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The Gardeners of Earthly Delights

By

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Setting the Scene

The lettering on the side of the cherry-colored truck read "Put your garden into our hands," the words wreathed by flowers. Gareth and I arrived at the staging site on the outskirts of Richmond at 8am, crepuscular birds still chirping, shade cooling the gathering sun. It looked to be a full day ahead. There was no rain in the forecast. We slathered on sunscreen and spritzed herbal bug spray. We complained about the boss—old grievances about lack of communication, failures of trust, and schedules coming out at midnight the night before a workday. That was always something we could chat about to pass the time when I worked for Prudent Pruners. We would also speculate about the homeowners: what was it, exactly, that they were getting out of our services? Was it the beauty of a well-manicured garden? Sovereign control over their property? Did they get some measure of social utility out of it, being able to show off to their neighbors their ability to afford a costly[1] gardening crew? In the neighborhoods we worked, there was always some kind of improvement going on—landscaping, hardscaping, renovation, expansion. There must have been some logic behind it—a logic that seemed to extend beyond property value.

In part, we were reading home improvement as a form of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1994). The ends of the acquisition and accumulation of wealth were its spectacular expenditure. For Veblen's subjects, the possession of wealth is a "meritorious act" through which people can gain social esteem (ibid, 24). Their abstention from labor is "beautiful and ennobling," whereas the role of labor is to maintain and expand the honor of the employer (ibid, 29). Consumption, hiring others to perform the tasks that enhance one's social standing, is an

[1] It would be interesting to do a comparative study of gardening and landscaping companies based on demographic makeup of workers and prices charged. Was there a premium placed on the predominant whiteness of Prudent Pruners' workers as compared to a company made up of, for example, immigrant Central American workers? Was whiteness an implicit selling point? How do ideas like care and attention resonate in racialized ways?

investment in one's own reputation. The "obvious costliness" of the tasks is a feature of the "appreciable amount of labor" that has been put in (ibid, 105). This was not all that dissimilar to Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital, taste and breeding on display, or Berger's (1986) discussion of being envied for one's aesthetic accumulation. All these analytical angles share a functionalist bent. The garden and the expenditure that goes into it fulfills a social role.

I started this project by thinking in terms of social reproduction. The residential garden played a role in reproducing the family, in replicating class, racial, and gender divides. The notion of structure remained. I considered social forms to be more or less fixed, falling into the same slots generation after generation. Others guided my inquiry. Estes et al (2021), in an incisive return of the ethnographic gaze, discuss the reproduction of property (and the garden has plenty to do with property, as I'll discuss later) as the basis of white kinship in North America. I might have also come to a multispecies account of social reproduction in which plants actively help reproduce social forms[2]. Or I could have dived into an elaboration on biopower (Foucault 1997), in which gardeners manage life by making it persist in a presentable way[3]. I still find these ideas compelling, and I think they merit elaborating elsewhere. But ultimately, these frameworks cannot speak to what was going on in the gardens I investigated.

I want to begin instead with knowledge. It is not the only framing device I use, but it gets me to a workable starting point with what I found when I returned to the world of gardening to study it. Throughout the essay, I return to pragmatism, the idea that knowledge and activity are

[2] I take on a posthumanist account of capital and labor later in the essay, but the notion that plants actively intervene in human social forms resonates equally in the realm of social reproduction.

[3] The gardeners are the ones who 'make live and let die,' but the imperative ultimately comes from the desires of the homeowner and the boss. I approach this imperative through the framework of ritual and cosmology, wherein the whim of the homeowner, whether tethered to reality or not, sets forth the rules for the activity of the gardener. There is an element of the transcendent and apparently irrational in the dictates of the homeowner, which pushes me from talking about ontology towards cosmology. For example, watering the grass after a rain, or trimming the azaleas (*Rhododendron indicum*) at the wrong time of year because they look 'hairy.'

intertwined, and that meanings emerge through the effects of action. I also reach some unruly political edges in which the efficacy of pragmatism seems to dwindle. Pragmatism will not be my only guide. Specifically, I want to look at how homeowners use hired gardeners' knowledge to create meaning of their own, often in the form of attachment to place, mastery over it, and connection with it. This was a theme that emerged repeatedly in my interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. Homeowners, I argue, make use of gardeners' knowledge to secure productive property and a sense of ownership and place. I will elaborate on the interweaving of mastery and care: these are not as contradictory tendencies as they might appear. This will allow me to segue into an extended discussion of the historical context of the residential garden in Virginia, specifically the plantation and the urban gardens held by wealthy planters. I will touch on some historical gardening methods, comparing them to the present-day methods I made use of to tease out some of the continuities and departures within southern gardening.

Virginia is an exemplary case study to make sense of the intersections of colonial dispossession, slavery, and capitalist development. Its present, I will show, contains traces (perhaps more than traces) of each form of historical violence. The plantation continues to resound, as does the settler land-grab and the enclosure of private property (sometimes from subdivisions of former plantation land[4]). Virginia is worth studying through an anthropological lens to better understand the interplay of these dynamics. Though understudied by cultural anthropologists, Virginia presents an opportunity to take a hooks-inspired (1984) glimpse into the interactions of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous forms of oppression.

My ethnographic data turned me from thinking only about knowledge to also considering care[5] as an essential dimension of gardening. Homeowners expected from their workers more than knowledge about plants—they expected emotional investments from their workers. They sought from their workers deep and lasting care for their gardens, an attachment that extends past the normal, secular bounds of knowledge and wage labor into an almost intersubjective relation. Against their own apparent exploitation, the gardeners I spoke to and observed demonstrated this expected care. Gardening brought both the homeowner and the worker a measure of gratification, though this feeling worked differently on each group. I will attend to labor and the workings of gratification in its own section.

The paper then moves in a decidedly stranger direction, thinking about, as my interlocutors did, the garden as a vital being with its own demands and provisions. I argue that this is not fetishism[6], that in order to understand the relationship between gardeners,

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[4] Another study worth doing would be the examination of 'historically preserved' plantations in Virginia. There are a handful around Richmond.

[5] Care meaning both personal investment ('I care about the garden') and acts of attention ('I care for the garden').

[6] With attention to how Marx and Freud referred to 'the fetish,' an idea derived from the Eurocentric study of African religions, pejoratively, as if (Black) people were mistaken in attributing power and divinity to objects. See Pietz (1985) and Matory (2018) for extensive discussions of the racialization of the framing of the fetish in European scholarship.

homeowners, and the gardens themselves, an observer must be attuned to the garden as an agentive being. This is true in a more material sense, with the garden being made up of plants that are doing labor (under the watchful management of the gardener) to enhance the value of the garden, but it's also true in a cosmological sense, with the garden as a metaphysical being engaged in a spiritual economy. I quarrel with Coulthard's (2014) notion that land is only an abstraction for the settler vacated of relations. I argue instead that for the settler, land remains a relation (as well as an abstraction) characterized by care and domination

I frame my discussion of land, property, and cosmology around the guiding analytic of settler colonialism. Instead of elaborating on its material dimensions, as many others have done, I stick with the cosmology (or cosmologies) of settler colonialism in Virginia. To counter colonialism, I claim, requires metaphysical engagement (a kind of cosmological contestation, intervening at the level of the invisible and unapparent[7]) as well as material interventions. Ultimately, other gardens are possible, other forms of organizing social life beyond private property, and other forms of organizing caring activity beyond wage labor. In a liberatory political project, people would do well not to neglect either the spiritual or material components of action.

Knowledge, Mastery, Kinship?

There is a relation between knowing and acting upon or acting with (Gow 1995, Kohn 2013). The substance of this relation is political (Foucault 1997): whether knowledge is formulated over another being as an object, or with it as a fellow subject. Lamming (1985), in a

[7] By this I mean a kind of intervention that speaks to the violence of the property regime and settler colonial dispossession. I argue that property and possession are already cosmological, having to do with how people relate to not just their material world, but also to a realm above it, an invisible but transactable (via ritual performed by gardeners) world full of demands and potential offerings. If property and possession are figured in radically different cosmological terms (for example, making claims to property becoming a damnable act), then they might be more fully contested, rather than only making secular and rational claims against them. Property makes claim to an element of the transcendent, a connection to divine nature. That is what I mean when I speak of cosmology.

more Marxist vein, says that power operates through owning as well as knowing. This kind of power and mastery is relevant here. In the Virginia garden, homeowners establish through their gardeners a mixture of knowledge-over and knowledge-with, mobilizing contemporary scientific knowledge, divisions of nature and society, and a vitalist notion of attunement in order to come to know the garden and their property. While it may appear so[8], attunement is not on its own decolonial as a way of knowing, undergirded as it still is by property relations and continuing Indigenous dispossession. Knowledge here took on the forms of mastery, domination, and mutual comprehension, not reducible to any one dynamic.

One of the selling points of Prudent Pruners was the expertise of its workers. The hands into which clients placed their gardens were tested, knowledgeable, and experienced. Gareth, in his early 30s, had been trained by a master gardener in his early years with the company. Prior to becoming a Pruner, he had worked on a vineyard and had some existing knowledge of plant care. Like many of PP's employees, he had a college degree. Rian, in their late 20s, had worked for a similar gardening company prior to Prudent Pruners, one that emphasized care and expertise. They had been trained by experts with master gardener's certifications and horticultural degrees. Rian expressed interest in returning to school for horticulture, perhaps before striking out on their own as a gardener. Jack, a former teacher in his mid 20s, was mostly self-trained. He tended to work properties on his own, having earned the trust of the boss. Tim, a former dairy farm worker in his early 20s, had dropped out of college. Upon finding the long hours and mediocre pay at the dairy farm unsuitable, he had begun making a long commute from the agricultural lands east of Richmond to its western suburbs to garden. He was the novice of the group, having been hired a month before my first field visit in April 2023. Katie, the owner and boss, was the

[8] If one takes knowledge to be *the* grounds of politics.

only member of the company with formal classroom training. The rest had learned by experience and tutelage.

The gardeners of Prudent Pruners practiced a kind of mastery over nonhuman life through their knowledge. They controlled reproduction and created species separations to create highlight areas, an aesthetic mode of domination. At the Greene residence, a mansion in Richmond's northside with a carriage house the size of a four-bedroom home, Rian spent time pruning an azalea (*Rhododendron indicum*) off a cluster of peonies (e.g., *Paeonia x suffrictosa*), creating distinction between them. I noticed that gardeners spent a lot of time creating difference, a kind of border work that highlighted neatness, separation, and the individuality of plants. Rian did similar work at the Werner house, trimming azalea (*R. indicum*) from the mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) and rhododendron (*Rhododendron catawbiense*), and cutting the tall stalks off the nandina (*Nandina domestica*) that were blocking the window. At the Klich residence, another large house on the south bank of the James River with a sweeping view of the waterway and train trestle, Rian spent an hour pulling liriope (*Liriope muscari*) from mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*) (mondo grass looks a bit like liriope in miniature, but this kind of border work was important to Katie, who cherished neatness and precision).

I saw this knowledge embodied in my field observations. Rian walked me through Mr. Greene's potted plants, most of which were geraniums (e.g., *Geranium himalayense*), but which also included so-called citronella (*Pelargonium cucullatum*)[9], a natural mosquito repellant. A hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) caught our eye. It was exploding in bloom from pink to blue. Rian told me it was remarkable to have such a range of colors on a single plant. Bloom color depends on soil pH, they told me, so there must have been a pH difference even on the small piece of ground on which the plant sat.

[9] Actually a scented geranium. See appendix.

The hostas (e.g., *Hosta kiyosumiensis*) were in bloom, white flowers on tall stalks, as were the oakleaf hydrangeas *(Hydrangea quercifolia*). A rhododendron (*Rhododendron catawbiense*) held onto now-faded purple flowers. A row of camellias (*Camellia japonica*) in the front of the house that Katie had cut almost to the ground (to the distaste of many other workers) was bouncing back with new shoots coming off the sides of its stumps. The baptisia (*Baptisia australis*) was done blooming and had put out heavy seed pods. As we toured the house, I noticed the boxwoods (*Buxus sempervirens*) were getting hairy. Katie despised unruly boxwoods; we were always trimming them back into shape. Rian demurred, saying that the company had been avoiding these in particular because they were blighted. Besides, Rian didn't have disinfectant spray with them to apply to shears between each plant, standard practice to ensure the blight didn't spread.

The azaleas (*R. indicum)* were done blooming. I asked Rian if that meant they were ready for a prune. Rian agreed that they looked overgrown, but that now wasn't the time for a true prune. They would "tip them back" instead, clipping off the new growth while leaving the woodier branches in place until a full prune in the early spring, before the plant bloomed. We

chatted as Rian and Tim worked. They had to trod on periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) to get to the azalea *(R. indicum),* matting it down ("it'll bounce back"). I asked them about their horticultural training. "I grew up with my hands in the dirt," Rian told me, and Tim talked about his time at the dairy farm.

In my employment with the company, I recall spending days on end picking up acorns (from *Quercus alba*, for example) from people's yards before they could germinate (the seedlings were a pain to pull with their deep taproots). We would deadhead flowers, cutting off their seedheads so that the plants couldn't reproduce and spread. We spent fall and winter blowing and raking up leaves, nutritive mulch for the soil if left in place, spreading new mulch in the early spring so that surfaces would appear pristine. This kind of work wasn't incidental, completed at the whim of the boss; it was designed to permit the homeowner mastery over their space. It created a distinction between uncultivated, unmanaged, wild 'nature' in the space beyond the yard and cultivated, managed, civilized 'society' on the other (Liboiron 2021). This is characteristic of a relation of domination.

The desire for knowledge of and control over life fits well within (and expands) the framework of biopower, though in a more-than-human sense that Foucault does not discuss. Here, service worker knowledge is enlisted to enhance not just control but also intimacy with plants and ecosystems. Homeowners wanted more than population control; they wanted the kind of knowledge and intimacy with the garden that workers could provide. This points to more than the 'war against nature' that weeding or pruning indicate, the imperative to remove the undesirable and fight back against irrepressible growth. The homeowners' desire for intimacy through knowledge (mediated by workers) was all part of a biopolitical regime that included people and plants.

Deb was a retired Episcopalian minister, one of Prudent Pruner's latest clients. She came under PP's care after Lizzie, the person who had been tending her yard, joined the company. Lizzie took the client with her. Deb discussed her own lack of knowledge, and her reliance on the gardeners to tell her about the garden. Knowledge bridged homeowners and their property.

> Well, it's also been a bit intimidating because I'm not a gardener. Certainly not to that level. I mean, I love being out. I love weeding, but I am not trained. I don't know what I'm doing. *I couldn't tell you a weed from a plant.* So, I've learned a little bit more obviously about that having lived here for three years, but my angst and my greatest fear the first year was that I would kill it all that it wouldn't come back and after this wonderful legacy and care for all these years, but obviously that didn't happen. [Emphasis added]

Deb's lack of knowledge of the plants in the garden could only be compensated for by the gardeners' expertise. Deb was a novice in a space that required knowledge to maintain. Her garden had been established by the previous resident, a master gardener named Ruth Johnson. Ruth's expertise also established for Deb a certain value, and a desire to know more. The yard was small but "so well-gardened," a point of interest for Deb and her husband in deciding to buy the house. "The home definitely has some character, and that's what we like," Deb said. The garden's history, its connection to Ruth Johnson, its handmade creation and sustainment, was central to the homeowners' experience of the home's value.

In order to become sovereign over her space in a Foucauldian sense, Deb needed to tether herself to the expertise of her workers. She needed their work just as they needed her sovereign mandate to govern. In this formulation, gardeners were to administer the space (a private enclosure) as a species of technocrat armed with their tools and experience. This hints at a theoretical joining of Marx and Foucault in which capitalist accumulation and relations of production fit within biopolitical modes of power. Deb's state-in-miniature[10] must be known and

[10] Just like the settler state, property in this context is preceded by Indigenous dispossession and antiblack violence, and governmentality is maintained through the fiction of rightful and original ownership. Later, I will discuss *terra*

closely governed. Deb, the sovereign[11], could not govern alone. Hers was a biopolitical regime characterized by the kind of domination that flows through intimate knowledge.

It was this knowledge—of the history of the garden, of the bits and pieces Deb had picked up about the plants in her yard—that subtended the subjective value of her garden. At the beginning, Deb "couldn't tell you what [the plants] were or where they are." Now, she had been accumulating knowledge through her workers.

> I found Lizzie. And she started coming once a month. She had a lot of other clients. She really was just fitting us in. But that gave me the confidence I needed just to ask her, so what about this? What about that, then she's so gentle like me, like, you know what, this is your garden? I'm like, well, I don't really like that there. She said, well, we can take that out. I don't want to hurt it. So that is *I think a key part of gardening is to have somebody who does know and learning from the experts*. She left it to me; it was my garden. She wisely just wanted to not be afraid of it, which I was at first. You know, just make it yours. *I really do want somebody who knows what they're doing to help me* with it, and I'll watch. [Emphasis added]

A key part of the process of closeness and connectedness with the garden for Deb was gathering knowledge about it. This was mediated by people to whom Deb referred as experts, especially Lizzie, who had learned through years of experience. I want to note the element of care contained within expertise. Recalling her statement about the other landscaping company, it was not enough for her workers to know about plants, even if that knowledge approached completeness. Knowledge was nothing without care.

For Deb, this was gendered. Lizzie told Deb "that she was going to go with this group, and it was all women[12]. I'm like, well, that's great. I love that aspect." To Deb, women would be able to provide the care, perhaps even intimacy that the garden called for. The masculine sphere,

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nullius and the moral implications of property. Engels' *Origins* also hangs over this point, however reliant he was on bad 19th century anthropology.

[11] Of course, Deb is also a biopolitical subject in her own right. Is this a kind of mirroring? A scaled-down reproduction of biopower? An attempt by the subject to wrest back control from a position of helplessness?

[12] Prudent Pruners isn't all women, but the workers selected to care for Deb's property might have been only women.

by contrast, was hard, analytical, disconnected, and lacking in a deep sense of place. Knowledge without personal investment would be insufficient for Deb's garden. Deb would readily become a customer of a company whose employees cared.

