GARDENS WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

Straddling the Line Between Wild and Domesticated

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Forests with wild animals and mysterious sounds at night, mountains with unattainable glaciers, predatory birds, mosses and lichens, deserts only inhabited by thorny plants and snakes. The archetype of wilderness is well anchored in our collective imagination; remote areas where nature remains unspoiled, filled with undomesticated flora and untamed fauna, where humans are tolerated only as temporary guests. Such places are both dangerous and attractive, unwelcoming and therefore to be conquered. Living in the wild is usually considered as an act of bravery allowing us to reach our deepest human nature, as Thoreau claims when he decides to live in a cabin by the Walden Pond:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essentials facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.[1]

This picture-postcard image of pristine wilderness, untainted by human activity, has nowadays come to exist largely in the collective imagination and children's picture books, while such areas are rapidly shrinking and becoming increasingly fragmented as time goes by. Destruction of primary forests in favour of grazing and agricultural lands in Amazonia, melting glaciers in the Alps, deserts turned into clothing dump for fast fashion in South America, casual pollution of land, air, and water, use of pesticides and fertilizers, as well as habitat loss, have dramatically reduced what is still left of wild areas today. Human actions threaten more species with global extinction now than ever before. Nowadays, only about ten percent of the global landmass can be classified as 'wildland', composed of the areas that are anyhow either too steep, too cold, or too dry to be commercially exploited, meaning that the remaining ninety percent of what used to be 'wild' areas have been drastically transformed.[2]

Human interference is thus everywhere, as we are constantly shaping our landscapes in order to fulfil our needs for food production, energy consumption, and much more. While fragile primary ecosystems such as forests or wetlands are disappearing at a high pace, a counter phenomenon can also be observed as nature discreetly strikes back to live its own life in the margin of human activity. It can be pioneering vegetation, growing spontaneously in disturbed lands like fallows or neglected spaces like cemeteries. Many plants are also domesticated for agricultural or horticultural purposes in fields and gardens but then rewild and

1 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Penguin Vintage Classics: London, 2017, p. 80.

2 Erle C. Ellis and Navin Ramankutty, 'Putting People in the Map: Anthropogenic Biomes of the World', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, Vol. 6, no. 8, October 2008, pp. 439–447.

3 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1993, pp. 1–2.

start growing freely in the cracks in the pavement, along infrastructures, colonizing untended spaces.

This type of nature straddles the line between wild and domestic and is part of what Bruno Latour describes as a 'proliferation of hybrids':[3] a living proof of the enduring resilience of nonhuman lives facing the hardship of surviving unwelcoming anthropogenic landscapes. This unruly vegetation shapes a different type of ecology that escapes simplistic dichotomies between nature and culture.

DELANY AND JARMAN

Some visionary gardeners have been able to perceive the ambiguous value of such vegetation and have created threshold spaces within their own gardens where a type of hybrid nature, neither completely wild nor entirely domesticated, is able to thrive. Two queer personalities spanning different generations, Mary Delany and Derek Jarman, beautifully exemplify this drive. They were not interested in creating gardens as controlled enclosed spaces insulated from the outside, but instead as places where exchange between different plant communities could take place. By creating gardens with diffuse or even no boundaries, they wilfully chose to shape places where the movement of plants would not only be tolerated but actively fostered.

Mary Delany was born in 1700 to an aristocratic family. She married twice but also had strong and long-lasting friendships with women, which are documented in letters and poems exchanged between Delany and her same-sex friends, shaping what has been considered a pre-history of lesbian identity.[4] One thing that Mary Delany valued as highly as friendship was gardening. During her second marriage, she took take care of the landscape property of Delville near Dublin, an estate owned by her husband Patrick Delany.[5] While much as been said about the Beggar's Hut, the grotto she created in the garden and covered with shells in reference to Aphrodite, I would rather focus on the work she conducted on the boundary of the estate.[6] She replaced the perimeter wall with a 'ha-ha', a type of sunken fence allowing a direct visual connection between the private property and the surrounding countryside. As such, she emulated the style of the English gardener and landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, a founder of the English landscape garden movement, a style that emphasized the more picturesque aspects of the landscape.[7] The ha-ha not only permitted her to create uninterrupted vistas towards the open terrain, but also allowed an exchange of plants from her estate to the wild surroundings and vice versa,

4 Lisa L. Moore, 'Queer Gardens: Mary Delany's Flowers and Friendships', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 1, September 2005, pp. 49–70: 51.
5 Ibid., p. 54.
6 Ibid., p. 61.
7 Ibid., pp. 55–56.

deliberately blurring the boundaries between garden and wilderness. Delany's passion for the plant world didn't stop there. At a later age when her eyesight declined she developed a technique of paper-cut botanical illustrations surrounded by a black background—paper mosaics. This impressive collection of hundreds of botanical illustrations, for which she is best known today, is unique in its style and striking for its delicate and accurate representation of plant specimens. It shows how Delany ceaselessly strove to challenge norms by creating a life and a body of work which is both personal and deviates from the expectations of her time.

