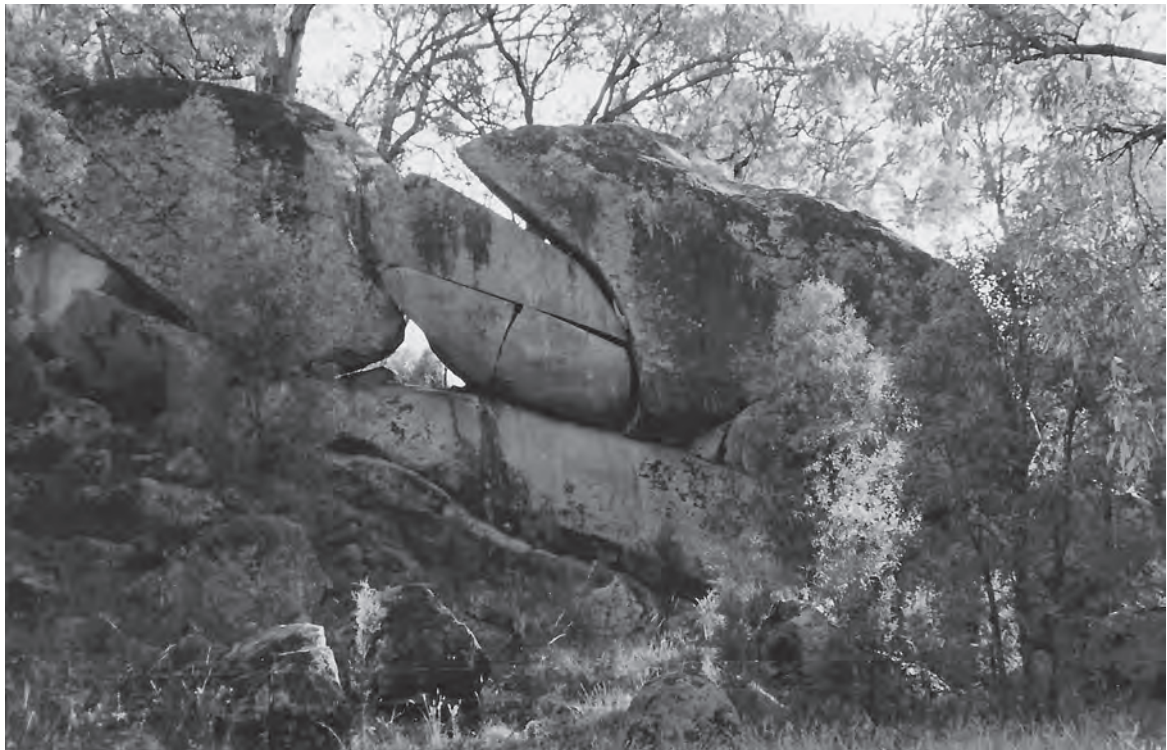
Close by the Frog Rock image is one of stencils of hands on rock, as well as various sites of grinding grooves, the result of stone-tool making. Reading the landscape through Aboriginal eyes makes it replete with meaning. A frog can be an important source of water during a drought because it stores a huge amount. Because Tiddilik (or Molok) the Frog drinks up too much water, he produces drought but other animals make him laugh so he will gush out his stored water, causing a flood.

imaginative capacity of Aboriginal people to understand and live within the demands of their environment and to humanise it in ways sensitive to its demands. All humans depended upon this knowledge. Its accuracy and profundity are measurable in the rapid loss of habitat occasioned by British ignorance and the newcomers' refusal to acknowledge or learn. The degree of intimacy required by Aboriginal people to manage their environment was misunderstood and demeaned for nearly two centuries by colonisers whose traditions of thought and practice had developed in a non-comparable northern European ecology and climate.

Unlike the people of Japan, who needed to protect themselves from the mountains, for Aboriginal people danger lurked in the sky rather than the land. Volatility resided in the fierce storms, flooding rains or drought-provoking blue skies, not in the movements of the earth. There were no dangerous animals against which people had to build fences: living with poisonous spiders and snakes or crocodiles requires knowledge and protective awareness, not barricades. Angry spirits stop rain or bring it in violent outbursts, they do not churn up the earth in earthquakes and mudslides.

It was the apparent lack of physically constructed enclosures—to keep things or people in or out—that was misread by the British as a lack of land management and

Illust. 6
Frog Rock is an example of the way the landscape speaks through the forms brought about by the activity of creator spirits. This granite rock is on the Ulan Road, 19 km north of Mudgee in eastern Wiradjuri country.