This also meant that for Deb, knowledge took on a simultaneously vertical and horizontal dynamic. She wanted the knowledge that her workers could provide, knowledge-over, a detached and seemingly objective form of knowledge. But she also spent time in her garden; she wanted to be attuned to its patterns. "It's really the rhythms of plant life and the fact that it is a perennial garden. It all comes back and just has an amazing way of really beyond or without my need to manage the weeding or the pruning," Deb told me over a video call. This kind of knowledge is not reducible to mastery. It hewed to a different sort of dynamic, approaching knowledge-with plants. Knowledge had multiple modalities and effects, neither fully flat nor dominating.

I'm thinking here of kin-making with plants in the Amazon (Kohn 2013, Fausto and Goes Neves 2018, Gow 1995), a relationship which prefigures Haraway's (2015) notion of making kin with other-than-human beings. Clearly, the Amazonian and Virginian contexts have some fundamental differences. Creating kin is non-colonial not just on the relation of the knower to the known, but in the material conditions in which the relations of knowledge take place (i.e., knowledge is not the only grounds of politics). Importantly, access in the Amazonian context is not mediated by property. The Amazonian examples are cases of knowledge-with. Mutual knowledge of/with plants and other beings establishes people's sense of place, but equally important is the fact that the space is not enclosed, and access is not restricted. This may point to one of the limits of philosophical pragmatism as an approach to politics.

On the other side of knowledge was Eric, a master gardener who, as he professed, was the only one allowed to touch his garden. Eric had moved into his current home in 2000 and had

been gardening there ever since. He was knowledgeable and I was curious what it was like for him to manage a home garden without professional help. He told me, "nobody can do my beds like I can do," and clearly took great pride in the work he had done in the beds around his house. "I have a certain way," as he put it. He spoke to me about what he valued in a garden and his philosophy in crafting a space that met his specifications. It was only later that he revealed he had been paying a gardener for over a decade to come help out in the yard. I wondered why he had withheld this fact. Perhaps he didn't consider the hired hand a true gardener.

Eric took pride in learning to garden by experience, a Deweyan (1910) and pragmatist approach to knowledge. "Other than my Master Gardener class, I've never opened a book about it," he told me. His education took place by interacting with plants, testing out which plants worked under what conditions: plenty of trial and error. This underlined the sense of connection with plants he seemed to be trying to get across. He did not need book learning because there was something more profound about his relationship to plants. Book knowledge would only make that shallow. It might reduce his knowledge to something others could share. Eric felt protective over his relationship to his garden, believing it is something only he could partake in. Even if Eric still saw the garden as an object to manipulate and test, he seemed to hold a belief that it was a living thing to which he can hold some kind of relationship—even if that relationship is one of mastery intertwined with care[13], as Tsing (2012) details.

Only towards the end of the interview did Eric admit that he hired someone to help out in his garden, and that the hired hand had been returning for over 15 years. It felt less like an admission than an afterthought.

> Well, as I said the only help I get is I just have somebody come and cut my grass. I do have a helper who's been with me for years. But, you know, and it's nice because he knows what I like. He's been helping me for years. But you know, I just hire him when I

[13] Which seems a central dynamic to plantation and 'post'-plantation relations.

> need weeds pulled and perennials at the end of the season to be cut and stuff like that. He has a knowledge of what I need him to do. *He may not understand why, but he just does.* So I can say cut the peonies back he knows not to cut the herbaceous once you know the tree peonies he won't cut back. [Emphasis added]

The helper's work was illegible to Eric, so much so that he did not acknowledge the helper's work at the beginning of the interview, choosing instead to depict the garden as a solitary project. The helper's activity was not true gardening (as Eric performed) because the helper lacked knowledge. This contrasted with how Eric described his own learning, which was deeply experiential and non-didactic. He did not grant the helper the same possibility when discussing the helper's potential (or lack thereof) for knowing about plants. I see echoes of Deb's interview in terms of work necessitating knowledge, but Eric seems to worry less about the care that goes into gardening, at least as the helper performs it. Care is part of how Eric sees his own activity (care that the garden gives back in terms of "weeding therapy"[14]), but the helper's activity is relatively hollow and rote.

I wonder if this might resonate with Deb's gendered division of care, and if in fact Eric's depiction shared some of the same assumptions. For Eric, masculine knowledge of the garden was a bounded and secular thing detached from care. In fact, the helper's care for the garden might have detracted from Eric's ability to acknowledge and appreciate his work (and extrapolating from my worker interviews, I can only imagine the helper cared for Eric's garden after such an extended term). The gardener surely had knowledge, if not expertise, of a garden he had been working in for so long. I wonder what other factors (race, class, age) might have obscured for Eric the helper's expertise. I wish I had pressed Eric to elaborate on the question. To think pragmatically, the helper had knowledge, but for relational and political reasons Eric had rendered it illegible.

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[14] The vital commodity addressing the malaise of the subject of 21st century capitalism?

Knowledge in Virginia was intimately tied to property. To reinforce her sense of ownership over the space, Deb needed the knowledge of her workers and the house's former occupant, Ruth Johnson, just as other homeowners used gardeners' knowledge indirectly to establish mastery over their domain[15]. Knowledge was appropriated from the gardeners for the homeowner to feel more secure in their control. At the same time, property was denied workers—as was knowledge in the case of Eric's helper. I'm curious how knowledge functions as power-over in the garden (Foucault 1997), a form of mastery. Does Deb's mode of attunement, watching the workers and being in the garden, escape this colonial way of knowing? I argue that attunement can also be colonial if subtended by private property and wage labor (following Matthews 2011). Although knowledge-over is not the only way of knowing, other ways of knowing are not necessarily decolonial. Care and attunement in this case do not overcome colonial property relations and continued dispossession[16]. To get a better sense of the implications of colonial property regimes, I'll now make an excursion down the social and aesthetic history of the Virginia garden.

Stirrings of Mastery

A garden does not spring from the earth preformed. Matted or penetrating, its roots take up the decomposing material of the past and transform it into the stuff of the visible present. Plants and gardens are also traces that can tell the history of a place (Clark 2020, Farstadvoll 2018, Schiebinger 2004, White et al 2016). In the cloistered suburban gardens of Richmond, gardens-as-history seem to recede behind the immediacy of the present. Gardens seem to be ephemeral objects but are truly historical. I will uncover some of the hidden history of Richmond

[15] The biopolitics of the more-than-human become entangled in property and the capitalist possibilities of the service industry. One can buy biopolitics by the hour (or by square footage, as other companies quoted). Low-paid technocrats for hire.

[16] And as I will show in the next section, care was an important part of the colonial and antebellum plantation—care was integral, not exceptional, and was intimately tied to the domination of land and people.

landscapes, connecting 17th-19th century English, colonial and antebellum southern, and contemporary Richmond landscapes in a horticultural genealogy.

From the beginning of English settlement in what would become the United States, gardens were mechanisms of colonization. Early English settlers legitimized their claims to land by "building houses and fences and planting gardens" (Seed 1995, 18). Indigenous gardens went unrecognized or delegitimized because they weren't enclosed as per English jurisprudence (ibid). Seed speaks of the "English preoccupation with boundaries and boundary markers" of which the garden was a principal device (ibid, 19). Colonists saw the New World as a garden, a space to be planted and improved—ignorant of the modifications native inhabitants were already making, or willfully writing them off (Cronon 2003).

The garden signified rightful possession; it had the moral weight attached to it of cultivation and improvement, in contrast to the immorality of wildness (Seed 1995). To adapt Carter (2009), gardens functioned as the "edges of empire," existing on the frontier between supposed civilization and anarchy. Gardens were a means of Indigenous dispossession—and as Coulthard (2014) lays out, this process is ongoing. To borrow Seed's (1995) anthropological turn of phrase, gardening was (and arguably remains) a ceremony of settler possession[17]. In Virginia, some of these politically freighted gardens took the form of chattel slavery plantations. In the sections that follow, I will draw out the geographical and aesthetic legacy of the plantation, then demonstrate their continued relevance to present-day Richmond gardens.

Plantation Geographies

Plantations existed at the frontiers of newly colonized space (Heath 2016), their production enabled by violent removal of Indigenous people. I argue that planters conceived of

[17] Not for all gardens or gardeners, but in the dominant mode my ethnographic material deals with.

plantation landscapes as boundary spaces that existed in tenuous opposition to disorderly, racialized others (plants, animals, and people) that threatened[18] to overcome the plantation order. This is evident in the spatial layout of plantations and the geometric aspirations of their gardens. Life, labor and land were made subject to planter administration. It was not just the decorative garden that created and reflected authority. Planters made use of a hierarchy of fences to separate areas on the plantation. Radiating outward from the house was the ornamental garden, the kitchen garden, the quarters of the enslaved, the tree groves, and finally the agricultural fields (Cothran 2003).

Through the process of drawing boundaries, one can observe “the imposition of one kind of line on another,” a fundamental process to colonial relations (Ingold 2007, 2). Planters deployed lines, mediated by indentured and enslaved people, to project control over assemblages of people, plants, and other-than-humans. Barbara Heath (2016), using archaeological data from two small Virginia plantations, describes these spaces as frontier limits upon which new orders were imposed by planters.

The English gentry who claimed Virginia and eventually the expanding southern colonies as wealthy planters took with them a nostalgia for the English countryside where they had held land (Cothran 2003). These planters reproduced—always partially, limited as they were by climate, topography, the scarcity of expert landscape architects, and the uprising of those they sought to suppress—the rolling naturescapes of the homeland (Cothran 2003, Cronon 2003). The plantation landscape was a set of boundaries and enclosures drawn over previous geographies and spatialities, namely Indigenous ones. Cothran (2003) takes a more literal approach to unevenness: “as the southern landscape abounded in natural and irregular forms, the use of

[18] And sometimes succeeded

straight lines and geometric shapes in the design of formal landscapes and gardens established a mark of distinction, implying a sense of wealth and refinement of taste (48)."

For Cothran, the purpose of these new colonial lines was to mark out status in the Veblenian (1994) vein. I add to that picture, asserting that line-making was also about establishing the productiveness of the land as a moral good in a Lockean (2016) sense. But here one can see that "planters desire[d] and ability to shape their world as Englishmen" (Heath 2016, 41). This project was always incomplete, limited as it was by the irregularities of the land, the conflicting presence of Indigenous people, and the resistance of the enslaved. But still, planters attempted to create "a purified British society transplanted to another land" (Ignatieva and Stewart 2010, 399). These are not distant historical forms but continue to play a role in shaping the gardens from my ethnographic material. One way to index continuity is through the idea of the productive cultivation of land.

Culture and Cultivation

Here I attend to Green's (2020) discussion of the slippage between 'culture' and 'cultivation' (127), calling upon Smith and Locke to think through the relation between productivity and legitimate landholding. More than merely agricultural, I argue that the idea of productive land use was also present in horticultural designs on colonial and antebellum

plantations. As I will discuss in a later section, a similar notion of productive land use (beauty and regimentation) persists in Virginia to this day and takes on a moral weight as in Liboiron's (2021) explication of Locke (2016). The decorative and ordered landscape along with agricultural production established the legitimacy of a planter's claim to land, just as they do for present-day homeowners. This claim was enabled by the coercion of Black life and labor and the dispossession of Indigenous people.

The line between nature and culture established property as a site of order and exclusion. This line was immanent in the geometric hierarchy of the Virginia plantation. Carter (2009) speaks of the "doubled boundary" of property that "first delimits—and so makes definite, determinate—an otherwise indefinite terrain and the boundary that, by defining the terrain on both sides, creates two new regions in relation to each other" (98). I agree with Carter's assessment of property as first and foremost a relation rather than a static object. This runs counter to Coulthard's (2014) assertion that property in a settler-colonial situation is only an abstraction stripped of relations to land and other-than-humans. Property appears as an object, a bounded thing, but this conceals (in a Marxist sense) the relations of exclusion and subordination that compose it.

To justify private landholding and Indigenous removal, colonial settlers made use of intimately connected binaries of culture/barbarism and cultivation/disuse (Green 2020). Hearkening back to the division of nature from culture, these binaries associated the native inhabitants of the land with unproductive fallowness and a lack of culture—concluding in their lack of a legitimate claim to the land. Liboiron (2021) describes this process as a transformation from indigenous Land (full of relations between people and their landscape, including beings

other than human) to secularized land (relations reduced to mastery, a distancing[19] of people from the landscape). I will return to the idea of land as a relation when discussing present-day gardens, complicating or adding to Liboiron's description of rupture. My ethnographic data muddies the Land/land distinction without objecting to it wholesale. The land for the settler remains a relation, I argue, but a relation of domination threaded with care rather than mutual obligation, as Liboiron describes it for Indigenous residents.

The gardens and fields of the colonial plantation are apt historical examples of the transformation Liboiron describes. Plantation lands were seized under the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the idea that 'unproductive' land belonged to no one (Borch 2001). Englishman William Blackstone, quoted in Borch, declared that "plantations or colonies in distant countries," could be legitimately founded upon "finding them desert and uncultivated" (ibid, 225-6). Adam Smith (1977) professed a similar sentiment:

> In our North American colonies, where uncultivated land is still to be had upon easy terms, no manufactures for distant sale have ever yet been established in any of their towns. When an artificer has acquired a little more stock than is necessary for carrying on his own business in supplying the neighbouring country, he... employs it in the purchase and improvement of uncultivated land. From artificer he becomes planter.. who cultivates his own land, and derives his necessary subsistence from the labour of his own family, *is really a master*, and independent of all the world. [emphasis added]

This is clearly a distortion. Smith's planters may have pocketed the profits for themselves, but they were not the ones performing the labor of cultivation. But as an indicator of colonial ideology, it could not be clearer. The planter, through his labor (he owned his labor; he owned the people who labored), cultivated and cultured the landscape.

Cultivation and improvement were unimpeachable moral goods. By creating the landscape, the planter established himself as a "lover of God and creator of wealth" (Bushnell

[19] I use 'people' inclusively here, but this distancing took place differently for white settlers, Black, and Indigenous people.

2003, 16). In their discussion of land transformations, Liboiron (2021) cites John Locke's explication of productive property and land improvement as having a distinctly moral weight. I argue that this value applied to more than the agricultural fields. For Francis (2008), quoted in Heath (2016), the "state of the garden[20] was a visible indication of the state of the household and, by inference, the morality of the household" (22). The horticultural improvement represented by the formal garden and, more generally, the linear spatial hierarchy of the plantation landscape, legitimized the transformation of land into property, a space within which the planter could enact mastery. This relation continues to this day, as my ethnographic data suggests.

Mastery and Labor

A similar process of transformation and transplantation was taking place across the colonies (Cronon 2003). Histories of settlement were ecological (ibid) and temporal (Milligan 2022) as well as cultural. I might read gardens in the colonial form[21] as an attempt to arrest time completely: plants are pruned to the same size each year, and seedlings are plucked from the earth to ensure no unwanted growth crops up. Landowner choices about landscape reflected the idea of land as wealth, as a resource that could be transformed and exploited through relations of mastery (Meinig 1979, Cosgrove 1985).

The idea of mastery required the division of nature from culture and the subordination of all relations to the sovereignty of the planter. Liboiron (2021) discusses the act of separation of nature and culture as constitutive to the settler colonial process. Nature becomes something to be

[20] Francis is speaking of plantation gardens, but this might equally apply to present-day residential gardens.
[21] Meaning both the historical and present-day gardens of wealthy white settlers. It gets more complicated as one moves to provision grounds. Parsard (2023), building off and critiquing Wynter (1971), offers the provision grounds of the enslaved as ambivalent spaces, existing partially outside of market relations but also making the enslaved familiar with and accustomed to property relations. And then the semi-decorative, semi-agricultural gardens of rural working-class people (Black, Indigenous, white, and so on) might present aspirations towards mastery as in my gardens, but also a non-market form of provisioning—still within the property regime. It remains complicated.

mastered by settler-colonial culture (Singh 2018). For Edward Kemp, the garden works "to express civilization, and care, and design, and refinement...In these respects, it is fundamentally different from all natural scenes" (Turner 1986, 166). The garden and the landscape around it functioned to separate the culture of the house from its uncultivated, uncultured surroundings. The formal, geometric gardens of the plantation "reflected a control over nature and served as a means of conveying wealth, taste, and social prestige" (Cothran 2003, 9). This was present in careful control over weeds and undesirable plants and in the boundaried, fenced-off exclusion of a surveilled and subjugated labor force.

Order in the landscape was instituted by a relation of mastery over the land and over the people whose labor created the orderly property relation. The Reverend Stephen Elliott Jr., quoted in Cothran (2003), declared that "the planter is an independent power" (48). "Recognized by his idleness," the planter is a figure always "dreaming of mastery" (Bushnell 2003, 87). As the quote implies, this mastery is incomplete: it is at once an aspiration and a partial reality. Still, the planter held the power of discipline, the biopolitical power to manage life and death in a Foucauldian (1997) sense, which was manifested in the spatial order of the plantation (Epperson 2000). One can see in the hierarchical, linear layout of the plantation the creation of a racial order. This resembles McKittrick's (2006) notion of the "spatial grammar" of colonialism and white supremacy (17) that "[invalidated] the [Black] subject's cartographic needs, expressions, and knowledges" (3)[22]. It also resonates with Epperson's (1999, 2000) and Neiman's (1993) description of the plantation as a panopticon in which the surveillance of Black life was part of the process by which notions of racial order and difference came to crystallize.

[22] Including the aforementioned garden plots/provision grounds relinquished by the planters for the enslaved to cultivate. These spaces were also about connection to place, to the earth, and to one's peers. They also complicate the picture of care within slavery: it wasn't simply planters caring for their labor force to maintain and reproduce it; the enslaved were also expected to care for themselves.

Crucially, the planter never himself labored. The planter is "the man who luxuriates in [the] garden and is the sole master there" (Bushnell 2003, 108). The planter does not do the labor of creating the landscape; that is relegated to the enslaved worker. I consider the plantation landscape as an assemblage of power relations between landowners, enslaved people, land, displaced people, and the plants and other nonhumans who occupy the space. The Virginia colonial landscape was not flat, lacking in mediation and exploitation; it was uneven, tenuous, and often violent, and these relations persist to this day.

