

# Pre-presence: An Upheaval of Eden's Garden

Molly Stephenson

## “The controlled beauty of landscape”<sup>1</sup>

‘Gardening’ is not merely a leisurely activity, or an exertion of labour, but a behaviour that uproots, manipulates, propagates and nurtures organisms within a boundless yet contained space of creation, beauty, destruction and confinement.

Ironically, one goes to great lengths to create their own special garden of Eden – all for the mere purpose of being “seen rather than used.”<sup>2</sup> If the survival of the garden relies on the hand of the gardener and the sight of the viewer, one may argue that the recognition of the polished, freshly mowed lawn or the secret admirer of the gorgeously pruned petunias is what grants the suburban dweller as not just the gardener, but as the “caretaker and overseer” of the neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup> The gardener has not only been bestowed as the top of the food chain, but also anointed the casting director of visual “miniature theatres” of production.<sup>4</sup>

Uncomfortably, what's missing in the tale of Eden's garden is the sobering realisation that the performative act of gardening is also an act of selection, dominance, wealth, bondage and threat.<sup>5</sup> These loaded terms also birth questions surrounding who gets to see or enter the curated, Gucci garden? Food for thought. A human inflicted behaviour as subtle as say spraying and uprooting a

particular weed, or sheltering a clustered heap of delicate cosmos in your back garden, isn't as subtle as a hint. But, more so an overt expression of our value systems that are rooted within ideologies of

domination, displacement and colonialism.<sup>6</sup> How do we decide what is of value and what is not? What do we domesticate, and what do we unleash or feralize into the wild? The garden can quickly become a product, a stage, a dumping ground, or an asset when in the hands of the ‘wrong’ gardener. Or, in this case, the ‘bad’ gardener.

Unusually, though, if the performative act of gardening does indeed rely on the recognition or contribution of humans, organisms, mechanical tools or the other, it poses an interesting question surrounding what and who defines the ‘other’ as well as the process of gardening and the garden itself as ‘cyclical.’ Nature, and its thousands of differing ontological structures, operates in a seasonal fashion. One must be patient and wait for spores to web and tangle, for roots to grip, for saplings to sprout...We become more focused on the absence or flux of time, as opposed to the cyclical nature of time. What happens if we want our nourishment now? ‘I want it now!’ we shriek like toddlers. This sense of urgency had led me to become curious about what occurs when we pluck, disperse, reject or manipulate within the garden.<sup>7</sup>

1 Tamás, Rebecca. *Strangers: Essays on the Human and Nonhuman*. London: Makina Books, 2022.

2 Bormann, F. Herbert, Diana Balmori, and Gordon T. Geballe. *Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

3 Cluitmans, Laurie. “Introduction on The Necessity of Gardening.” In *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation*, 13–15. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021.

4 Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150 - 1750*. Third printing edition. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2012.

5 McKay, George. *Radical Gardening: Politics, Idealism & Rebellion in the Garden*. London: Lincoln, 2011.

6 Cluitmans, Laurie, and Centraal Museum Utrecht, eds. *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021.

7 Katsof, Alhena. “Mythological Formulations: Autochthony at the Root of the Matter.” In *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation*, 23–26. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021.

What happens when we sit within this curated space? What happens when the soil beneath us becomes toxic, much like the flora within our gut? I wonder if the garden is a place of freedom, or of capture? Is it a curated space where one can exist in a contained spot of tranquillity that is sheltered from a place of violence? Or, is the garden not defined by these rigid boundaries? Do we enter and return to the garden for forgiveness, do we enter and reside in the garden in hopes of redemption, or for healing, or connection, or do some dwell in this space to give ourselves permission to purge and claim?

But I must stress, the garden is also a magical space, a mystical place; a precious, sacred, healing place, a place of care.<sup>8</sup> It is a place where one can connect with kin and the very thing inside and outside of themselves. As much as we may try to separate nature from culture, body from vine, we are, in fact, entangled with and through nature. We exist in denial - in denial that we are made up of “glucose, amino acids, water, fragrant oils, pigments, and other tissue and call it both a flower and mystical gesture.”<sup>9</sup> We are in denial that we need to forge an interdependent relationship with nature not just for nourishment and survival, but for communication beyond our senses. Humans are not just witnesses or bystanders of nature. We are contributors, participants, actors, destroyers, creators, viewers - “to be a one, you must be a many.”<sup>10</sup> To deny our complex cob-web of a relationship with nature, allows for the festering of violent ideologies associated with colonisation. Encouraging this separation nourishes humanistic principles of autonomy and independence all the way back from the Age of Enlightenment, which encouraged a hierarchical structure that gifted the human being and exploited the non.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the garden is also a place that protects and treasures blood, bone, tissue, memory - whether that be through the process of burial, ritual, cooking, composting, storytelling, the dilution of menstrual blood as fertiliser, the preserving of fingernail trimmings for protein, the burial of an amniotic sac under a gardenia tree, or as a sacred space of rest. These are grounds of forging and protecting kinship. Soil is a “site of refuge, a space for recuperative storytelling, spiritual nourishment, and healing.”<sup>12</sup> To exist and be present in this sacred space is a verb, it is a precious practice we cherish, not a product that we conquer and claim.<sup>13</sup> To be living and connected are not mutually exclusive. The very real consequences of denying this animistic entanglement is manifesting itself vigorously in front of each and every one of us everyday, and we all need to look in the mirror.

8 Cluitmans, Laurie, and Centraal Museum Utrecht, eds. *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021.

9 Meloy, Ellen. *The Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections on Desert, Sea, Stone, and Sky*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

10 Sutela, Jenna. (Director). (2018). *Extremeophile*. Serpentine Marathon, Serpentine Galleries, London. Also see Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

11 Steffan, Patrick. “In Conversation with Candice Lin.” *Flash Art*, October 27, 2014. <https://flash---art.com/article/candice-lin/>.

12 Notes on Digging, 2020. <http://www.kiyanwilliams.com/notes-on-digging>.

13 Agapakis, Christina, Leah Aronowsky, Natalie Bell, Rogier Braakman, Bruce Clarke, Ryan E. Emanuel, Scott F. Gilbert, et al. *Symbiosis, Reciprocity, And Indigenous Epistemologies*. Interview, October 1, 2021