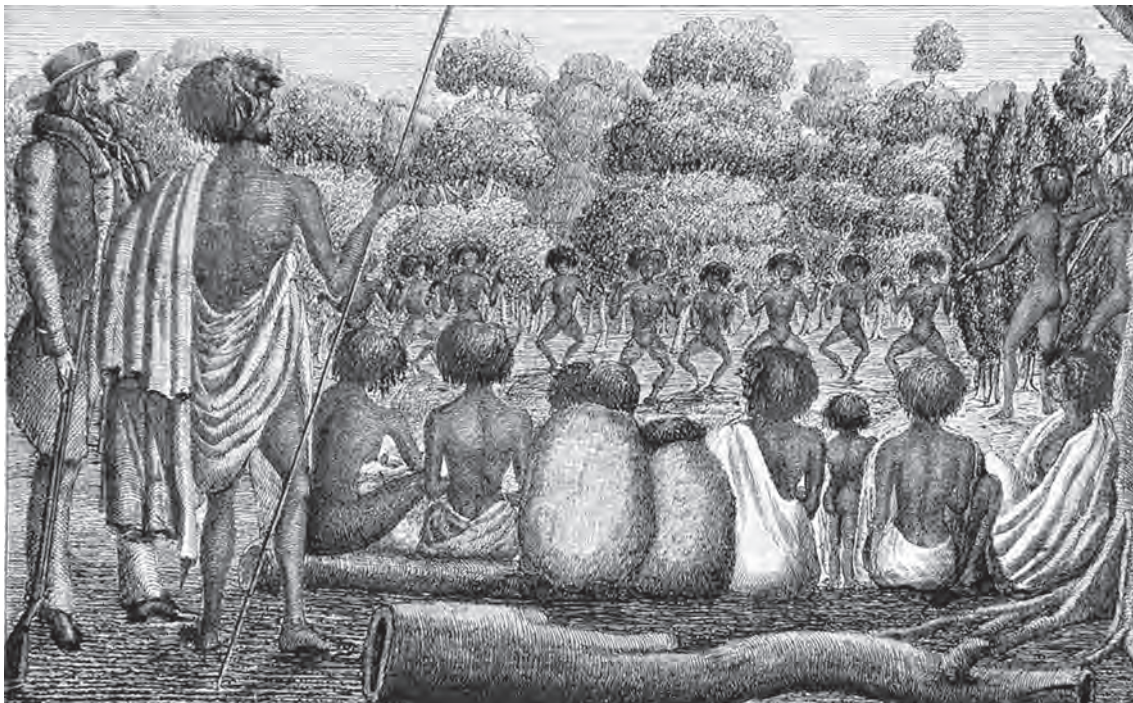


even a lack of ownership. However, in Aboriginal culture, it is the absence that is revealing. There was no need of barriers; belief and practice encompassed all things. Human and non-human, animate and inanimate, terrestrial and celestial—all are visible expressions of the Dreaming. All space is humanised. All places are signifiers of historical events in which the activities of the spiritual beings which brought them into being, and the humans who live within them, are clearly visible.¹³ The spiritual bond between certain people and certain places distinguishes them from but also connects them as kin with other people and places. The material environment is not understood as ‘out there’, beyond the person, but as intimately connected. One’s personhood is bound up with the non-human world in relationships modelled on kinship. Just as people are related to each other in kinship, they are related to other life forms brought into being by their creative spirits: that hill is my mother, brought into being by my mother’s Dreaming spirit; that particular species of kangaroo or that particular bird has my spirit, we were brought into being by the same spirit, just as that tree is an expression of the activity of another spirit so I should not use it for my spears.

This encompassing understanding did not mean there were no boundaries. As one can violate a person, so one can violate the country of others through, for instance, trespass and hunting without permission. Trespass denied the rights of others to their

Illust. 7
This early drawing shows an Aboriginal corroboree (ceremonial dance festival) celebrating the spirit of the kangaroo.