Evolving Forms

Having discussed the social and political history of the plantation garden, I now turn to aesthetics[23]. Landscape architects in England were loyal to different garden philosophies that informed the way they laid out properties. The concept of 'the landscape' was first introduced to England by Dutch landscape painters, whose idea of the landscape placed great weight on well-composed vistas (Turner 1986, Ingold 1993). The Dutch influence is evident in 17th century English landscaping. It included *parterres*[24] from the French tradition, small, iterated geometric

[23] Aesthetics is not separate from politics, but it merits its own treatment here.
[24] From the Latin *partire*, to divide. The garden is an enclosure.

units of herbs bordered by low shrubs; it also made use of topiary, rectilinear orchards, water features, and tree-lined avenues leading out of the rectangular enclosure of the garden to surrounding farmland (Turner 1986). I continue to see these features reproduced and interpreted in present-day Richmond gardens, albeit not usually in as exacting a presentation.

English landscape design would draw from and depart from these more formal influences in the early 18th century. Formalistic, geometric styles came into competition with the flowing yet ordered style of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown in the latter half of the 18th century in a movement called Naturalism (Turner 1986). Brown used vast lawns to frame orderly tree groves on manorial lands (Ignatieva and Stewart 2010). These lands were concretizations of power, especially the power to enclose and reign sovereign over private lands (Turner 1986, Meinig 1979).

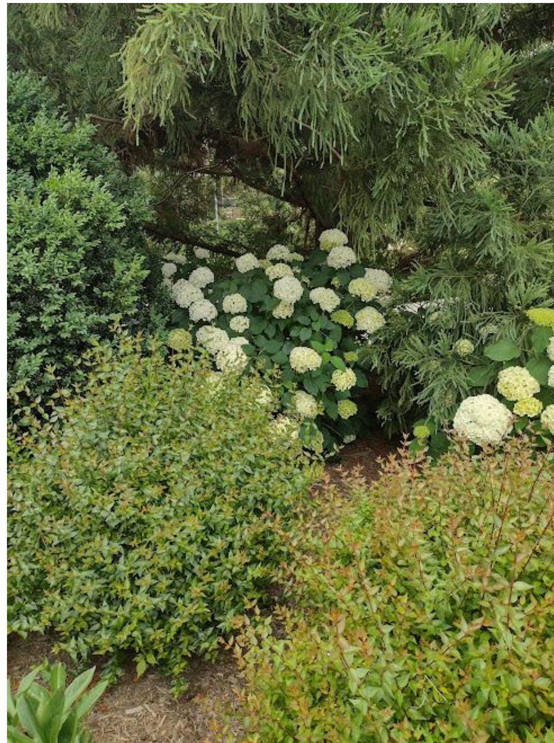
John Claudius Loudon would depart from these aesthetics in the early 19th century by introducing the phenomenon of highlight species, usually ‘exotic’ plants obtained elsewhere in the sprawling British empire (Turner 1986). His Gardenesque style, immensely influential beyond the 19th century, would leave an imprint on American landscape gardening, particularly the landscapes of southern plantations and the urban yards of wealthy planters (Turner 1986, Cothran 2003). This is an example of knowledge, technology, and human relations (trade and colonization) coalescing to form a lasting, if naturalized, trace in the landscape that has become invisible.

Gertrude Jekyll, also English, introduced the practice of creating colorful herbaceous and floral borders, which will become relevant to my later discussion of contemporary suburban gardens (Turner 1986). Historical aesthetic practices remain relevant, albeit in a hidden way, to both antebellum southern gardens and the residential gardens that followed them.

Plantation and urban gardens owned by planters and the professional class form a crucial link between English gardens of the 17th-19th centuries and the Richmond gardens where I worked from 2019 to 2022. Inserting this history will help establish a genealogy for Richmond gardens that has been rendered invisible in the ethnographic present. If horticultural traces of the past can be used to tell the history of a landscape, this genealogy is a key intervention in uncovering what has been hidden (Farstadvoll 2018, Rojas 2019).

In the urban residential garden in the South, especially beginning in the 19th century, practices began to deviate from the staid formalism and rolling naturalism of the plantation. The 1840s saw an influx of plants from South and East Asia that would become mainstays of the southern landscape: camellia *(Camellia japonica*), azalea *(Rhododendron indicum*), osmanthus (*Osmanthus spp.*), banana *(Musa acuminata*), crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), gardenia (*Gardenia jasminoides*), and nandina (*Nandina domestica*) (Cothran

2003). Ornamental (often so-called 'exotic') plants became easier to obtain, especially in coastal cities such as Charleston where prominent planters held homes (ibid). Urban gardeners relied on European gardening books, particularly those from England and France (Mickey 2013). These proved less relevant to the southern climate. William Nathaniel White's *Gardening for the South* in 1856 was a major intervention (Cothran 2003). It reflected a newer Gardenesque style, which emphasized the explicitly artful (rather than natural) aspects of the garden (Turner 1986).



What were these journals and books describing? What adaptations did they offer to southern gardeners? Bilston (2008) describes the new Victorian process of 'bedding out,' or overwintering imported species in greenhouses and moving them to outdoor beds in the warmer months. The new Gardenesque style demanded this practice in the South. Southern gardeners also began to practice 'change-bedding,' or planting displays of flowers that would be rotated out from season to season (Ignatieva and Stewart 2010). The landscape invokes practice: people interacting with and modifying their landscapes (Ingold 1993). I will discuss the continued

relevance of these practices in contemporary Richmond gardens in order to unveil the hidden histories of contemporary horticulture.

Gardening, Then and Now

I will compare ethnographic to archival and bibliographic data to connect the time periods and regions I have discussed. The plantation garden has not gone away but has morphed into the forms now seen in Richmond's suburbs—changes and continuities considered. Assemblages of traces form a connective tissue holding past to present in unseen ways (Rojas 2019). I have seen elements of English and antebellum southern landscaping practices in present-day Richmond gardens through my fieldwork and employment. The Rahejas, for example, had a Dutch/French-style herbal *parterre*, replete with thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), sage (*Salvia officinalis*), and mint (*Mentha spicata*) and bordered by low-lying boxwood *(B. sempervirens),* rectangular overall with radial paths and a birdbath in the center, resembling the formalist plantation style. Every client had a grass lawn of some sort, following Brown's manorial design. Many had Jekyll's colorful borders, changing flower beds seasonally (pansies, *Viola x wittrockiana*, in the colder months), and almost every homeowner made use of a highlight species (calla lilies, *Zantedeschia aethiopica*, yucca, *Yucca filamentosa*, even banana, *Musa acuminata*) in the Gardenesque style. To protect these more climactically tender species, homeowners would rely on a landscaping company to dig up and overwinter plants. Though an everyday part of standard landscaping today, the practices and aesthetics listed above have traceable historical roots.

To further compare gardening practices in the antebellum South to present-day Richmond, I will place side-by-side methods suggested by the *Ladies' Southern Florist* (Rion 1860) and methods I used as a landscaper. I will focus on a handful of popular plants and

features: the azalea *(R. indicum),* boxwood *(B. sempervirens),* and lawn (e.g., *Cynodon dactylon, Poa pratensis*). This comparison will allow me to draw out some of the ways that landscape gardening has changed or remained similar; ways contemporary practices are related to historical aesthetic traditions; and to connect modern practices to previous trends to support my argument that assemblages of plants, technologies, writings, and people have shaped Richmond gardens despite their apparent invisibility.

The azalea *(Rhododendron indicum)* was introduced to Holland from Japan around 1680 but faded in popularity in Europe until its reintroduction to England from China in 1808 (Cothran 2003). By 1845, azaleas were grown as outdoor plants across the lower South and in the upper South as cold-frame plants (ibid). They were an essential part of the artful Gardenesque movement. Today, the azalea is a ubiquitous outdoor plant in Richmond (which qualifies as the upper South), though no longer overwintered under shelter. Its use remains consistent with Gardenesque style; it is often planted in rows or clusters that highlight its twice-yearly blooms.

The *Ladies' Southern Florist* introduces the azalea by highlighting the attention a gardener must give to a "good situation and suitable soil:" situation referring to moist, black, sandy loam and plentiful shade, being careful not to apply animal manure (Rion 1860, 65). Azaleas are still grown as shade-loving plants, though I have seen quite a few grown out in sparsely shaded front beds. Emphasis is now placed on loose, well-drained soil. Rocks were placed around the plant to retain moisture. Mulching remains essential to azalea care, though most homeowners and garden contractors today prefer wood mulch. Rion refers to the use of "boughs or coarse litter" (ibid, 66) to cover bare soil (regulating temperature and retaining moisture), quite similar to mulching practices today, if less neat and uniform.

The common boxwood (or simply 'box') (*Buxus sempervirens*) is an evergreen shrub native to Europe, North Africa, and West Asia noted for its ease of shaping and resilience to frequent clipping (its leaves remain green even after cut) (Cothran 2003). Because of its properties, boxwood is used extensively in formalist gardens as a border (for *parterres*), hedge plant, or for decorative topiary. Introduced to Long Island by Nathaniel Sylvester in 1652 and incorporated into early American formal gardens, it also came to be used as a specimen (highlight) species in later Gardenesque aesthetic practices (ibid).

The common box retains many of the same uses to this day. While almost no present-day Richmond gardens had elaborate topiary, most incorporated boxwood as a hedge, border, or highlight plant. Rion recommends the use of boxwood "to hide defects" in the garden (Rion 1860, 123). Indeed, its ability to be "trimmed to any shape desired" (ibid, 124) and its resilient foliage make it widely desired in the Richmond scene. Rion suggests trimming the shrub twice a year; I have trimmed boxwoods much more frequently than that. My boss Katie hated an unruly boxwood: any hair out of place would have to be addressed straight away. While it is popular in

residential/urban gardens, the boxwood also retains ties to the French/Dutch formalism of the plantation era.

While immensely popular on English manors, especially following Brown's Naturalism movement in landscaping, the grass lawn did not quickly catch on in the American South (Turner 1986, Cothran 2003). Lawns require a mild climate and were not well suited to the South's hot summers. They were also labor-intensive, requiring regular scything (Cothran 2003). The lawn would gain a foothold in the northeastern colonies but took much longer to get established to the south—not until the patent of the lawnmower in 1868 did southern lawns really take off, and that was after the introduction of Bermuda grass (*Cynodon dactylon*) in 1751 (ibid). In his discourse on colonial southern lawns, Episcopalian bishop Stephen Elliott recommends native rather than European grasses. In advice that recalls Gammage (2011), Elliott also suggests the adoption of the indigenous practice of burning leaves to make space for native grasses (Cothran 2003). In many southern spaces, this first required the clear-cutting of forests (ibid). Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*) grew in the upper south (including Virginia), allowing some planters to maintain lawns in the Naturalist style (ibid).

Rion devotes great space to discussing lawn care. To prepare for spreading seed, the "ground must be trenched" at least two feet deep (Rion 1960, 132). After trenching, the ground is raked and let to rest for 7-10 days before sowing seeds heavily. The ground then "should be rolled by a heavy roller" (ibid, 132). Once grown, the lawn is to be mowed every three to four weeks from April to October, never to surpass four inches of growth. Rion recommends a mixture of grass seed (as would have been available through garden catalogs) that would be sown every year in early fall. The lawn should be weeded every spring and fall. She also suggests rolling the lawn after every rain. The lawn is to be top-dressed with manure regularly;

straw is to be raked off in the spring. Rion cautions that if the grass is kept short by too frequent mowing, the roots will stay tender and wither under the heat.

Most of this advice is unrecognizable today. While my company didn't specialize in lawn care, we still mowed, edged, prepped, and sowed lawns for a handful of clients. I had never heard of the practice of rolling out or trenching a lawn. The lawns we cared for we mowed every week unless it had rained, in which case we avoided mowing so as not to damage the grass. Four inches would have been too long; we hewed closer to two. Many clients had their lawns hooked up to sprinkler systems that watered the lawn every morning. This encouraged quicker growth and gave lawns the conditions needed to survive intense southern summers. Top-dressing and weeding have been discontinued; instead, people have their lawns treated with fertilizers and herbicides. We prepped lawns in early fall by dethatching (similar to raking off dead grass), aerating (like trenching, but with small, interspersed holes), and then sowing seed mixtures. Though significantly changed by knowledge, technology, and labor, the feature of the lawn remains from Virginia plantation and English manor days, indebted to the Naturalist movement.

In this section, I have used ethnographic and archival evidence to show that despite shifts in knowledge, technology, and labor, many of the aesthetic philosophies and gardening practices remain in place from plantation and urban gardens in the early 1800s. These practices can be traced back to English manors from the 17th century onwards. I have selected each species or feature in this section as a representative of a landscaping trend. The azalea came to prominence during the Gardenesque movement; the boxwood retains ties to formalism; and the lawn is rooted in English Naturalism. Practices of change-bedding and overwintering remain key parts of landscaping practice. These are not pristine examples meant to show an unbroken lineage; practices of care have also shifted over time. But in the plants' general use and in people's

thinking about them, I have shown the relevance of historical landscapes to the present day. Next, I turn back to the social questions of the legacy of the plantation.

Care and Mastery in the Present-Day Landscape

Equally important as mastery, the dominant (but not only) analytic in my historical section, was the idea of care that I began to touch on in my first ethnographic section. Homeowners expected of their workers not just control and management of plants, but deep investment in their wellbeing. Companies were contracted because their workers seemed to care about and care for the garden. Workers, the figures who controlled garden plants, were in turn dominated by bosses and homeowners, whose desires they had to enact. This dynamic has historical precedent in the plantation, though its application has changed. I don't want to chart a direct trajectory from slavery to wage labor *in toto* but show how certain plantation relations carry over in the garden, specifically that the mixture of care and domination found on the plantation is now applied to decorative garden plants.

As Savitt (1978) and Tsing (2012) detail in modern and historical plantation contexts, domination and care are not contradictory. They can (and often do) coexist harmoniously. Van Dooren (2014) terms this dynamic "violent care," adding a normative element to the descriptive, a term I find readily applicable to Virginia. Chao (2022) frames care and violence as multispecies acts, meshing with my analysis of the violence planters and plantations enacted over many beings, humans and more, as well as my multispecies account of biopolitics. The violent care of planters and homeowners involves not just the management of life, but the invocation of affect. Workers are meant to care for and about the life that they manage—and as I will detail, that life is supposed to care back. One might read the obligation to care as a form of violence, or at least an unwelcome addition to one's job description. Complicating this picture, however, are

the ethnographic examples I encountered in which workers readily and eagerly cared for their subjects.

This dual dynamic of care and mastery was true in the gardens I examined: homeowners expected both tight management, domination over the growth and reproduction of plants, as well as intimate knowledge of their care and personal attachment to their health. Rather than approaching them as countervailing forces, my data and context requires that I look at care and mastery as complementary. Biopolitics is one way to get me there, but a form of biopolitics that's imbricated in the service industry and that has to do with the management of more-than-human life. Biopolitical managers (gardeners) are hired because of their intimate knowledge: knowledge becomes intimacy, transcending dispassionate knowledge-over and becoming transformational knowledge-with, though this form of attunement doesn't escape colonial relations (see "Knowledge, Mastery, Kinship?"). Biopolitics (in miniature, in the sphere of property) is bound up in accumulation by dispossession and the forces of the market for service labor.

The theme of care also complicates the idea that homeowners were only appropriating knowledge from their workers. Homeowners expected the investment of the entire being of the worker, the laborer as a desiring being. Work was to call upon the whole self, not just labor power. Or rather, labor power was more than rote activity of the body; it was also emotional engagement (as in Hochschild 2012). I'll return to Deb's account. Here she discusses having another landscaping company come to her property to give a quote, a company that was perfectly knowledgeable, but that lacked the care that Prudent Pruners seemed to provide.

> I had a landscaping company come out and give a bid. I knew that we needed to do a little bit more for some mulching and probably pruning and so this guy came out and it was nice guy, but it was a business. He just walked all around. It was going to be thousands of dollars. And I was like, I don't know about this. He seemed to know exactly

> what he was talking about at anything I mentioned. You know, and he got it. He'd send a crew out, but that's not Katie. You know, Katie comes, Katie's here and Lizzie was like that too. *It's that personal relationship that I have with them but also that they have with a garden. I think that this garden really matters to them.* I made it Lizzie has told me over the last couple of years. *You know how much she loves the garden; how peaceful she feels when she's in it.* She is one that just sits on the ground and just weeds around her. She's great. We've got a little fish pond. It's not big. Currently, we don't have any fish in it. But it's, it's not a doesn't have a pump on it. And it never has but it's beautiful. It's got those lily pads and they bloom and stuff. But Katie, when she first came out was walking around with me, she actually put her hand down in the pond, not that deep, but she put her hand down and I'm like, I would never do that. She's like, oh, I couldn't wait to get my hand down and feel you know the silt and the mud and I thought well, you are the gardener. *You really like to get your hands in there.* [Emphasis added]

It was still important to Deb that the gardeners knew something about the garden, to be sure. But more crucial is that the workers shared with her that sense of awe, that unsecular and ethereal emplacement[25] that she describes feeling. The other landscaping company had horticultural knowledge, but that was not enough for Deb. She needed her workers to connect with the space and the land just as she did. This kind of intrinsically connected work is not secular; it is not a job where a worker only labors for a wage. It is something closer to a vocation. It requires investment of more than time and labor. It requires the whole being of the worker: the worker as a desiring spiritual subject. I will return to this point when discussing the Marxist theory of alienation.

[25] A fancy way of saying 'a cultivated sense of place.'

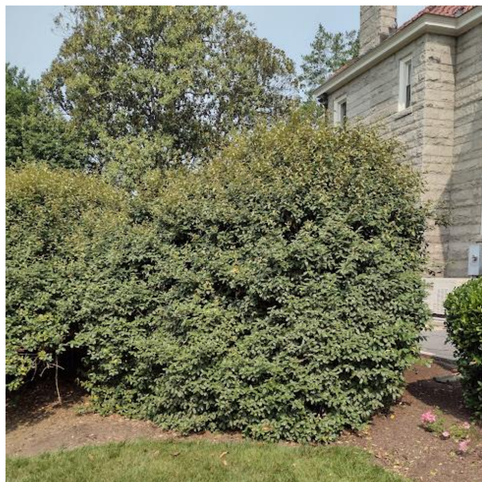
Rick, a retiree, had lived in his home for 12 years. He had been through a couple homes and two marriages, and he “wasn’t gonna do any more yard work or gardens” because “it takes a lot of time and energy.” He was working around the clock and did not have the time to maintain a garden. Aging kept Rick out of the garden for the most part. “You guys [Prudent Pruners] helped me out,” he told me. “I feel kind of guilty that I'm not more active or more engaged now.” Rick still wanted to be involved in the garden. He described looking out on it as I spoke to him over the phone. It was the first thing he looked at in the morning.