Derek Jarman, born in 1942, was an English artist, film director, gay-rights activist, and gardener. During his relatively short life he asserted his presence as one of the first public figures in the UK to openly speak about living with AIDS, an illness he died from in 1994. When looking for a location for his movie *The Garden* (1990), he discovered a fisherman's hut called Prospect Cottage, which he acquired. The hut is located in Dungeness, a seaside location encompassing one of the largest expanses of shingle in Europe and situated next to a mighty nuclear power plant. During the last year of his life, Jarman went back and forth to Prospect Cottage, writing a journal, *Modern Nature*, which was published after his death. Thanks to this journal, we have a precise testimony of his gardening work at Prospect Cottage. With a meticulous recollection of daily events, we get a sense of the blooms and seasons passing by, as well as Jarman's efforts to create a tended garden in such a hostile environment. A striking aspect of this garden is its absence of a wall or fence. At the beginning of his journal, Jarman famously states:

> There are no walls or fences. My garden's boundaries are the horizon. In this desolate landscape the silence is only broken by the wind, and the gulls squabbling round the fishermen bringing in the afternoon catch.[8]

At first Jarman envisioned a rose garden and planted ornamental varieties, documented in an entry in January 1989,[9] only to despair in March that the rose buds had been scorched by the wind.[10] Later in the journal, the description of ornamental roses is replaced by the appearance of wilder varieties, like dog roses in the spring.[11] He was luckier with some hardy varieties like sea kale, a salt-tolerant plant growing wild along the coastline. After sowing it in January 1989, he spotted the first

8 Entry Sunday 1 January 1989. Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature: Journals, 1989–1990*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2009, p. 3.
9 Entry Monday 9 January 1989. Ibid., p. 4.
10 Entry Wednesday 1 March 1989. Ibid., p. 26.
11 Entry Saturday 27 May 1989. Ibid., p. 84.
12 Entry Tuesday 31 January 1989. Ibid., p. 6.
13 Entry Saturday 19 April 1989. Ibid., p. 70.
14 Entry Friday 19 May 1989. Ibid., p. 79.
15 Entry Sunday 04 June 1989. Ibid., p. 89.
16 Entry Thursday 10 May 1990. Ibid., pp. 285–286.
17 Entry Tuesday 13 June 1989. Ibid., p. 97; and entry Sunday 17 June 1990. Ibid., p. 214.
18 Luke Turner, 'Derek Jarman's house provides a rare space for queer history. We must save it', *The Guardian*, January 2020. Available: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/26/derek-jarman-house-queer-history-lgbtq-prospect-cottage. Accessed: 17 March 2025.

germination,[12] then the first flowers bloomed in April,[13] a delicious scent later noticed in May.[14] In June, Jarman boasted of the 'great display' put on by the sea kale, which had started to produce seeds.[15] In May the following year he rejoiced its beautiful growth, proving the firm establishment of this wild plant in the garden.

> The scent of the sea kale is rich and honeyed. At dawn when I'm watering the garden the scent is caught by the breeze. The seeds [...], which struggled through a first summer, have grown into plants five feet in diameter,—a mass of white blossom, like the May bushes that border the lanes of the marsh.[16]

Another species documented in the journal are poppies, which are described in two occurrences as blooming vehemently in June 1989 and June 1990.[17] This shows how, after some attempts to create a more formal garden, Jarman took advantage of the absence of boundaries to let wild varieties prosper, even fostering their development by sowing seeds and planting cuttings found in the surrounding landscape of Dungeness. The garden at Prospect Cottage has emerged over time as an iconic queer garden and a valuable space for queer history.[18]

DESIRE LINES

Both gardens celebrate the movement of plants from the domesticated to the wilderness and vice versa, and the gardeners who allow and even encourage contamination to thrive between plants from 'outside' and 'inside'. This type of hybrid nature results from both 'cultural and natural processes' , what the botanist Ingo

pp. 36–37: Céline Baumann, *Trial of Invasives*, 2025, digital collage

The courtroom scene is rather chaotic: an evening primrose accuses a Japanese knotweed of invasion. Summer lilac and Canada goldenrod protest vehemently. On the left of the picture the broad-leaved dock judge and common ragwort attorney are both standing in a menacing attitude, while a mint leaf is fainting in the foreground. The crowd in the gallery background fearfully observes the scene in silence.

The *Trial of Invasives* reflects on the status of a flora declared as foreign and invasive, and therefore undesirable, and to the tendency to retreat today behind nationalistic and paternalistic patterns. There has been in the past some examples of non-human trials, donkeys or sows being used as scapegoats for our own human actions. Is something similar happening today with plants?

Based on: Tompkins H. Matteson, *The Trial of George Jacobs, August 5, 1692*, 1855, painting

Kowarik has coined as a 'new wilderness'.[19] This new wilderness is still too often viewed in a negative light, as a type of vegetation that should be fought against for various reasons, from ecological to aesthetic, from serious to futile. All challenge our desire of control as they surreptitiously enter a beautifully composed flower bed or develop within our gardens without being invited.

Acknowledging the presence of hybrids and fostering their development is a queer act in itself, as shown by the dedicated gardeners Delany and Jarman who understood the importance of creating a threshold between untamed and domestic, between wilderness and garden—thereby giving plants the possibility to become ambiguous, slippery agents of non-normativity, straddling the line between nature and culture. Even in tended parks and gardens weeds appear between the cracks of the pavement. On the neatly trimmed lawn, so-called desire lines are traced by humans and non-human animals who do not follow the official path and prefer instead to create their own trail, creating 'a queer landscape, shaped by the paths that we follow in deviating from the straight line'.[20] In ecology, the threshold space between two ecosystems is described as an ecotone and is especially valued for its rich ecological diversity. Queer gardens also have the potential to shape such spaces of lush ambiguity, where the removal of expected boundaries allows for another wilderness to arise, an ecologically diverse mosaic where feral plants and weeds flourish and live a life of their own; a landscape where desire for control is replaced by desire lines.

19 Ingo Kowarik, 'Wild Urban Woodlands: Towards a Conceptual Framework', in Ingo Kowarik and Stefan Körner (eds), *Wild Urban Woodlands*, Springer-Verlag: Berlin/Heidelberg, 2005, pp. 1–32: 9.

20 Sara Ahmed, 'Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 4, October 2006, pp. 543–574: 570.