The kangaroo had many economic uses, providing meat, thread made from sinews, bone tools, and warm cloaks. Kangaroos are part of the totemic system and people only dance those spirit dances that are associated with their totemic species, so it can be assumed that these dancers shared a spirit with the kangaroo of the dance. The spear, too, would have been made of a tree of the same totemic relationship as the spectator holding it.



integrity and could lead to death. Many fights attest to it having been a contentious social issue, just as inappropriate liaisons were. Strict laws of trespass meant boundaries were known and visible. These were not, however, fences. Hydrography—the river systems—provided boundary markers across much of the continent: the way the water flowed, on which side of the range, into which river or waterhole, told people whose country they were in. There were appropriate tracks through which to travel into the country of others; taking other routes meant suspicious, perhaps vengeful, activity. This was no different from the practice of entering a house through a door rather than a window, or entering a country at a checkpoint with a passport. But, as Nancy Williams put it, Aboriginal boundaries were permeable.¹⁴ The laws were designed to instil respect for others by following appropriate protocols; they were not there to deter interaction.

Myers said of the Pintupi people of the Western Desert that theirs were among the most remarkable adaptations in the whole of human history, understood in economic, social and spiritual terms.¹⁵ Their beliefs create an intimacy with the entire world, including knowledge of each star and what its movements tell about the season at hand. Aboriginal people do not need to be protected from a violent land. The owners of each tract of country know every part of it, and are responsible for its care and regeneration. It is common to translate Aboriginal references to their own spaces as ‘my country’ but it could equally be translated by the more intimate notion of ‘my garden’.

The meanings incorporated in the term garden for people of Anglo cultural origins are very much a feature of Aboriginal thought. However, the thinking about what constitutes persons in their relationship with their environment differs significantly. I have often heard Anglo-Australians comment that they share with Aboriginal



Illust. 8
These hand stencils on the rock around Sydney Harbour were recorded by J S Bray in 1890.

Stencils were a common way in which people of south-eastern Australia left their mark on the landscape, in shelters or rock faces facing north, and included handprints made by men, women and children. The position of the hand on the rock face, and whether it included the wrist, were indicators of relative status. They are often found close to sites of technological or sacred significance. The stencils were made by mixing ground ochre with animal fat and water, which was then sprayed from the mouth across the hand. The ochre seeped into the rock surface.

people a great attachment to specific places, such as a rural property that has been in the family for years. But this sentiment is not of the same order as Aboriginal sentiment with regard to country, and it is this sentiment that explains why I can use the notion of garden in this apparently different context. If a garden is an intimate, known and civilised space, a humanised space made useful, beautiful, perhaps sacred, then Aboriginal people experienced their landscapes as gardens, every part of which was imbued with social and spiritual meaning as well as playing its role in a complex economy. Alongside their spirits, Aboriginal people ordered, controlled and protected the environment through rituals of preservation. Everything is garden: intimately known, bounded, ordered, nurtured, and imbued with moral and spiritual sentiment. This is garden in its most expansive form, an outcome of active and ongoing cooperation between people and creator spirits.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Exploring the concept of garden in different cultural contexts provides an opportunity to challenge the taken-for-granted meanings gardens might have for us, to examine how our own understandings speak to the relationships we have to both our ecological world and our neighbours. Gardens encourage a belief in the existence of an idealised material environment: domestic, cultivated, controllable and known. They assume a space carved out of an uncultivated environment—by people or by their creator spirits. They imply that a former (formless) environment or a wider (untamed) environment has been improved upon in the making of the garden, improvements that may have been the outcome of spirit or human activity. All gardens are sources of nutritional, social and spiritual sustenance: a source of value and knowledge about the ways in which we understand healthy lives in biological, social and spiritual terms. People store this knowledge in particular forms, as in scientifically oriented botanical gardens, in histories of parks and gardens, in the ritual forms of shrine gardens, or in vast bodies of knowledge transmitted through story and practice in an environment. Different approaches in thinking about gardens, landscapes and wilderness are noticeable across cultures because different environments pose constraints and possibilities for those who live within them. In comparing how the landscapes of Australia and Japan shaped thinking about what it meant to be a person in a particular ecological and social world, we can see why the two cultures' approaches to 'gardens' are so dissimilar. This, in turn, demonstrates how important our environments are in our thinking about who we are as persons in the environments on which we depend, and through which we shape our meanings of life.

The Japanese landscape is volatile and dangerous. Gardens are juxtaposed to this wild world, providing tranquillity, order and harmony. They encapsulate the values and understandings of life in Japanese Shinto and Buddhism. They do not negate the world beyond the gardens. Rather, they serve to mediate between the wild and the domestic.

Ancient Shinto thinking as well as Buddhism saw fate and contingency, rather than order, as the norm. Their land was impermanent, their lives contingent. Order and civility had to be sought in social decorum, in the straight lines of rice paddies, and in small, highly stylised gardens, all of which protected people, symbolically and actually, from the threat of disorder and ferociousness. Keeping the *kami* spirits in harmony required significant commitment: spirits controlled people through the threat of aggressive intervention in the form of literally earth-shattering activity. Symbolically, the sacred Japanese garden satisfied a desire for a controllable, ordered world, removed from the reality of the restless violence of the environment beyond.