It was important to Rick that the people who took over maintenance of the garden be equally invested in its health. He chose the company because he “could tell that they just were being meticulous and maybe even enjoyed what they were doing and then they came over and did a good job.” Here, as with Deb, passion and personal attachment were just as important as horticultural knowledge. Knowledge emerged from experience (the kind of knowledge that encourages domination), but so did care. In the garden, knowledge is a predicate of care but does not encompass it. Rick looked for in his workers attention to detail and desire. It was not enough

for a worker to weed or prune or trim. They had to mean it. They had to take ownership of the garden (but only ever in a detached, figurative sense, never in terms of legal propriety).

I noticed care playing out in my fieldwork. When the trellis for a climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala*) on the carriage house broke off at the Greene house, Rian spent a great deal of time searching for twine to re-secure it. They eventually came across a set of stakes they could use to prop up the plant. “I don’t like how squished together it is,” Rian said. Their attachment to the garden was evident. Rian wanted to do good work, to care for the space. I remember feeling the same way. I wanted to make the garden into something beautiful, something worth appreciating. I did that partially because it was a condition of my employment, but also seemingly out of a desire to see my labor flourish.

Later, Rian disappeared inside the silverberry (*Elaeagnus commutata*) to track down a honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) vine that was climbing the tall shrub. We had spent a great deal of time during the summer of my departure clearing the vines and dead growth from within the silverberry. Failing to find the honeysuckle from the inside, Rian decided to go to the carriage house to find a ladder to pull it out from the top. They felt obligated to care for the garden thoroughly. They cared about the garden’s wellbeing.



In this section I have sought to draw out the elements of care contained within domination and domination contained within care. This is a continuation of the historical relationship of the plantation owner to his property, which included people, plants, and land. There are some crucial differences—this is not a neat genealogy—but knowledge, management, and biopolitics alone do not account for the dynamics of personal investment expected of the worker and embodied by the worker as fulfillment of their job. The connection between owner, worker and landscape is also emotional.

Earthly Delights: The Affective Garden

Gardeners and homeowners alike took pleasure in the garden. They saw it as an object—perhaps even a being—that could offer them something: gratification, livelihood, rewards of the spirit. I will consider gardeners and homeowners individually, exploring questions of emplacement, self-expression, healing, and beauty for the clients and joy, boredom, and discipline for the workers. By approaching the garden through its effects on the world (i.e., a pragmatist approach), I can begin to apprehend the work the garden does on individual subjects. I take the garden seriously as an actor in this regard, understanding it, as my interlocutors do, as an agentive being with the power to cause an effect in the world.

The Homeowners

The three homeowners I spoke with each had something to say about the effects their gardens had on them. These effects were deeply felt. They ranged from relaxation to healing and therapy to the pleasure of knowing about plants and feeling connected to them. I put these affects in conversation with Halvaksz (2020), whose work on emplacement in the gardens of indigenous Biangai people in Papua New Guinea informed my own thoughts on the work gardens do on

gardeners and homeowners in the Virginian context. This text pushed me to think beyond consumption and towards the subjective effects the garden has on people.

Clearly, my situation is different from the Papuan one. Halvaksz's data leads him to conceive of personhood in this context as "placepersons," contending that being is inseparable from the places in which people are situated. I don't find this term suitable for personhood in Virginia. People remain connected to place, and deeply so, but that connection does not determine their being. In any case, connection to place is already implied in terms like 'being,' 'subjecthood,' or 'personhood.' I don't need a neologism (as Halvaksz's data might warrant) to explain the folding in of personhood and place.

Emplacement in Virginia has profound political implications, though they are rarely brought to the surface. I argue in this section that personhood in the colonial mode (specifically in my Virginia data, but perhaps more broadly in settler colonial contexts) is negotiated by access to place, which is equivalent to access to property. Place is property. This has to do with the intertwined histories of enslavement, Indigenous dispossession, and capitalist accumulation and enclosure[26], the transformation of people into property and the foundational exclusion of Black and Indigenous people from access to property[27]. Moreover, a settler's sense of place is enabled by prior and continuing Indigenous displacement (Eggan 2022). The property relation is underwritten by theft. Eggan frames the desire for a 'return to the land' as a settler fantasy. Later in this essay, I will push past the language of fantasy into the realm of cosmology, arguing that settler attachment to land and the affects that emerge from it have something to do with how

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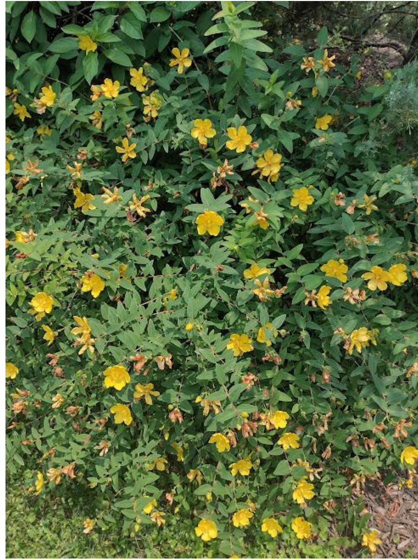
[26] Once again, I am making the case to study contemporary Virginia anthropologically to tease out these forces and examine their intersections.
[27] With the exception of provision grounds, as Parsard (2023) notes.

settlers imagine their (our[28]) place in the universe, how they (we) structure the world. For now, I'll stick to affect.



Prior to her move to her current home in spring 2020, Deb had been tending to a flock in New England recovering from a mass shooting, a deeply traumatic event for the community. For her, the garden was a place of personal healing, a site of spiritual fulfillment. She would seek out the garden to recharge after taking on the weight of a community's grief.

> I am an Episcopal priest. And I specialize in trauma situations. The work in the ministry that I've done over the years takes a toll and having moved to from Newtown, Connecticut where, as you remember, the Sandy Hook school shootings took place. I came after the shootings. I came about the fourth anniversary and was there for three and a half years. I needed a place to heal myself after that ministry. It was wonderful. It's a great community and wonderful place to be but it's also heavy. Yeah, so the garden even before we moved in, we made a couple of visits down and *I was just so drawn to the garden for that aspect of slowing down, of healing of nature, which I do believe is a natural healer, if we will allow ourselves that opportunity.* [Emphasis added]

For Deb the garden was more than a place of relaxation. It had a holistic effect, guiding her through the healing she needed after taking on immense trauma. The garden "is my sanctuary**.** It

[28] I use 'we/us/our' not in an all-inclusive sense, but in one that implicates me as a settler.

is my place to sit and watch clouds." As Deb described it, healing was a solitary[29] practice, almost monastic, secluded, threaded through with quiet contemplation. By personal connection with nature (mirroring Protestantism's personal connection with God?) a person might come to find peace.

Deb professed a deep sense of connectedness to her property through her garden. The garden transcended aesthetic appreciation to become a site of transformative relation with life and land[30]. She came to better know herself, her needs and desires, through her relationship with the garden. The garden filled her up. It was a healer. The garden had a presence; it was an embodied being with its own behavior and lively composition. Deb had emphasized the rhythm of the garden elsewhere in the interview. It was one of the prevailing themes of our conversation. The garden "really is three seasons like spring, summer, late summer. Katie was out here yesterday and she's like, oh my gosh, it looks so different than I was here two weeks ago and I'm like, that's right. It just constantly changes." The rhythms of life in the garden helped her regulate her emotional and spiritual well-being.

Derek Jarman (1995) discusses his garden as a healing and transformative place in the barren, industrial landscape of Dungeness, England. The garden was doubly transformative: Jarman was changed by the garden, by the act of gardening, and in return Jarman altered the landscape to create a garden that hadn't been there prior to his residence. The garden had a palliative effect in the artist's final days. His account is a moving testament to the therapeutic and artistic potential of gardening.

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[29] Or not so solitary, if one were to consider plants as beings with whom Deb is communing.
[30] Perhaps a broader phenomenon (think of the transformative connection people report when being 'in nature'), but an experience mediated by Deb's access to property.

The garden offered something to Eric in return for his labor, too. Eric described this gift as a kind of therapy.

> If it gets too aggressive, I start pulling and then I get into weeding therapy. So, yeah, neighbor used to have a big oak tree so I would sit my butt down and just pull acorns out of it. I get blue when I sit inside the house too long. *Just being outside and seeing pretty purples and seeing things grow and just having some understanding about them.* And as I see a weed right here, I'm standing out in my garden. I see a weed right now I'm just reaching down and pulling the weed out. [Emphasis added]

The aesthetic pleasures of the garden added a certain quality to Eric's life. It wasn't just a passive intake of aesthetics, either. Eric actively created the beauty. The compulsion to garden was front and center. Gardening was habitual. Gardening was not merely a lifestyle choice; it was a way of seeing and interacting with the world. There was pleasure in knowledge as well as aesthetics for Eric. There was joy in knowing the garden was growing, and knowing he had some control over it. The sensation of getting his hands in the dirt, pulling weeds, caring for the garden—that was therapeutic.

For Deb, the aesthetic quality of the garden took on a spiritual quality. Deb divulged that she'd been getting into Celtic spirituality, which she didn't see as opposed to her Christian convictions ("I think it's a natural fit. But that aspect of Celtic spirituality and the nature, the rhythms, the wholeness and all of that: I am finding that in my backyard.") She attested to her amazement at the autonomy of the garden, at its ability to grow and thrive seemingly independent of her intervention. Her account allows me to think through the interplay of positivist and metaphysical knowledge.

> *I just don't know how it happens.* It does, you know, like, really, I'm not kidding, like every plant every I can look out my window up here and see it so as I'm talking to you, I'm looking at them and I'm just like, they're truly amazing. I look at one of those little blooms and *I just don't understand. It was created beautifully* with those little dots of purple inside. It's just amazing to me. So the wonder and the awe and the magnificence and the creativity of it all, the beauty, the artistry. I mean I can say that almost for every

> flower that's out there. How does that happen? *You did that*? The scientific aspect of it. [Emphasis added]

Deb's account is redolent of intelligent design or some similar spiritual scientism. (Who is *you* in her query? The plants? God? *You* is invisible but vital, a divine mystery.) There is a metaphysics within horticulture and leaking out of it. There is something beyond comprehension, something that surpasses science but does not exclude it. This is reminiscent of Taussig's (1993) discussion of enchantment: the garden was never disenchanted (see also Hondagneu-Sotelo 2010). It does not need to be re-enchanted. "I'm sure it's helpful to know some of [the science]," Deb said, but science does not encompass or exhaust the possibilities of the garden.

The edges of horticulture are spaces of possibility, not unknowing. It put Deb at ease that the gardeners know a bit more about the plants in her garden, but I got the sense that it was also wonder, not just secular knowledge, that drove her interaction with her yard. Still, awe is also a kind of knowing, and does not require me to dispose of pragmatism as a framework in this case. I draw from Dewey (1910) in describing Deb's knowledge as a kind of science. While Popper (1992) may deny metaphysics as proper science, I disagree: Deb comes to her knowledge through intimacy with the garden, by being open to its patterns and rhythms, as does the gardener. The garden is a proper subject about whom knowledge can be gained through openness and sensory engagement. The garden requires care and management, but to some extent it is self-replicating and self-regulating, a system-being capable of taking care of itself. And what being does not require care?

Now that he had retired, Rick could put more time into his garden. He spent more time there than he had prior to retiring.

> I used to think about how I could get home and water them as efficiently and quickly as possible because I was running out of time between them, work, and taking care of business at home such that automatically I got plenty of time, so I don't have to be fast and take care of a bucket or whatever. Some days it might be 15 minutes or two hours.

Where before there was mechanical efficiency, now there is space for contemplation and care. The garden was no longer an extension of the workday. Rick attributed part of this relaxation to hiring people to come help out in the garden. “They're down there pulling weeds or planting plants or transplanting or trimming or pruning,” doing enough to take the burden off Rick and allowing him to partake in the joys of the garden without arduous labor. Rick’s time in the garden took on a different character. He still had the sense of place he had when working out in the garden more often, but now he could outsource the toll it takes on the body.

I spoke with Rick about why he had gotten into gardening, why he had decided to install such an extensive garden at his house.

> *I guess it’s just in my blood.* I grew up in the country and we had gardens that were food, so if we didn’t have gardens, we didn’t have vegetables, *so probably it’s just something in the back of my mind and in my genes. You got to do this because this is part of your way to live.* My dad spent a lot of time, we had a little greenhouse, started with seeds going and then we transplanted into vegetable pots and then we put them into the garden itself for vegetables. So yeah, that was all part of my upbringing. [Emphasis added]

Gardening for Rick was more than a hobby, it was a “way to live.” Although he no longer grew vegetables, Rick had a penchant for plants. His childhood knowledge and affinity (surely there was more to it than knowledge) were the baseline for his later work. At his current home, Rick had begun the garden himself, only later enlisting help. He told me that the house had not had a garden prior to his arrival. He clearly took some sustenance from having a decorative garden—somewhat a departure from his childhood garden, offering a different kind of provision. What began as a functional project for material wellbeing ended up, through apparent class mobility, as a project for emotional wellbeing. No longer subject to the demands of wage labor, which had denied him the time for a generous garden, he had secured through that same labor the property and resources to hire people to maintain and expand a garden. He was doing everything in his power to heal the alienation of his working years.

> I started clearing the space, which was attractive. *I didn't really have anything to worry about or take care of at that point in time,* and I was still very busy with work. I told myself after I moved here, after the third or fourth house I've had to take care of, to garden a little more, but I just I don't know. It's all planted beds and put the two together and then multiply that times a hundred. We know it has the makings of a small garden. [Emphasis added]

The garden was the object of Rick's care. Only later did he marry and retire, shifting his energy towards passive enjoyment from active cultivation. Even if he was less involved in its care, Rick felt deeply invested in the wellbeing of the garden. After all, it was something that he had started, a DIY project that grew out of childhood ways of life and experiential knowledge, something he could feel proud of. The garden was central to his sense of place and his sense of ownership. He could both master and be cared for by his land by installing a garden.

With Deb's and Rick's accounts, I'm building from the affective dimensions of the garden towards the spiritual and cosmological. I have already shown that, for Deb at least, the garden is a spiritual place. But I argue it represents something larger. By cosmological I mean those aspects of experience that are not immediately graspable, that require the intervention of special figures and rituals to access. I assert that gardeners are those figures: they are the mediums that homeowners demand to reach the transcendent, invisible realm, and that gardening represents a ritual activity that enables homeowners to (partially, incompletely) reach the cosmos contained within the garden. Ritual[31] is demanded by the homeowner and happens on their terms. For Rick, the cosmological alters his "way to live;" for Deb, the connection offers spiritual gratification. I return to the affective with Eric, but his account of affect also slides easily into the

[31] Why ritual? Why not stick to secular language? Why not call it activity, or simply labor? In part, it's because there is a disjuncture between material and cosmological realities by which homeowners abide. Think of the grass lawn that receives water from the sprinklers right after a rain, or wood mulch that gets laid down in the place of leaves, or azaleas that get trimmed outside their pruning season. These activities don't fit within the same logics which homeowners follow elsewhere; they have their own logic and allure. There's a separate logic that serves/services the garden. It's not irrational per se but follows a different sort of logic set out by programs of care and benefit.

cosmological. Eric was his own ritual medium (besides the neglected 15-year-tenured worker) in the care of the garden and in accessing its occult[32] benefits.

To get a sense of how he related to his garden, I asked Eric, the master gardener, to name some of his favorite plants. He was more than happy to oblige. He had a special affinity for trees, but also took the opportunity to show off his ability to make amaryllis *(Hippeastrum puniceum),* a popular winter indoor bulb, work[33] outside and bloom in late spring:

> I love my Japanese maples. I have probably 10 of them in pots and in the ground. I have a chocolate mimosa that I love. I finally have Ruby Falls, a weeping plum, a weeping redbud. I've always liked Ruby Falls. I have another one that's a bigger one that's Autumn Rising. So you know I like my trees. I love my tropical looking plants. I have amaryllis blooming. They're always the Christmas houseplants, now I'm putting some more out in the ground. They would grow and I got three or four of them blooming right now. There's certain plants that I really like.

Eric took pleasure in knowing about his plants. He loved contributing what he knew. He adored listing his successes. The garden is something to show off, not just in terms of pure consumption and inordinate devotion of resources (Veblen 1994), but in the way it exists as a living compendium of horticultural know-how. The garden is an extension of a gardener's talents, a testament to them. Eric got to flaunt the fruits of his labor, unlike the paid gardeners who must get by on fleeting moments of satisfaction. Eric shared some of Deb's joy in the aesthetics of the garden, in his ability to connect with it as a living object, but Eric did not speak of this connection in spiritual terms. This is not to say this garden is disenchanted (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2010). Rather, the garden occupies a dual position both as an object of management and as a vibrant, vital being or set of beings.

Asked if he'd ever hire a company to do the garden, Eric told me that

[32] In the sense that it is obscured, in that it exists beyond the natural, and in that one must be initiated/attuned to it.
[33] 'Work' as in 'function' as well as 'labor.' More on this later.

> Eventually I may have somebody do it. Only because I'm getting older. And I'm traveling more. And I'm getting to a point where I should not be adding any new plants. You should just keep maintaining. Because I'm the type where I go when I find something I like, if one of these gardens I'm at or one of these plants. And then I come home and I'm like, okay, where can I put it? I walked around and you know I probably have conservatively 1000 bulbs in the ground.

I get the sense that it would be difficult for Eric to let go of his garden, to put it in the hands of someone else. There would be some mourning associated with letting go of the garden, just as Deb described Ruth Johnson, the master gardener and previous owner of Deb's property, mourning the loss of her garden. Eric was attached to his garden. He took pride in it. He was constantly adding to it, putting new plants in the ground and digging up new beds out of grass patches. The garden contributed to his sense of place, but also to his sense of self. To be in place was to be a person. That is the necessity of property in the colonial mode. To access personhood, one must be able to access property. This is true for Deb just as much as it is for Eric.

Deb made it clear that aesthetics—here meaning more than visual experience—allowed her to fully experience and enjoy her garden.

> That's the beauty of it. Is that really, life is very vibrant even in the dead of winter. You just can't see it. And so what you can't see doesn't mean it's not there. It's not active. So, I obviously I love the color. I love the spring green, the new color in the bare trees and bushes. I look for that. Oh, that gives you a little green there. That gives you a little but there. Peonies are great for that. You know, watching them and the smell, so for me it's all of it. It's the texture, the variation, the smell, the color. We do have some herbs. So I guess taste comes into that.

Homeowners create value through their investment in beautifying their space. Their rightful ownership is attached to their improvement of the property. Deb's tribute to her garden is full of multisensory gratitude. Beauty is to be apprehended by all available senses. Her garden offered her something. Deb's values came to align with the rhythm and seasonality of her garden. I, as a gardener, felt it too. I desired the beautiful garden: a piece of the good life. I was similarly, if not equally, implicated in colonial notions of beauty and control. With this investment, it also

becomes difficult to hold in mind the history of the garden in Virginia. In speaking to my former coworkers and observing the care they displayed for the gardens, I know they felt similar attachments to beauty and improvement.

These sensations speak to an attachment to colonialism as a powerful affective force, a form of investment or attachment that leads people to buy into its precepts. After all, it offers them pleasure, connection, and an overarching sense of structure in the universe. It makes sense to speak about the garden as a location of powerful affect, a locus of attachment. This somewhat resembles Harms' (2012) discussion of how beauty mobilizes desire and leads people to invest in politically harmful structures. In Harms' case, he is discussing a sort of investment in property development from below, from people who would be displaced. Here I'm not talking about displaced people[34], but people with capital (land). Still, Harms is instructive to think through the investment people feel in capitalist (and in my case, colonialist) development as mobilized through notions of beauty and place. Beauty constitutes and vitalizes desire.

These accounts also bear some resemblance to Rifkin's (2014) notion of 'settler common sense.' It is taken for granted (by settlers) that these affects are normal, unquestioned, and beyond the remit of politics. That is, feelings are only feelings; they don't need to be questioned or examined. Or to borrow from CLR James (1981), the garden constitutes a kind of colonial nostalgia, an emotional investment in the old order. Jamaica Kincaid (2001) finds this nostalgia difficult to resist, even as she's critical of it. One of the interventions of this paper is to bring the politics of feeling to the surface—not for deconstruction or blanket condemnation, but to better understand the workings of colonialism so that it may be dismantled. I find myself equally

[34] I am indirectly, as displacement precedes property, but I'm focusing on the affective investments of people with property.

invested in the beauty of the garden, in its transcendent power, and in the connection to place it provides. I'm working through it too[35].

The Gardeners

As we stood by the back fence and examined some columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) that deer had stripped of its flowers, I asked Tim about his interactions with clients and about his relationship to the work. Did it matter to him how things turned out in the garden? Was it simpler to care when he got feedback from the homeowners? It was "easier to connect with human interaction," he told me. "When people come out, it's a lot easier to care about it." He told me about an older couple who brought him cookies for his work. It's rarer for a client to come out, he told me, but much more gratifying when they had something positive to say. Gratification was important to him. It made him feel like his labor was worth something. The social relation between the worker and the homeowner (and between the homeowner and the worker) offered each party means of satisfaction, though underwritten by different levels of access to property.

Since it was a weekly maintenance client, Gareth placed an emphasis on weeding the heavily trafficked areas: the beds along the walkways, by the front steps, by the back door, and encircling the swimming pool. Today would be about "the things they see more frequently," as Tim understood it. The company would be hitting more houses than on a usual day, spending one to three hours at each to tidy up. In addition to maintenance, the company also had project clients

[35] These aesthetic attachments need not be fully condemned, which I see as one of the main political interventions of this piece. There's an element of care and mutual benefit people find in their work that an anti-work ethic doesn't need to erase. To establish a different politic doesn't necessitate starting from scratch. Rather, as I argue in the conclusion, one might take the elements of care out of relations of exploitation and alienation and place them into more mutualistic relations. People resent aspects of their job (the disaffecting, alienating portions of it) but seem drawn to others. Crafting an anti-work politic doesn't mean rejecting this attachment outright but placing it in a different context. Aesthetics are one register in which these attachments take place.

who would contract Prudent Pruners for specific tasks: a thorough semiannual weeding, installing new perennials, or switching out seasonal flower displays.

We took a look at the fishpond and decided there was nothing worth our while there. The Bartoks had six raised beds in their driveway in which they grew vegetables; the family took care of these themselves. Gareth and Tim picked weeds and seedlings as they went along, quickly identifying which plants belonged and which should be removed, the kind of decision-making that becomes intuitive as a gardener gains experience. Later, when I asked Rian how they identified a weed, they simply said, if it "doesn't look positive," it's a weed. One gains an eye for these kinds of snap decisions. Sometimes, it might lead to trouble with the client. On one occasion I pulled a cluster of small, wispy plants thinking they were weeds, only to find out later that they were the homeowner's prized zinnias *(Zinnia spp.*).

The irises (*Iris pseudacorus*), peonies (e.g., *Paeonia x suffrictosa*), azaleas *(Rhododendron indicum*)*,* and variegated Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*) were all in bloom at the Bartoks', making for a rich multisensory experience as we traversed the garden. Gareth brought up a client who preferred her weeds trimmed rather than pulled. It seems counterintuitive, Gareth said, but the woman swears by it. Pulling up weeds only disturbs the soil, bringing up new weeds. It would be far easier and less labor-intensive to whack the tops off

weeds before they can go to seed. It's all a matter of preference, I thought. Beheading weeds would leave them visible in the garden, a resounding no for Katie and other purists. Besides, weeding was a significant part of the job.

It wasn't all shop talk. We filled much of our three hours with the kind of casual conversation I had come to know as a worker. We talked bail reform, banned books, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (the novel and the movie), the horrors of trench warfare, Ukraine ("a divisive subject in the workplace," according to Gareth), reparations, campus politics, and the Chicago mayoral election. Gareth, who mostly led the conversation, preferred weighty topics. They worked as we chatted; I took notes, pulling the occasional weed when I got bored. Our conversation was occasionally challenged by gas-powered backpack blowers and other power equipment from neighboring landscaping companies. We stuck to the shade as the sun climbed higher and hotter.

Conversation would lapse into silence; we would drift to different parts of the yard and come back together again. "That's the thing about this job," Gareth told me. "There's a lot of room for thinking." Thinking, chatting, playing music over phone speakers, checking for texts every now and again: this made up the day-to-day rhythm of garden work. I was taken back to my time as a gardener. I was there again, a partial phenomenological return. I was watching the clock, waiting for the day to end. I was worrying over how to fill my time. I was thinking about what I would put on my time log at the end of the day, a summary of all my activities and time spent at each location. When Katie came to the site to exchange trailers with Gareth, I could only interact with her in the old mode, as a worker-subordinate.

Katie represents an interesting figure in shaping the relationship between workers and owners. She is an intermediary, overseeing the labor that gardeners do and interpreting

(sometimes anticipating) the desires of homeowners. Social relationships exist not just between workers and owners, but with a third party, the figure of the boss/owner. Katie was the primary point of contact between homeowners and Prudent Pruners; she took care of most of the consultations and quotes. It would be her site notes that guided worker activity at each location. She was also the client-facing representative of the company. She would receive texts from clients with praise (and the occasional complaint) that she would forward to her workers. These messages served as disciplinary/regulatory mechanisms that dictated the quality of the work. The relationship between the worker and homeowner was always mediated by the presence (or sometimes the specter) of Katie, who set the terms of labor and marked out its successes and failures. Often it felt like it was her criteria of success workers had to reach for rather than any expressed by the client. Her presence complicates the worker/client dyad.

The worker was disciplined—by themself and by the boss, most of all by the haunting presence of the watchful client[36]. It was all very panoptic (Foucault 1995). The client didn't have to be watching; it was enough that they might be. Katie had gotten mad at Tim for smoking a lunchtime cigarette too close to the client's house. It reflected poorly on the company, she had told Tim. Tim felt like he was being talked down to, and as if Katie cared more about appearances than the wellbeing of her workers. Katie wanted her workers to internalize the idea that the client was always watching, or to act as if they were. This is how discipline was enacted in the workplace. I found myself at times policing the number of times I checked my phone or took a break for water. For Tim, it was the cigarette break. Work time was not our own time to do as we pleased. We had to be rigorous and disciplined in our behavior.

[36] A specter which Katie eagerly impressed on her workers, but which was occasionally confirmed. I remember one coworker getting fired because a client had filmed him playing on his phone and sent the video to Katie. Discipline always ran through Katie's mediation.

What to make of the satisfaction gardeners get out of their work? It was not the only affect—there was also boredom, self-regimentation, camaraderie, disaffection, and joy[37]. I could recall these when doing my fieldwork; they were not abstractions or ethnographic assumptions. For me, they had been part of the everyday rhythm of the job. But for me, satisfaction is the most troublesome, and worth sitting with here. On the one hand, gardeners are clearly alienated from their work in a Marxist sense. They do not own the tools they use, the trucks they drive, or the gardens they improve. On the other, they all spoke of some kind of gratification they derived from their work. They enjoyed seeing a garden transform thanks to their labor. They felt a sense of ownership over the flowers that bloomed due to their management. Marx doesn't suffice to flesh out the subjective experience of being a gardener.

Here I bring Simone Weil in conversation with Marx to discuss alienation. For Weil (1955), work is a "vital need of the soul" (34). She is insistent upon "the spirituality of work" (97). Weil, however, does not dispense with alienation entirely. For work to be fulfilling, a worker must be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor, as in Marx. A worker must be 'rooted,' in Weil's formulation, able to make claim to place. This brings me to an interesting addendum to Marx's alienation, one that goes beyond material conditions. If for Weil unalienated work is a spiritual exercise, then wage labor strips away some of the spiritual fulfillment through a kind of false or misleading investment of selfhood. The spirit can never be fully sated because the object of work is someone else's property, and someone else enjoys the full fruits. Even if the worker can take away some satisfaction, it is only ever partial. Nonetheless, the worker does gain

[37] A seemingly contradictory set of feelings which calls back to the duality of the provision grounds of the enslaved. Opportunities for self-provision and community provision were subsumed under the logics of property (Parsard 2023 might say incompletely). The property regime attempts to circumscribe and mobilize feelings, but there are other attachments at play. The set of affects involved in care, to use a pertinent example, might be activated in service of property, but there is something of it that is not fully captured. Workers took away feelings (like ownership) that strict propriety would not allow. Ownership also benefits the bosses—workers are more motivated; they're more eager to serve property—but I think there is something about it that resists totalization. Ownership is more than a coping mechanism; it points to a different way work might be organized.

something out of work. In my conversations with gardeners, they returned to the refrain of personal fulfillment, a sense of propriety they feel over the gardens in which they work. I cannot dismiss this as false or irrelevant.

What, then, to make of this satisfaction? What does it mean to be a worker? What does it mean for a client to demand investments of the spirit for a garden that is not the gardener's? A gardener might genuinely feel connected to a garden in which they work—and this is not mere false consciousness. To name it as such would be not only demeaning, but would undermine a very important part of the experiences my interlocutors described. Another anthropologist might frame a worker's connection to the garden as a small, even unconscious act of rebellion against the property regime. I find this kind of move depoliticizing, individualizing resistance and precluding the possibility of collective mobilization. Instead, I might frame it as the stirrings of a desire for something different, following Weeks (2011) in imagining a post-work future in which the fragments of pleasure people get out of their work can be transformed into non-waged, non-coerced work. Caring labor, as gardening undoubtedly is, can take other forms. I will elaborate on this in the concluding section.

The Metaphysical Economy

Pragmatism (e.g., James 1907) allows me to access the question of agency. Can the garden itself or the plants that constitute it be understood as actors in their own right? Do people (homeowners and gardeners) act as if the garden is a living, agentive being? If they do, then pragmatism (as in Taussig 1993, for example) dictates that I take seriously people's understandings and treat the garden as an entity with agency. Rather than *granting* the garden agency, people seem to be attuned to it—the garden is a vital metaphysical actor. This echoes Actor-Network Theory's assertion that objects are actors in their own right (e.g., Latour 2000). I

place this in contrast to Roosth (2009), who argues that people endow things with agency, and this is an act of power. I do not disagree with Roosth that knowledge is inseparable from power (or Foucault 1997, for that matter), but this ethnographic data demands a different kind of engagement.

The garden could offer my interlocutors, gardeners and homeowners alike, rewards of the spirit in return for caring labor, even if that garden is not their own, as in the case of workers. It provided gratification, enjoyment, pleasure, and, yes, conspicuous signs that a person had the resources to improve and manage their land—or more to the point, to have somebody else do it for them. I might describe the garden as an actor as offering provisions in return for the demand of caring labor. Clients, workers, and the garden itself were entangled in a kind of metaphysical exchange, which I will later describe as patronage[38]. The care work performed by the gardener mediated the relationship between the homeowner and the garden. But for this exchange to take place, all parties first had to be attuned to the garden as a vital being, an actor with demands and provisions. To participate in this metaphysical economy required stepping outside of the secular Marxist framework of wage labor[39] towards something closer to Weil's (1955) definition of work as a spiritual activity.

Deb acknowledged wage labor still drove the relationship between workers and garden. But she desired something more.

> Obviously, we pay them, but I wouldn't want to just pay for services. Again, I don't want to be just another customer on the route that day. I really don't want to. I don't feel like Katie or Lizzie rush. I'm sure they had other appointments that they needed to get to, but it wasn't it when like, just getting there, doing it really quick, and going on. I appreciate that.

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[38] I might see the garden as having wealth (in potential subjective value and gratification) it bestows on workers and homeowners.

[39] Which is to say that materialism can only get us so far in understanding this kind of labor. This kind of work is not secular because it deals with a system of life/being that people (workers and homeowners) can only distantly, imperfectly comprehend—thus, the language of cosmology.

Deb's nonsecular connection with her garden demanded spiritual investment by workers as well. Getting one's hands in the soil, feeling the silt in the pond, as Deb describes Katie doing: these are more than detached assessments of a garden's quality. What is it beyond horticultural services for which Deb wants to compensate her workers? A gardener's connection to a garden is part of their compensation[40]. This is a payment Deb herself shares in. Clearly, compensation exists within market mechanisms, material or cosmological. But the transaction is tripartite, involving the gardener, the client, and the garden. All three homeowners spoke about the garden as a point of access to the transcendent. The garden is an embodied being with the ability to participate in a free and fair transaction, as Deb conceives it. It's not exactly a client or a worker, nor is it a peer in trade. The garden is something closer to a patron[41], a higher authority (or its proxy) with near-endless wealth who bestows rewards of the spirit while asking caring labor in return. The parties come to know each other through participation in this transaction.

The garden is a delicate thing to put in another's hands, Rick told me over the phone. "You just have faith and trust in people who you can relate to in terms of, like you said, trust and faith and that makes paying the bill easier too, because it's not just a job. I mean, it seems to be something that they're passionate about. And that makes it that much more." Rick puts it in less explicitly spiritual terms than Deb did, but I might equally apply the idea of the garden as a spirited economic actor and the gardener as a participant in a hidden economy of care and patronage. As with Deb, a wage is not proper compensation. A worker must also acknowledge rewards of the spirit—and for this transaction to take place, a gardener must be attuned to the garden. Garden work transcends the status of 'job' to become a vocation. Gardeners, to be

[40] As an Episcopalian minister, Deb is possibly going off a Judeo-Christian cosmology, though she also speaks to Celtic pagan leanings. Genesis says it's humanity's duty to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." The garden has no small role in this duty.
[41] Or a representative of divine providence (more so for Deb).

effective and show the care that homeowners feel a garden deserves, must not see themselves as mere workers—even if that is their actual position vis-a-vis capital.

It is the labor of the worker that allows the homeowner to access the benedictions of the garden. More to the point, it is *caring* labor. There is a relationship between the worker's care and their openness to the garden as a healing, spiritual entity. That is why it does not make sense for Deb or Rick to consider wage payment as sufficient reward. There is a whole other economy to which they are keyed in. For work to be done right, for the garden/patron to be cared for appropriately, a worker must not only see and acknowledge this economy but participate in it with enthusiasm. This requires significant commitment on the part of the worker—especially if one were to read wage labor, as Marx does, as a relation of distance and estrangement between the worker and the fruits of their labor.

I do not want to dismiss as false consciousness Deb's or the gardeners' experience of the garden as a source of gratification. However, a gardener's relationship to someone else's garden is still demarcated by the alienation of private property. The garden is not theirs to fully enjoy. And crucially, the garden is a result of stripping relation from the original Indigenous stewards of

the land, holders of mutual relationships as Glen Coulthard (2014) and Max Liboiron (2021) describe them, by settler-colonial regimes. But Deb's account complicates my use of mastery/care as the sole analytic to account for settler relationships to land. I now must add something like spiritual patronage—not a politically void spirituality, but one enlivened by colonial relations.

Interestingly, a gardener's production is not made up of dead objects that the worker merely shapes out of inert matter but animated beings capable of offering something of their own to the worker. The substantive effect of that provision is fulfillment and connection. I do not wish to dispose of alienation as an analytic. Marx goes to great lengths to say that the extraction of labor makes living things dead ("capital is dead labor that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks"), that wage labor is an objectifying phenomenon for the worker, and that capitalism makes lifeless commodities seem to have their own vitality (Marx 2015). But I don't think that's exactly what's going on in the garden. The worker is alienated, but that's not the whole picture. They're also engaged in a spirited exchange outside the bounds of the material economy.