In contrast, the Aboriginal peoples of the Australian continent lived in a stable environment but this very stability presented problems such as soil quality and a wildly fluctuating climate. Living within these constraints made distinctive demands of social life and required an intimate knowledge and awareness of the potentialities of the flora and fauna upon which they relied. They tended their entire country as a garden: intimately and carefully. These gardens were huge so as to provide for each grouping of kin, who, with their neighbours, followed practices of care laid down by spirit ancestors at the beginning of time. Spirits and people worked together in maintaining the balance of life: rituals were focused on the nurturing, cleansing and regeneration of all the flora and fauna belonging in their garden. Intimacy rather than fear governed their demarcations of space. An area deemed particularly fragile or essential to reproduction was dangerous and kept as secret. It was so filled with the creative force of the spirit-world that it must not be disturbed by the activities of daily life.

In the Japanese and Aboriginal cases, great changes took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Aboriginal people were colonised, their ability to live out their relations with their landscapes either completely or partially destroyed or, at a minimum, distorted by people with other knowledges and technologies of transformation. They have had to adjust to living within a different world of values and understandings, even where they have worked to keep their social and sacred connections. Japan modernised under pressure from Europe and the United States from the 1860s, although it did so by bringing much of its traditions into its modernist conceptions of itself as a new nation. Cities took over rural landscapes but accentuated the value of the garden, now mediating concrete urbanity as well as the more distant but still threatening mountains. Festivals that celebrate 'nature' abound in the Japanese annual calendar.

The dominant Anglo-Australian paradigm of persons and their environment has been influenced by the technological orientation to life that originated in René Descartes' seventeenth-century understanding of the mathematical, external physical world. He juxtaposed the human thinking subject and its external non-thinking object. To conceptualise something as an object involves a process of removal from its subject. The Cartesian view encouraged and thus allowed for the separation of the human subject from the landscape as object. The landscape became an object which

people could act on rather than with. It was still humanised through these processes but distanced. People did not think about the environment as a part of their own humanness. Rather, they could use their knowledge to exploit and reshape it at will.

Cartesian thinking cannot encompass the sacred dimensions of the Japanese or Aboriginal understandings, and thus encourages their dismissal. This is not, however, the only view in the European tradition. Martin Heidegger critiqued the Cartesian model by challenging the distinction between subject and object. He argued that there is no human subject distinct from the external world of things because to be is to be-in-the-world. A Heideggerian view comes closer to Japanese and Aboriginal views because the environment is more explicitly a part of who and what we are rather than something removed from the human.

The Japanese and Aboriginal traditions of thought are influenced by a spirit-given and spirit-filled world. What is different about the scientific perspective is that it assumes that environments can be changed, sometimes radically, to achieve different relationships between people and land: threats and obstacles can be removed. But in each case, a focus on gardens as humanised space reveals what it means to be human in a non-human world. Humans are social beings, who need to live in relationship with other persons. To do so we develop cultural systems of morality, law, respect, sharing, and so on: the etiquettes of social life which govern our expectations and interactions. In much the same way we develop cultural systems to engage with our non-human worlds. The practices that govern these expectations and interactions give rise to gardens as one particularly intimate expression of this humanising of the non-human. As between people, there are etiquettes reflecting meanings, statuses, laws and moral codes. Through this humanising of space we make spaces sacred versus secular, personal versus public, cultivated versus wild, your space versus mine. Some of these spaces are known as gardens because they are owned, tended, known intimately: the garden makes a direct connection between those owners and their non-human world, albeit in a variety of ways and to achieve a variety of ends.

To create a garden is to humanise a space in terms of a particular relationship between humans and between them and their environment. Humans control and shape that garden to reflect their beliefs, values and needs. Naming a space a garden brings it into consciousness as a distinctively known and humanised space. A garden is a transformation of a particular environment and, as such, it is a mediation, a statement of relationship. Ultimately, all mediations are about life and death, the known and the unknown, the connected and the disconnected, the safe and the dangerous. Gardens of all kinds are forms of human activity which produce connectedness and integration, thereby defining the unconnected and unrelated. They all, in different ways, emphasise the good life: health, harmony and safety. How they do so varies from one part of the world to another, and through time, but because they do so they are a window onto how we understand ourselves.