Contra Taussig (1980 and 2010), working in an orthodox Marxist framework, the garden as a vital being is neither reification nor commodity fetishism. Reification describes mistaking a person (or a set of relationships) for an object (Lukács 2017, Taussig 1980) or mistaking an object for a person. Commodity fetishism, as a form of reification, is the appearance of objects as having their own powers behind which the social relations that create them are obscured (Marx 2001). An object—the fetish—appears to have vitality or certain innate qualities (value, specifically), but these are really animated by social relations. Here, one might read the apparent liveliness of the garden as a case of mistaken animacy. What if I were to turn that around and take seriously the life of the garden? I mean this in a material sense—the garden is a living

thing—but also in a cosmological sense—the garden is an actor capable of bestowing to workers and homeowners a piece of the good life.

Why use the language of cosmology rather than, say, ontology? My primary support for this argument lies in the role of the gardener as an intermediary (perhaps even a *medium*) between a world that cannot be fully grasped (the metaphysical garden) and the material and worldly. There is a realm behind the worldly that homeowners are trying to reach. They might articulate this in explicitly spiritual terms, as Deb does, or they might discuss it as a healer or teacher, as Rick and Eric do. Eric somewhat complicates the picture I'm drawing, as he serves in part as his own medium (he's the "only one" allowed to touch his garden), but even he has hired help. The gardener is doing something that the homeowner cannot, for reasons of time, knowledge, or ability, and that activity grants the homeowner access to the provisions of that hidden world. Homeowners cannot reach the transcendent realm through direct experience; they need the gardeners there to feel a garden's full provisional potential. A homeowner wants to access this other world to feel at home in the cosmos, to feel a sense of ownership and control, but they can only achieve this by using the ritual mediums that are gardeners.

Moreover, the rituals that homeowners demand of their workers—and they are rituals, ways to reach the transcendent in ways that direct experience does not allow—work on their own logic. Care is not just care; it's ritual activity. I have already brough up the examples of lawns being watered after a rain, or non-nutritive wood mulch being laid down after perfectly good leaf mulch has already fallen from the trees, or plants being pruned out of season because homeowners (or Katie, the boss) think they'll look disorderly otherwise. This logic doesn't correspond with the needs of the plants. It lacks an ecological or even practical logic that homeowners seem to practice otherwise. People must do things for the garden (rituals of care) which might appear strange or out of joint with the everyday. The garden demands its own logic

which defies the precepts of ontological reality. The garden's needs are read and understood in hazy (though consistent) cosmological terms rather than in the worldly terms of ontology.

Cosmological authority is vested in homeowners and bosses. They set the conditions of interaction between gardeners and the garden. They dictate the course of ritual activity. Plants are given a special place in the garden. They become representatives of an otherworldly power, more than mere organic beings. Plants connect homeowners to place; they are the objects through which homeowners come to know their place in the universe. An orderly garden is an ordered cosmos. Still, something of the garden exists beyond the knowledge of either gardeners or homeowners. They can only glimpse it dimly, incompletely. Although their ritual activity gives gardeners privileged knowledge about the garden (and their knowledge permits their ritual role in the first place), gardeners' knowledge is still only partial.

Instead of looking exclusively elsewhere for the otherworldly, anthropologists should also consider the presence of the otherworldly in their own societies. Instead of thinking about people bringing their own cosmologies to capitalism, as Sahlins (2021) does, I propose that global capitalism is creating worlds within worlds. I will later refer to this world as a cosmology of (settler) colonialism. The Richmond suburban garden (and one might think of examples beyond my limited context) represents one such world. Virginia is the perfect place to study a cosmology of colonialism as it exists at the historical juncture of settler dispossession, plantation slavery and its contemporary resonances, and (service industry) capitalism.

Rather than commodities being turned into spirits, as in commodity fetishism[42], I present my case study as an example of spirits being turned into commodities. For Marx (2001), the commodity is a disguised relation. In my example, the garden's metaphysical beings (objects, if

[42] Returning to Matory (2018) to highlight Marx's racialization of the fetish.

you prefer) are not disguised by their putative animacy. Rather, the politics of social relations play out in the realm of spirits, that of cosmology. I'm not talking about the "phantom objectivity with which capitalist culture enshrouds its social creations" (Taussig 2010, 4). Instead, I'm taking seriously the subjective experience of workers and homeowners as constituting reality, or one reality which seems to slip out from the logic of the everyday. My interlocutors set the objective realm aside—the world of wage labor and material relations—and stepped into another kind of economy, one in which the garden was an agentive being with needs and offerings. This economy was still capitalist, but of another order.

This might appear a strange move in a context usually thought of as disenchanted, a social fabric apparently defined by Cartesian dualism and Enlightenment skepticism. These secular forces are not irrelevant. I argue instead that they are incomplete, that there remains a vitalist (animist?) strain within postmodernity (e.g., Hornborg 2006). One might also object that the language of spirituality or metaphysics is not necessary to describe the value created by the garden (I'll cover this posthuman materialist approach in a later section). I contend that to understand the relations that are playing out in the garden, in the activity of hiring someone to manage one's garden, one must be open to seeing things beyond the 'phantom objectivity' of social science. There is more at stake than what a secular Marxist approach can grasp. The animated economy is ontologically real. I do not completely disavow Marxist analysis but attempt to plunge it into something stranger.

The Moral Garden

Here I highlight some of the claims and dimensions that make up the cosmology. The garden has certain moral qualities, by which I mean ideas about what constitutes a good garden and good property ownership which articulate with ideas about proper personhood and ethical

claims about how to live life. These are not just material strictures, but represent a power higher and less immediately graspable than the material (hence, ritual and cosmology). As Locke (2016) laid out, property has a moral dimension. It is the obligation of the property owner to improve the land (read: enclose and manage it) in ways that have historically coincided with colonial dispossession (e.g., Seed 1995). The Lockean notion of improvement is more than an historical relic. As my ethnographic data shows, it continues to resonate in how people think of their gardens.

Homeowners had distinct ideas about the proper use of outdoor domestic space. They created an implicit moral hierarchy of plants—while it was not totally consistent across interviews (for example, the moral ambiguity of introduced species), I provide a generalized moral architecture, with native plants and 'beautiful' introduced species at the top and 'ugly' invasives at the bottom. This hierarchy was a facet of the garden cosmology. Homeowners also emphasized wholeness, order, rhythm, and seasonality within the garden, returning to the theme of finding beauty and peace. I argue that their moral orientation was to make land both productive *and* beautiful in a way that goes beyond Lockean improvement—or rather, expands on it to include beauty in the notion of productivity of land.

Eric described for me how he had got his start with his garden. “I just started adding a bed here and then a bed there and a couple of years later another bed and another bed and then another bed. You know grass is a waste of fertilizer, a waste of energy, although it looks pretty. I don't mind taking grass up to put beds in.” He transformed the house he had moved into in 2000 by taking up grass and installing decorative beds. This increased the productivity of the space and enhanced Eric’s enjoyment of it.

Eric placed the garden in moral terms. Grass was “a waste” ecologically, energetically, and aesthetically, while flowers and perennials were ethically sound. And as in Deb’s case, property itself was not questioned. Indeed, the garden seemed to naturalize property. It made property useful for all the reasons listed above. Eric’s attachment to beauty was also an investment in colonial property regimes, although Eric did not think of things this way. Colonialism appeared as an epiphenomenon at best, hovering above the garden but never putting roots in it. The discourse of usefulness helped keep accusations of colonialism, if they appeared

at all, safely at bay. Gardening here was a personal practice only about a person's relationship to land[43], totally stripped of historical dressings.

For some, native plants occupied the highest rung on the moral hierarchy of plants. This was not necessarily the case for Eric.

> I do like having natives. But I like unique. I like semi-tropicals. I'm looking at one with a purple leaf. I like things that are gonna catch my eye and catch everybody else's eyes and whatever. Like ooh, that's good. If it catches my eye, I know what's gonna catch somebody else's. From my eye more than anybody's.

Value was about interest for Eric, personal interest but also capturing the attention of passersby. Ultimately, Eric's aesthetic preferences took precedence. He cherished being able to act out his taste in plants, to realize it through knowledge and mastery of plant life cycles. He had total control over the space. Eric described to me being unable to resist acquiring new plants at giveaways and plant sales. To have a good garden for Eric was to have a space full of eye-catching detail and overall vibrancy, a space which his knowledge and resources allowed him.

> You can have texture and color year-round. I started learning about what can be winter texture and what can give me winter color. So I do have winter bloomers and I do have winter texture in my yard. So there's always something for me to walk around and see and smile about.

Like Deb, Eric valued the seasonality of the garden, finding meaning in its rhythms and repetitions. The garden is a space in which a person encounters the ecological and the transcendent. Care takes on a different cadence in the garden. It is cyclical and seasonal rather than linear. While a garden's growth could become linear if left unregulated, the task of the gardener is often to tip back new growth, or to prune old branches to make way for new ones, or to uproot seedlings: that is, to make space for iterative cycles, almost to arrest time or set it back by intervening in a plant's reproduction. Perennials still age; trees add rings; annuals fade. Time

[43] As I argue, it is not a secular relationship.

passes. But the pace of the gardener is set to the rhythm of the garden, and the gardener works to speed up or slow down the forward motion of the garden in return (e.g., Milligan 2022).

Eric felt innately drawn to plants and their care. “Even before I got into gardening, I would go even if I would see somebody's pot as I was walking into their shop or whatever. I would pull the weed even before I knew what plants were, I seriously knew what they were because I wasn't doing any of my own planting. I would still pull weeds out of somebody's pot.” What he described as “ADD or something” might also contain some amount of care. I’m not sure if he would admit this (thinking again of Deb’s gendered division), but from what he told me, Eric felt a profound connection to plants, something he did not have to learn. This also speaks to Eric taking on some of the ritual mediation I discussed when talking about gardeners. He was, at least in part, responsible for connecting with the transcendent.

Eric spent a lot of time in his garden. He looked out for it. He was vigilant. Without his watchful eye, it might have spiraled into disarray.

> Yeah, I definitely like to get out of the house. You know, gotta pull a weed here and there. Gotta see what's going on. See what's going haywire. They behave for the first two or three years and then they go haywire. The last one was an aster for three years that behaved, and then it was everywhere. So I figured if I pulled as much out as I could in the next couple years, I'd only have a few last little aster but when it takes over everything, it's a little too much.

A garden was in control if species reproduction and growth fit within certain parameters. These parameters were set in part by individual taste (some might get rid of the aster (e.g., *Symphotrichum adnatum*) while others perceive it as desirable) and in part by social convention (the distaste of others, or the discipline of a homeowner's association at seeing a sea of asters). There can be tension between these impulses, or someone’s desires might easily be shaped by the desires of others. Eric framed plant behavior as capricious, something that could slip into indiscipline. Plants tended toward a state of wildness. It was his role to keep them in line. The

watchful eye of the gardener was a moral actor that ensured property remained productive and rampant reproduction contained.

‘Wildness’ is a racialized, political category. Muhammad (2010) links the dispossession of Black people in the United States to constructed images of disorderliness and criminality. Liboiron (2021) discusses similar ideologies being applied to Indigenous people of the Americas. Disorder is phenotyped. This is true in the garden as it is in the creation of social space. ‘The wild’ is constitutively other, a force that threatens to break through the order and placidity of whiteness. The logic of management in both cases necessitates an unruly other to regulate, remove, or exclude. I do not wish to reify the association between blackness or indigenousness and the unruly other, especially when it comes to the image of the wild garden, but I want to point out how they are ideologically linked.

I asked Rick who made the decisions about what goes into his garden, and he told me, “I’ve got control, whether for right or wrong.” His discretion drove the layout of the space. While others did the work on the ground to realize his vision (work that is enmeshed with care), Rick was the creative arbiter. Rick admitted he was not an expert, but that he tried to do the legwork to see what would fit and what won’t in the garden: “I'm not a naturalist or a native plant kind of guy, although I just do whatever strikes me. I do research before to make sure it's gonna work. Or just to kind of get a feel for what the plan is and if it's native or not, etcetera. Googling online a couple of minutes.” Having native plants was not a moral imperative. Of more importance was whether a plant will work in a place: whether it will grow and thrive and look good doing so. There was an ecological bent to his preference.

Rick described for me his gardening philosophy, which was centered on the idea that each kind of plant should have a space for itself.

> It's mostly just building up. Yes, starting with a spot because like I said, there wasn't anything here to begin with. It's a decent size. It's a small town, small city, small suburban kind of garden, as you know. And so, over the years, it's taken up more and more space. Big, nice boxwoods. Because of the boxwood blight, that opened up a lot of space to be filled with other things. But it's persisting as you know, and it's just kind of rose-land which was very bizarre in the garden. We're having a tiny little garden with lily-land and magnolia-land. The hostas are easy to grow. You know, other than the hostas, everything's in different zones for different stuff.

Rick liked to have space for different varietals. By dispensing with the boxwoods (*Buxus sempervirens*), or having to dispense with them due to blight, Rick opened space for new kinds of plants: roses *(Rosa spp*.), day lilies (*Hemerocallis fulva*), magnolia trees (*Magnolia grandiflora*). This gives the garden a kind of order. Rather than blending plants for aesthetic effect, Rick keeps things organized.

I asked Rick whether he went for a more wild or manicured look:

> Somewhere in between, and that's the good and the bad of it. At some point you love it, you love to see it grow. That's why you're doing it obviously, and you'd love to see plants thrive. *But then they go over the edge and become invasive or overkill* or like the jasmine hanging off my patio. There's pleasure and frustration because it becomes too much work. *I don't want to be tidy, tidy.* In fact, I've got it looks kind of hodgepodge in a way some people would say pure sincerity, not kind of, groomers who are doing kind of like

> Katie did, *a gardener's garden which means a bunch of stuff everywhere.* But then you had come take care of it and weed it, mulch it, right, that become either very expensive and/or very labor-intensive. *So that's total structure, total simplicity, versus, you know, just here it has become more of a wild look.*

Like Eric, Rick worried about things swinging out of control in the garden. He indexed the distinction between desirable and invasive plants solely to their rate of reproduction[44] rather than their native or introduced status. For Rick, 'invasive' had moral overtones. An invasive plant disrupted the orderliness of property, its ability to be productive and therefore good.

Still, a property could be too neat. Rick did not want his garden to be perfectly tidy; he liked a little wildness, a little "sincerity." He told me he likes his garden to be clean and thinks his neighbors notice when a garden becomes untidy, but that both he and his wife like a degree of order in their garden. It "kind of concern[ed]" him what other people thought of his garden, but to him, personal enjoyment was the most critical. He confessed that his garden was not "a gardener's garden," which would have "a bunch of stuff everywhere," but his order, everything in its place, suited him—both in aesthetics and cost. It was interesting to me that he described his own garden as having "more of a wild look" when everything was so deliberately placed, not what I would think a wild forest garden would look like. I would describe his approach as much closer to 'structure and simplicity' than wildness. But that was not how Rick saw his garden.

I want to touch again on the theme of improvement and the moral order of the garden. Property has a moral dimension, per Locke (2016): improvement is good, and allowing the property to lapse into mismanagement is a demerit. The order of plants takes on a dualistic quality. There are good plants, useful plants—sometimes native plants, but just as likely decorative introduced plants, beings with tremendous interest and aesthetic value. Invasive plants, too, play a role in this drama.

[44] Ideologically linked to eugenicist concerns?

> I don't like invasives that just take over. *It doesn't seem fair; it doesn't seem right. It seems good and right to manage them, to contain them or just take them out, because I feel like they're doing harm to other plants. So the invasives I think can be problematic.* The garden this year because of Katie and the Pruners and that additional time that they've been spending in the garden really looks very it's not manicured, that kind of garden but it doesn't have the wildness that it's had for the last several years, and I like both. I don't think it's one or the other. Like the wild violets for example, right? They went everywhere. And when Steffi was tending to it, we just let it be because it had some color like the purple. Spiderwort is everywhere. And so we are pulling that out more. The bees love it. [Emphasis added]

The garden as Deb described it had protagonists and scheming villains. It was the place of the gardener to intervene on behalf of the good plants against the bad—always at Deb's behest. Deb desired a kind of cosmic balance in her garden, a meeting of wildness with order that preserves the best qualities of each, similar to Rick's ideal garden. The garden has ecological demands, but it also obeys a logic that moves beyond the logic of niches and into the cosmological.

There was a hierarchy of usefulness that was not totally black and white. Spiderwort (*Tradescantia virginiana*), to take Deb's example, has a tendency to take over. Its ambling, leggy roots make it difficult to remove. These count as marks against it in a garden for which control is prized. But it has ecological and aesthetic value: it has pretty blooms that attract pollinators. The plant was not a total loss. Violet (e.g., *Viola sororia*), too, fits in this ambivalent moral space. "The difference it makes... I love the personal, almost private benefit I get from our garden, but I know there's a whole other dimension to gardening that is good for the whole planet," Deb said.

Deb is contributing to the moral betterment of the world by holding a garden—specifically one that can balance ecology with aesthetics. Garden-as-property is not only natural, but good. Again, this conceals certain colonial and capitalist relations that recreate dispossession. I do not argue that Deb is misled by the values of property and colonial aesthetics, rather that they represent an investment in a certain kind of political order to the exclusion of others. Alive and vibrant, the garden is a moral and economic actor who, animated and regulated by the

gardener, holds together the microcosmic property-world as it should be. Homeowners work with and against nonhuman systems (in their material and transcendental forms) through gardeners to hold this world together.

Living Labor

From the Enlightenment, productive work has outlined what it is to be human (Besky and Blanchette 2019). I would add that humanity was denied certain people, as in chattel slavery, despite or maybe because of their labors (Hartman 1997). From a more recent multispecies[45] ethnographic perspective, other-than-humans are also conscripted into producing excess value for market appropriation (Chao 2022). This approach expands Marxist accounts via posthumanism to encompass a wider network of economic actors. Value begins not with human labor but with the labor of other beings which humans transform and appropriate.

In the garden, one might read plants, insects, worms, fungi, and microorganisms as doing labor, activity that is exploited for its value-creating effects. Trees, shrubs, and annuals put out blooms that make up part of the garden's value, its rhythm and vibrancy, as several clients pointed out. The value of a garden lies partially in the way it enhances property values or evokes the envy of neighbors, to be sure, but my interlocutors pointed to a far more individualized and intimate relationship that comprises value. People have affective relationships with plants through work—oppositional, as in Mintz (1960); collaborative, as in the Amazonian examples (Kohn 2013, Fausto and Goes Neves 2018, Gow 1995); or some combination of the two (Besky 2019), as in my ethnographic situation. The workers in my case occupied an ambivalent position, straddling alienation and affection.

[45] Why retain 'species' as a universal category? Why not 'multibeing?'

As Dave's (2019) critique goes, one need not read these activities as labor on their own terms, but one might instead come to see how they are taken up and placed into networks of expropriation and exchange. The activities of flora and fauna might resist the normative bounds of labor (Dave 2019). In the garden, this resistance looks like excess. Plants are always doing *too much*. They put off too many seedlings; they let too many leaves drop; they grow too quickly, faster than any vigilant pruner could keep up; they send out underground runners that surface in inconvenient places. The work of the gardener, then, is to manage this excess. The gardener occupies the strange position of being subordinate to the demands of the boss and the client while dominating, to an extent, the reproduction of the garden[46]. This kind of ambivalence is not captured in conventional assessments of labor.

I'll use the peony (e.g., *Paeonia x suffrictosa*) as a case study. An expensive plant that grows off of underground rhizomes, the peony is valued for its large and creamy blooms. In Richmond gardens, its foliage is cut to the ground before the first frost of the season in order to

[46] I'm not so sure it's quite as clear-cut, especially if I'm sticking with patronage as the framework to read the relationship between gardeners and gardens.

protect the plant. At the Klich house, Rian identified the heavy seed pods (or follicles) off the already-bloomed perennial as potential aesthetic and reproductive trouble. There was no beauty left to take in save for the deep green of the three-foot-tall stalks and leaves. The peonies grew in patches, one on the bank adjacent to the driveway in front of the abelia (*Linnaea chinensis*), and one in the side bed in front of the conifers and next to the hydrangeas *(Hydrangea macrophylla*), calla lilies (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*), abelia *(Linnaea chinensis*), boxwood *(Buxus sempervirens*), dianthus (e.g., *Dianthus barbatus*), black-eyed susans *(Rudbeckia hirta*), and a solitary Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana*). A few unwanted spiderworts (*Tradescantia virginiana*) had crept in as well. I asked Rian whether Mr. Klich noticed the difference after the company had come to do maintenance. "He doesn't care," they speculated. "We care."

The peonies had outlived their use. Neither the workers nor the clients wanted them reproducing, so Rian set off on the task of cutting off their follicles. Rian clipped and tossed the seed pods onto the grass as they went. The pods dropped with a thud. I decided to help out, stuffing the follicles into Rian's purple gardening bucket and lugging them to the back of the house to dump in the trash can, where we were to leave all debris we created. Each time I returned I found a new pile. The peonies were more extensive (and prolific) than I had bargained

for. I had missed a stunning bloom. I didn't get the chance to talk to Mr. Klich, but I'm certain he valued his peonies despite Rian's speculation—or the landscape architect he had hired to design the garden had valued them. Their flowers are spectacular.

If a garden's value can be measured in part by the blooms it puts off—the subjective value it offers the homeowner in taking in its beauty (think of Deb talking about the color of her garden, how it offers year-round looks thanks to a master gardener's touch), in feeling pleasure at owning something so beautiful; the calculable amount it adds to property value—then it's not a stretch to read Mr. Klich's peonies as doing labor for him. They add value to his yard and to his experience of his yard. More to the point, the peonies' activity goes far beyond labor into excess such that gardeners must be hired to rein them in. The gardeners act as middle managers, ensuring the peonies have the conditions they need to bloom and then curbing their activity once that value has been realized for the owner.

What is not exploitable for value becomes "weeds and waste" (Tsing 2015). Value is difficult to pin down in the garden, but it's also readily apparent what detracts from a garden's value. Part of the gardener's work of management is to take away what is undesirable and unproductive. For Selwyn (1995), the good and the productive always invokes a bad and profligate other. Importantly, any plant can become unruly if left unmanaged (the example of Eric's aster, a cherished plant that became too much to handle after it reproduced in excess). Eric had to intervene and pluck many of the asters from the ground before they could reproduce. One can read other-than-human life as labor, as these examples suggest, but it's just as easy to read them as resisting disciplined labor, of doing everything in excess so that other labor must be

hired to discipline them. In this way, plants might point towards a post-work imaginary (Dave 2019, Weeks 2011) in which activity is not coerced or disciplined[47].

Cosmologies of Colonialism?

More than labor, though, the garden is a vital entity. The notion of the garden as an animated being or a collection of animated beings is not mere fetishism. It has life: biologically, through scientific knowledge; in terms of labor, through its capacity to create value for the homeowner; and cosmologically, through the metaphysical apprehensions of clients and gardeners. The Marxist move of uncovering hidden social relations is politically limited. It doesn't take spiritual life seriously as a grounds of politics. Rather than dismiss the animacy of the garden as misguided, superstitious, or mistaken, I opt to stay with the cosmological implications of its spiritual existence. The animated garden offers a way into the organization of worlds. Settler colonialism in Virginia has a cosmology (or a set of cosmologies) that, far from being neutral or apolitical, allows settlers to make claim to place, calling upon the plane of spirit (or spirits) to organize and make sense of the world.

More settler fantasy, cosmology describes real metaphysical relationships people have to the beings around them. It is more than an imaginative structure, as Eggan (2022) might have it. It is more than an affective attachment to colonialism. I might also describe this as a cosmology of property, or a cosmology of dwelling (drawing from Heidegger 2008 and Ingold 1993). Colonialism insinuates itself into the world of essences and spirits. It influences the way people envision and relate to their world. As my interlocutors have it, there is a world behind this one of

[47] These plants are not Marx's proletarians; they have not been dispossessed of the commons and forced to work for their means of survival. Of course, many of these plants have been removed from their original ecological contexts and forced to 'work' for the benefit of homeowners. This points to a different kind of labor relationship, not exactly a capitalist one. One might be tempted to make the slavery analogy (being ripped from one's home and forced to work), but I don't think that fits either. Plants are cared for and feted; they are placed almost above the human in terms of pure devotion of resources by the owner. It's more than reproducing a workforce at a subsistence level. It's reining in the excesses of plants.

partially seen beings that can only be reached through the ritual mediation of gardening. This is the realm of cosmology—not a politically void realm, but one vitalized by the kind of colonial and plantation histories I have been describing. To create the world otherwise is also to intervene on the metaphysical plane, to articulate different modes of relating to other-than-human beings (and perhaps human spirits as well). It is not enough to demystify. Or to demystify is to miss the point: there's a whole host of relationships out there that the move of uncovering delegitimizes and casts aside, but that are deeply felt and an important part of human and other-than-human experience.

Adopting the term cosmopolitics from Stengers[48] (2010) and the title of this section from Sahlins (2021) and Chu (2010), I use cosmology as a framework to think about the ways settlers relate to their (our) surroundings. As I detailed prior, this is not a purely secular, material relationship. Property is not a secular relation to land. The words and actions of my interlocutors demanded other kinds of engagement and other vectors of politics. This line of thinking is also inspired by Conklin (2020), whose work on the relationship between cosmology and social relations among Wari' communities is instructive in thinking through politics beyond the material world. For the Wari', the nature of the underworld provided "repositories of knowledge of other possible forms of social organization and ways of dealing with hierarchical authority" (Conklin 2020, 120).

I might think of colonial cosmology operating in a similarly relational vein, only with a different thrust. It has something to say about how people relate to location, how they make claims to their place in the world. Here, cosmology isn't a warning against other, more potentially repressive forms of social organization. Those have already come to pass via colonial

[48] But rather than 'cosmopolitan politics,' 'cosmological politics.'.

dispossession and enclosure. I offer instead that colonial cosmology is an idealized form of settler capitalism, a kinder one in which colonialism is relegated to a relic of the past, no longer relevant, and people enter into Smithian free contracts with the spirit of the garden. This spirit might take the form of a teacher, a healer, or a divine patron, depending on which homeowner one asks. Conveniently, the spirit has just what the homeowner needs to realize the value of the garden. A skeptic might describe this cosmology as fantasy, or in Eggan's language as pure imagination, but it has very real effects on the world. Reckoning with colonialism requires wholesale cosmological change. It calls for altering the way settlers envision their (our) world.

What makes up the contents of this cosmology? I will draw a brief and incomplete sketch of the world as it is known through the bodies of homeowners and gardeners. I don't attempt to draw a genealogy of spirituality (is it the return of the *anima mundi* and some sort of hylozoism? Does it have to do with a return to Eden? Does it draw from New Age spirituality? Is there a latent, constant animism that has persisted into western postmodernity? Or does it emerge from outside of western metaphysics?). Rather, I chart an outline of the cosmology as it was laid out to

me by my interlocutors so that I can begin to discuss its implications, then venture into what a cosmopolitical contestation of settler colonialism might look like.

I offer the following cosmological components, generalized from my interview and participant observation data (hopefully they will look familiar):

1) Wholeness, order, and rhythm.
2) A moral architecture of gardens and gardening.
3) Beauty, artistry, and aesthetics.

The garden is a place where seasons pass, where plants come into bloom when signaled by their environment and add color to the scene. The garden (and the property as a whole) is envisioned as a closed system with parts working in harmony to enhance its overall effect. Its being is always being-for-another. That other is sometimes the gardener (only ever partially), but ultimately the homeowner. The homeowner receives value by syncing up to the rhythms of their garden. They begin to look out for blooms, to notice when plants are done flowering. I'm recalling Deb's discussion of beginning to know her garden through anticipation and attunement.

The cosmological garden has a moral bent to it. Homeowners such as Deb, Rick, and Eric make claims about what belongs, what doesn't, and what constitutes good human activity. It's laudable to care for the garden, especially if one is open to the more-than-material satisfactions it might provide. Rote work and uninvested care don't cut it for these homeowners. They're morally flat, even objectionable. It's moral to care for and care about the garden. Moreover, there's a moral burden on the homeowner to make the land productive through improvement. I don't mean productive in the original agricultural sense, rather in the cultivation of beauty. This adds a fold to Locke's moral order of property. The homeowner is creating beauty, and increasingly, with the emphasis on native plants, pollinators, and rain gardens, ecological wellness. There's also a hierarchy of good and bad plants in the garden, a continuum (albeit a

disputed and sometimes cloudy one) that runs from native/beautiful introduced species to ugly and unwanted weeds and invasives.

I might extend this moral architecture to describe property as *sacred* within the colonial cosmology. By that I mean that people have a nonsecular relationship to land via property. This is explicitly true for Deb, but also true for Eric and Rick, who feel that the garden offers them teaching, healing, a connection to childhood, or a link to transcendent nature. They feel a deep investment in the garden, and they get something out of it. These feelings extend beyond material matter into the spiritual world. Property must be cared for; it requires great time and labor. More than that, it calls for the attachment of the homeowner (as mediated by the worker) as a desiring being. The worker must become such a desiring being. They must push themselves beyond the secular bounds of knowledge and wage labor into vocation and commitment. They must attune themselves to the demands and provisions of the garden as a metaphysical being. As in Chu (2010), the cosmology of colonialism goes "beyond the economic terms of rational utility" (35) into claims about how space should be ordered and how people should behave. To quote Chu again, the "mortal sphere of value production [is anchored] to the more basic and generative logic of an encompassing spiritual economy" (ibid, 191-2).

Finally, the garden is an aesthetic production, one with historical ties to English aristocracy, imperial circulation of plants, and plantation slavery. It is a space for the artistic labor of the plant to coincide with the individual flair of the gardener. The gardener is an interpreter or curator, bringing out the best in each plant. The gardener's discretion decides what gets highlighted and what gets ripped out. The garden is a space for contemplation of beauty—this relates to the tenet of order and rhythm. It is designed intelligently—by the innate knowledge of the plants (they just *know* how best to grow), by the technique of the gardener, and perhaps by God or the inherent divine presence within the garden. The garden is a means of connection to

the divine. By communing with nature, the disciple connects with a power transcendent. One must first believe in the garden.

Gardening as a ritual act remakes the cosmology of the garden. Property and so-called rightful claims to place are reinstituted through the act of gardening (Seed 1995). More than that, gardening gives people the ability to connect with other-than-humans, whether physical plants or beings more metaphysical. The gardener, through their activity and their presence, is a medium. They allow homeowners who wouldn't otherwise have the time or ability to work in the garden to connect with it. They abide by the moral codes of the garden—what to touch, what to fete, what to enhance, what to modify. The role of labor is to give a piece of the transcendent, the divine, the good life to the client. Through the rules laid out by the homeowner, the gardener, through their labor, grants access to the partially seen cosmological world of the garden.

Even if you remain skeptical about the garden as a spirited entity, hopefully you will agree that land in the Virginian context is a relation. Here I depart from Liboiron (2021), Coulthard (2014), and Deloria Jr. (1973) to argue that land is not *only* an abstraction for the settler. These authors set up a binary that I want to trouble, which I believe my ethnographic data justifies. Colonized land can indeed be approached as an abstraction, as embodying a fetish called property value. This has not been my focus in this paper, but it remains strikingly relevant.

Instead, I have (I hope) added to their analysis by pointing out that land-as-property is *also* a relation. Eliade (1987) describes this process as a *reconsecration* of the earth after a deliberately forgotten removal of Indigenous inhabitants. Land-as-relation doesn't operate the same way for the settler as the original residents. As I have discussed, the relation for the settler can be described as *care and mastery*, which acts in an historical register that goes back to the plantation, rather than mutual obligation. Land is still a relation, but a different kind of relation. Its political vector is vertical rather than horizontal[49].

Maybe, in the scheme of things, the worker is making whole what modernity has sundered. They're returning life to its 'premodern' cosmological integration. They're reintroducing animistic spirits into social life. They're the media of re-enchantment. The holism they restore remains capitalistic; its relations are constituted by market mechanisms. There is no alternative, not even in the spirit world. Then, where to go from there? What is the gardener to do but to remake, over and over, the cosmologies of colonialism?

Other Gardens are Possible

What I am attempting to describe is a kind of ongoing cosmological contestation. The colonial property regime makes a claim to metaphysics, but so do people with other modes of being in the world. And in this contest, gardeners are not the obedient footsoldiers of colonialism and the plantation order. They protest; they slack off; they do a poorer job than they could have. The real picture is not as cut-and-dried as maybe I have presented. The gardener is not a passive medium for the reproduction of colonial relations. What I have said, I have said for convenience.

[49] This is obviously a simplification. There are vertical and horizontal elements within each, but I believe this accurately describes the prevailing relations.

My intent is to stay with the cosmological without distancing myself from it—as a settler or as a scholar. I'm trying, as Benjamin (2020) had it, "to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it." Anyone who is invested in making different sorts of social relations in the world cannot abandon metaphysics to the powers that be. That's why it's not enough to demystify or critique. An activist must stay with cosmopolitics just as much as with the material dimensions of their work. My goal here has been to spell out the dominant cosmopolitical order so that it may be met and countered.

What might an alternative cosmology look like? It would be presumptuous of me to try to spell it out completely, but Conklin's work might be instructive. If cosmology can act as a repository of knowledge, as a place to hold past or possible social relations, then what would it look like to banish the violence and coercion of colonial capitalism to the spiritual realm? The metaphysical world would begin to look a lot less Edenic. It would reflect (absorb?) the violence that preceded it. What if, instead of being a moral good supported by spiritual reward, settler sovereignty and the maintenance of private property were regarded as hellish acts? What if wage labor was known to be an indefensible slight against one's spirit[50]? This would have to be accompanied by material changes: to start, returning land to Indigenous sovereignty and stewardship, and reorganizing people's ability to access wants and needs outside the requirements to work for a wage.

This is not just a descriptive project. I also want to articulate alternatives—ideas that others have come up with and practices people have engaged in that defy the kind of normative garden and labor relations I describe in this essay. These are critical to the project of creating the world otherwise. I want to pick up on threads other people have already begun: there are other

[50] Arguably, this is already the case, especially for people working unrewarding, onerous, low-paying jobs. Echoes of early Marx here, creativity as species-being stifled by work.

worlds within and outside the one that appears so hegemonic. Hegemony is an incomplete project. There are always gaps in the dominant domain. I will bring some of these to the fore—from the past, in the present, and oriented towards the future—to demonstrate that there are alternatives, and that they have already begun.

Labor as Care

Caring labor sits at the heart of wage labor and unwaged labor (Graeber 2018, Hobart and Kneese 2020, James 2012). To work for another is to enhance their status and their ability to access the good life (Graeber 2018). What would it look like to wrest care from the vise-grip of the wage? To transform social relations from hierarchical obligation in which care is bound up with domination to something approaching mutual obligation[51]? To work for another is to care for them, as my ethnographic stories have shown (think of Rian going out of their way to prop up a fallen climbing hydrangea, *H. anomala*). The worker begins to identify with the needs and desires of their client[52]. In the garden, workers are beholden to the desires of the homeowners, the boss, and perhaps even the garden itself. Their creativity is appropriated for the benefit of powerful others. For Lamming (1985), gardening is a creative activity, a "[form] of labor which could not possibly be done without some exercise of the mind" (14).

[51] See *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Piepzna-Saramasinha for some ideas.
[52] An incomplete process. The worker is not totally subject to the desires of the superior, e.g., cracking jokes about a rude customer as soon as they leave the store.

To create is always creating-for-another, against the Marxist idea that one's labor is one's own. Creativity is not an act of solitary genius (Wong 2013), but part of circuits of relations. The point is to come into de-estranged relationships with each other so that a person might also enjoy the relations their labor creates. That is to say, labor creates more than objects or commodities. It establishes relations between people. This is one of Marx's (2001) key points. Freeing care and creativity might be accomplished by creating networks of mutual aid (e.g., Spade 2020) where caring relations are not circumscribed by the wage. By freeing our[53] creative capacities from coercion, we begin to create the conditions for collective flourishing. And from a posthuman or spiritually inclined view, this includes the creative capacities of all life—a vital force in the world.

To work a job that one finds meaningful is to risk being exploited for that meaning (Graeber 2018). Meaning is offered as part of the payment—usually as a metaphysical benefit that justifies the employer paying the worker less in material terms (ibid). Still, people find meaning in their jobs, and that is worth paying attention to. Instead of uncritically valorizing that meaning, we might take the fragments of pleasure we experience as part of work to craft

[53] Anyone dissatisfied with capitalist relations.

something different (Weeks 2011). This new structure of care need not be totally new, but selectively take from what we enjoy about work, what brings us pleasure, especially the pleasure of caring for others, and sow them as seeds for other, unalienated ways of being.

Living Alternatives

The gardens I describe here are but one type of garden. They have a history, as I've outlined, and they are enlivened by certain persistent colonial relations. Despite their dominance, other kinds of gardens and other ways of relating to land persist. I want to highlight just a few examples to demonstrate the contingency of colonial gardens and show that things just as easily could be (and have been) otherwise.

The plantation, for example, was not a totalizing or a completely realized geographical project. As I discussed, the unevenness of the land and the people inhabiting it always ran counter to Virginia planters' aspirations towards complete mastery. There were other geographies and relations to land being made in the same space. The gardening of the enslaved, the use of the yards and spaces outside of slave quarters to cultivate food, medicine, and aesthetic beauty, is one of them. Following McKittrick (2006), mine is not an attempt to uncover "lost geographies," but to offer this kind of gardening as a geographic practice in its own right that is not explicable through the logics of the planter (xii). McKittrick notes that "space and place give black lives meaning in a world that has, for the most part, incorrectly deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as 'ungeographic' and/or philosophically undeveloped" (xiii). The gardens and yards at slave quarters were just as much about place-making and relation to land and people as the planters' (and later homeowners') geometric, ordered landscape was. It seems crucial to my project not to paint the plantation as the only relevant landscaping practice in the colonial era, or the property sphere as the only contemporary mode.

While Black gardens on plantations have been “poorly documented” in the archival record, there still exists evidence of their practice in oral narrative and scattered photographs (Westmacott 1992, 3). Heath and Bennett (2000) perform an archaeology of slave quarters at Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest plantation. They argue that “through their yards, enslaved African Americans spoke to many audiences: ancestors, family members, neighbors, overseers, planters, and outsiders” (ibid, 38). Westmacott (1992) provides yards as an example of enslaved people carrying with them “agriculture, foodways, household practices, architecture, decorative arts, and religious beliefs:” in short, culture through cultivation of a different kind (101). Black geographic being was not erased by slavery. This act of performance and speaking-to via the garden was eminently geographic. It was about asserting a sense of place, and of declaring their “economic, social, and spiritual lives” (Heath and Bennett 2000, 50).

Alice Walker (1994), in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” describes the criminalization of Black creativity that was kept alive in creative labor within and outside of the working day. Gardening is one of the activities she highlights. Despite repression, coercion, and entrenched racial hierarchy, being an artist—and as with Lamming, gardening is an art—“has still been part of her [mother’s] daily life” (408). Gardening, a creative endeavor, resists in part being folded into the dominant mode as Walker’s mother performs it. CLR James (2013) argues that art and aesthetics are not reducible to social stratification or a simple historicist line. There are moments of transcendence in which beauty escapes its overdetermination by power.

Kate Brown, in a personal communication, described to me the gardens of Black people in the Washington, DC neighborhood of Deanwood in the 1920s and 30s as projects of mutual aid and community support. Residents used social “networks to pay bills and share food,” taking advantage of urban lots to grow plants for food and other uses. Residents would pass down land via “ten-dollar mortgages,” an appropriation of market mechanisms that might otherwise exclude

the possibility of home- and landownership. Food sovereignty projects, as they're now known, continue in the DC area as in other places. Brown pointed me to a list[54] of present-day urban farms and food sovereignty projects in the area.

I might also point to literature on Indigenous gardens from around the world. Schiebinger (2004) includes a description of Taino *canuco* gardens in the Caribbean which were used for food and medicine. Fausto and Goes Neves (2018) describe what western viewers might not conventionally understand as gardening practices taking place in the Amazon, massive projects of land modification and making kin with plants. Chao (2022), in her ethnography of the Marind people of West Papua, gives an account of communities incorporating plants into their networks of relation. Gow (1995), in the context of Western Amazonia, describes the process of becoming implicated with plants rather than gaining knowledge of them. Coulthard (2014), in his discussion of Dené practices, talks about creating systems of mutual relation with nonhumans. There are other ways of relating to land and to other-than-humans that the colonial garden does not capture. Of course, changing ways of relating are necessarily accompanied by other political projects such as mutual aid and Indigenous sovereignty.

The Metaphysics of Abolition

One of my guiding political principles is abolition, which signifies not only the dismantling of oppressive social forms, but their replacement with old and new modes of experimentation[55] (for its application to anthropology, see Jobson 2020). For Bonilla (2013), settler colonialism is always an incomplete project. An activist's goal might be to create more gaps in it, to replace it with other kinds of being and relating. By increasing its incompleteness,

[54] Linked here.
[55] Drawing from the podcast *One Million Experiments*.

one[56] might begin to unravel colonialism. One of the ideas abolition offers is that there will not be a single, newly hegemonic institution to replace the old. In its place will flourish other kinds of mutualistic projects, each with the autonomy to come into and out of being as it suits the needs of the people who make it up. The point of abolition is not to capture power, but to break it. I'm imagining a kind of pluralist nonstate socialism where communities get to decide how they want to organize themselves. Take the examples of Rojava or the Zapatistas, or of the mutual aid projects that cropped up in the United States in the wake of COVID. These projects are already being realized. It's not up to only me to say what those social formations might look like, or how they might evolve over time, but I will be transparent about my desires as they alter the shape of this project.

As I've strived to show here, abolition is at once a material and metaphysical intervention. At its best, it transforms how people relate to their place in the world. This includes all kinds of beings: humans, plants, animals, fungi, and the spirits people call on to understand their surroundings. The artist Zheng Bo (2021) talks about the political life of plants. By this he means the ways they move, interact, and secure resources. For him, politics includes a "more-than-human vibrancy" that sparks the basic creativity of all involved. Humans and plants practice politics together. Politics are embodied relations. His words made me think of the spiritual, not only political, life of plants. I'm trying to elaborate a kind of spiritual abolitionism which, while not forgetting the material changes people must make (for example, as Walcott 2021 has it, abolishing private property, prisons, and the police), also calls for more comprehensive change, including the spiritual realm. If property is indeed a relation—one that has been made sacred—then it must be deconsecrated and replaced with other kinds of spiritually informed relations. It is

[56] And not just individuals, collectives!

not enough to abandon the cosmological world to the workings of power, or to dismiss it as a mystification of real social relations. Abolition is also a metaphysical act.

Postscript: Ethnography as a Garden

I might think of ethnography as engaging gardens instead of field sites[57]. Gardens are multiple and varied, constituted out of a dazzling array of items to be contemplated and taken in by the observer. The nature of that contemplation is political; there is a clear gaze operating between one party and the other. The field site as the garden is always undergirded by exploited human[58] and other-than-human labor. There's a reification of nature and culture as distinct objects of study (though this probably doesn't accurately characterize much of contemporary ethnography) rather than dynamic, agential, and interrelated phenomena.

Space is enclosed, artificially delimited so that the viewer can create objects of study. There's a selective purging, as with weeding, from the image of the seemingly irrelevant and undesirable[59]. Knowledge is presented with great power of discretion on the part of the viewer. What is offered as interesting and beautiful is historically and socially contingent. What is highlighted is supposed to be silent, manipulable, and manageable, but the object of study inevitably breaks through imposed frameworks with irrepressible vitality. Ethnography and gardening, in their dominant modes, are ultimately reliant on colonial institutions, property enclosure and the university[60], both of which must be abolished in their present forms.

In this essay I have tried to show that the garden is not an ahistorical space, that aesthetics are germane to politics, and that ways of knowing and relating, material and spiritual, are worth

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[57] Riffing off the idea of the field site as structured by plantation relations (Shange 2019), which I've shown to be relevant to the contemporary garden.
[58] Historically, Black. It's worth noting the ways 'human' imposes a universal subject.
[59] I've done this too. I wonder how unavoidable this kind of choice is. Knowledge can only ever be partial, situated, selective (Haraway 1988). As participants and observers, we can fess up to the level of our ignorance.
[60] See, for example, the Abolish the University? zine and digital material.

grappling with in the many movements towards new and better worlds. Ethnography can have a role to play in making knowledge with other beings (human and more) and in articulating the possibility of different modes of relating to one another, the stuff of politics. What I've done here is closer to studying up (Nader 1972), attempting to apply anthropological ideas to better understand the powerful workings of settler colonialism in Virginia. But part of the promise of anthropology, among other modes of inquiry, is that things could just as easily be otherwise. To reframe Ursula K. LeGuin (1973), that great anthropologist of as-yet-unrealized worlds, society (she says love, which could very well become a guiding ethic of a new society), "doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new.[61]"

[61] Thank you to my partner Arda, who introduced me to that quote and who is the embodiment of its ethic.

Appendix: Plants mentioned in the text[62]

Abelia (e.g., *Linnaea chinensis*): the species is native to parts of China, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Ryukyu Islands of Japan (eFloras). Part of Caprifoliaceae, the honeysuckle family. The genus is named after Clark Abel, the English naturalist who accompanied Lord Amherst to China in 1816 (BHL). His attempt to bring seeds and plants back to England failed. Introduced to England in 1844 by Robert Fortune (Coats 1992).

Amaryllis (e.g., *Hippeastrum puniceum*): first described by Lamarck in 1783 as a member of *Amaryllis* (Hortus Camdenensis), the *Hippeastrum puniceum* is native to tropical regions of South America (Kew). Introduced to Texas and Louisiana in the US (Kew).

Aster (e.g., *Symphyotrichum adnatum*): *S. adnatum* is not a true aster, which are mostly restricted to Europe with the exception of *Aster alpinus*, which is found in Asia and North America (BHL). This member of the family Asteraceae is native to the southeastern US, formerly identified by Nutt. in 1834 as *Aster adnatus* (Kew).

Azalea (e.g., *Rhododendron indicum*): native to Japan and later introduced to Korea, China, and Myanmar (Kew). Introduced to Holland from Japan in the 17th century but didn't truly take hold in Europe until its reintroduction to England from China in 1808 (Cothran 2003).

Banana (e.g., *Musa acuminata*): native to southern Asia (Kew). The example species I've selected is a species from which many sweet, edible bananas are cultivated. Technically an herbaceous plant with a "trunk" made of layered leaves.

Baptisia (e.g., *Baptisia australis*): a perennial native to much of eastern and central US (Kew). Also known as 'false indigo' for its dye properties, it is a member of the Fabaceae (legume) family. Identifiable for its asparagus-like stalks and vibrant blue flowers.

Black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*): native to much of North America and introduced to parts of the Northern Hemisphere in Europe and Asia, the black-eyed susan grows as an annual or perennial (Kew). Identifiable for its black-and-yellow flowers.

Boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*): grows as a shrub or tree; native to Europe, North Africa, and Iran (Kew). Its evergreen leaves are not discolored by trimming, allowing it to be used as a common topiary and border shrub (Cothran 2003).

Calla lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*): native to southern Africa, the calla lily grows in a seasonally dry tropical environment (Kew). Not a true lily. Listed in Linnaeus's *Systema vegetabilium* of 1826 (BHL).

Camellia (*Camellia japonica*): native to China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan (Kew). Listed in Carl Thunber's *Flora japonica* of 1784 (BHL). Grows as a tree or shrub. Flowers early in the year.

[62] Species named when positively identified in the field. Example species given in ambiguous cases. Names have been checked and updated via World Flora Online.

Citronella (*Pelargonium cucullatum*): native to South Africa (Kew). Not a true citronella (*Citronella sp.*) or citronella grass (*Cymbopogon sp.*); actually a scented geranium.

Columbine (e.g., *Aquilegia canadensis*): a perennial that grows from eastern and central Canada to northern Mexico. Has medicinal and alimentary purposes (Kew).

Crape myrtle (e.g., *Lagerstroemia indica*): a shrub or tree native to southeast and east Asia later introduced to South Asia and the Americas (Kew). Used for medicine, fuel, and food. Notable for its thin, shedding bark that is likened to crape paper.

Day lily (e.g., *Hemerocallis fulva*): native to China, Korea, and Japan, *H. fulva* grows as a perennial bulb notable for its striking orange flowers (Kew). Some homeowners I spoke to considered it an undesirable invasive, but others preferred it.

Dianthus (e.g., *Dianthus barbatus*): the dianthus "Sweet William" is native to parts of Europe and east Asia. It has medicinal and alimentary uses (Kew).

Gardenia (e.g., *Gardenia jasminoides*): a shrub with waxy leaves and white flowers native to east and southeast Asia. First described by John Ellis in 1761, it came into circulation in English gardens (Kew).

Geranium (e.g., *Geranium himalayense*): native to the Himalayan region of Central Asia, this perennial geranium is known for being hardy and for its lilac-colored flowers. It has environmental and medicinal uses (Kew).

Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*): native to eastern China, *G. biloba* has medicinal and alimentary uses. A gymnosperm, unlike many other plants in this list (Kew).

Grass (e.g., *Cynodon dactylon, Poa pratensis*): *C. dactylon* is native to much of Africa, Europe, Asia, and Australia. It grows mostly in subtropical biomes but has been introduced to others (Kew). *P. pratensis*, on the other hand, is native to the subarctic to temperate biomes of the northern hemisphere (Kew).

Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana*): native range stretches through Europe to the Caucasus. Notable for its twisted, knobby trunks and branches (Kew).

Honeysuckle (e.g., *Lonicera japonica*): native to temperate biomes in East Asia (Kew). It's known for its sweet, honey-like flowers which are sucked like a candy straw.

Hosta (e.g., *Hosta kiyosumiensis*): this perennial grows natively in the temperate biome of Japan (Kew). It grows via rhizome and is easily propagated.

Hydrangea (e.g., *Hydrangea quercifolia*): the oakleaf hydrangea *H. quercifolia* is native to the southeast United States, growing as a shrub with oak-like leaves (Kew). Other prominent hydrangeas in this paper include *H. macrophylla*, which is native to Japan and grows in temperate East Asia (Kew), and the climbing hydrangea, *H. anomala*, which is native to the Himalayas, Myanmar, central and southern China, and Taiwan (Kew).

Iris (e.g., *Iris pseudacorus*): this iris is native to much of Europe, Central Asia and parts of Northern Africa. It has been introduced to much of North America, among other places. It grows mainly in temperate biomes (Kew).

Jasmine (e.g., *Jasminum officinale*): the native range of this jasmine stretches from Central Asia to central China. It has medicinal and alimentary properties and grows in temperate biomes (Kew).

Liriope (*Liriope muscari*): native to temperate biomes in East Asia (Kew). It produces lilac-colored flowers and is considered invasive to Virginia (PVN).

Magnolia (e.g., *Magnolia grandiflora*): native to the southeast US ranging from North Carolina to Texas, it was introduced to Virginia and parts of the Caribbean. It is used to treat circulatory system issues (Kew).

Mimosa (*Mimosa pudica*): its native range includes parts of Mexico and the American tropics (Kew). Its leaves fold inward when touched, echoed in the Latin *pudica*, or "shrinking."

Mint (e.g., *Mentha spicata*): grows natively in Europe, Central Asia, and China (Kew). It is used consumed as a tea or garnish and has medicinal properties for digestive system issues. It grows readily in Virginia and can easily take over a garden bed.

Mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*): as the Latin name hints, *O. japonicus* is native to parts of East Asia, stretching to Vietnam and the Philippines. A subtropical perennial (Kew).

Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*): native to the eastern US. It grows as an evergreen shrub on rocky mountain slopes and forests. It prefers a temperate biome (Kew).

Nandina (*Nandina domestica*): a shrub native to central and southern China. Its foliage turns red in the winter, and it produces appealing (though toxic) red berries prized for their decorative effect (Kew).

Oak (e.g., *Quercus alba*): this tree is native to eastern North America, including the US and Canada. It prefers a temperate biome (Kew).

Osmanthus (*Osmanthus spp.*): this genus is native to Turkey, the Himalayas, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. It is also found in New Caledonia (Kew). It is a member of Oleaceae, the olive family.

Pansy (*Viola x wittrockiana*): a hybrid flower comprised of a cross between *V. altaica*, *V. lutea subsp. sudetica,* and *V. tricolor* (Kew).

Peony (e.g., *Paeonia x suffrictosa*): a hybrid peony made up of *P. jishanensis* and *P. rockii*. Native to China (Kew).

Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*): native to Europe up to the Caucasus and introduced to Virginia and elsewhere in North America. A temperate-preferring perennial vining plant (Kew).

Rhododendron (e.g., *Rhododendron catawbiense*): native to the southern range of the Appalachian Mountains. Grows as a shrub or tree in a temperate biome (Kew).

Rose (*Rosa spp.*): this genus is native to the temperate and subtropical Northern Hemisphere (Kew). A woody perennial with thorns, it has hundreds of species and thousands of cultivars.

Sage (e.g., *Salvia officinalis*): native to western and southern Europe. A member of the mint or dead nettle family Lamiaceae, it has alimentary and medicinal uses (Kew).

Silverberry (e.g., *Elaeagnus commutata*): native to Alaska, Canada, and northern and western portions of the continental US. It grows as a shrub or tree in temperate regions (Kew).

Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*): an herbaceous flowering plant native to northern Mexico, eastern United States, and eastern Canada. It grows from a rhizome and has drooping, bell-shaped flowers (Kew).

Spiderwort (*Tradescantia virginiana*): native to the eastern United States, Canada, and Cuba. Grows as an herbaceous perennial with purple-blue flowers and tubular stems (Kew).

Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*): a subshrub native to southwest Europe. It has culinary and medicinal uses (Kew).

Violet (e.g., *Viola sororia*): a species of violet native to northern Mexico, the eastern United States, and eastern Canada, primarily in temperate biomes (Kew).

Weeping plum (*Prunus mume*): native to southern China and Southeast Asia. A deciduous tree that prefers a temperate biome (Kew).

Weeping redbud (*Cercis canadensis*): the redbud is native to northern Mexico and eastern and central United States. A deciduous tree that prefers temperate regions (Kew).

Yucca (*Yucca filamentosa*): a perennial native to the southeast United States, including Virginia. Its tall stalks carry white flowers whose petals can be eaten (Kew).

Zinnia (*Zinnia spp.*): a genus native to the southern US, Central America, and parts of South America. They grow as annuals, shrubs, and subshrubs (Kew).

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