

Botanical (Re)Collections: Gardens as Archives in American Culture

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To write the history of gardens, John Dixon Hunt suggests, is to study “why they came into being, what advantages and pleasures ... accrue from them, and how and why they have survived, changed or vanished” (6). The same questions can be asked about archives. Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor reflect on the archive as a capacious term in modern scholarship, encompassing “the collection, the inventory, the library, the museum,” but the garden, although absent from Hirsch and Taylor’s list, results from the same processes of collecting specimens consistent with a collective imaginary and weeding out undesirables. Both respond to similar mechanisms of knowledge production, transmission, and preservation; both are metaphors, spaces, systems (Taylor), transient and changeable, home to “vulnerable lives” (Hirsch and Spizer). They are spaces of paradox, border-crossing, and in-betweenness which equally dispossess and liberate.

Garden history is archival history: Botanical archives, like other archives, are (trans)cultural and human-made, inside and outside, private and public, enclosed spaces that still always relate to the world beyond their material or imagined boundaries. In fact, gardens are sometimes explicitly set up as archives, such as in the Audubon House and Tropical Garden in Florida, or the Smithsonian Gardens project, which features “flowers, herbs, and other plants selected for their importance to Americans as ways of honoring Memory” (Common Ground: Our American Garden, website). Gardens as archives are about heritage, memory and conservation, but they are also about the present and the future. The temporal dimension of gardens emphasizes how archiving always also functions as an intervention (cf. Bennett) and future-making practice (cf. Harrison). If archives are “leaky economies of generative and persistent acts in time” (Clarke et. al. 11), this is particularly true for the garden with its ephemeral, continuously changing nature.

We draw these connections because we are interested in exploring the intersections of gardens and archives as physical places as well as intangible sites of cultural memory and future-making, where neglect leads to comparably devastating consequences. Archival oblivion and the trope of the vanishing garden, annihilated by aggressive urbanization or other *forces majeures* (Furlanetto & Grider 292), result in similar landscapes of dust, waste, and cultural obliteration.

Studying the American garden as an archive allows us to shed light on the multiple ways in which gardens have functioned as sites of power and resistance in the making of American history (including present and future) and nationhood. Garden imaginaries have been central to vocabularies of conquest and colonization, from the Eden-like innocence of Columbus’s *otro mundo* to the Biblical land of “milk and honey,” the

Southern plantocracy, the yeoman and the pastoral, the centrality of gardens to property discourses around the Homestead Act and the American Dream, down to the “paradises lost” to contemporary overtourism. But the reverse is also true, as gardens happen to be a recurrent postcolonial space. It is not by coincidence that one of the central metaphors of postcolonial studies, “hybridity,” comes from the field of botany, as postcolonial garden narratives often see the rise of creolized ecologies (Mardorossian). By a similar token, garden metaphors have dominated decolonial narratives of belonging. The trope of the planet as a fragile garden in need of protection, but also capable of unimaginable destruction radiates through ecocritical textualities.

Contemporary urban-pastoral concerns such as urban gardening (within or outside the boundaries of gentrification), urban farming, green cities, veganism, and plant-based food philosophies show that gardens “are both entities within themselves and a focus of human speculations, propositions and negotiations, concerning what it is to live in the world” (Hunt 6). Gardens and gardening practices are also inextricably interrelated with their mediations in other cultural archives that contribute fundamentally to the negotiations above – such as garden books and magazines offering gardening advice, television, film, digital media, museums, botanical collections other than the garden itself. Now and in the past, gardening as a social (archiving) practice builds individual and collective identities, produces different positionalities of subjectivity (including expertise), shapes and is shaped by forms of knowledge, and is constitutive of biopolitical rationalities and governmental power.

In this workshop we propose to explore both the garden as material archive and the cultural constructions of gardens in archives that imagine them into being. We invite 15-20 minutes papers that may address the following topics and beyond:

- The garden (as archive) in American culture: postcolonial, decolonial, and transcultural perspectives
- The garden (as archive) in American culture: ecocritical and ecofeminist perspectives, assemblage theory
- The garden in African American culture
- The garden in Indigenous cultures
- The garden as a female archive: Women ancestry and the garden memoir
- The material history of specific gardens (e.g. botanical gardens, private gardens, gardens as museum / museum gardens)
- The history of traveling plants
- Gardens in television, film, digital media, and media archives (e.g. video games, social media)
- Practices of gardening in constructing American identities and places
- The gardener trope in American literature and culture
- Ecocritical dis/u/heterotopias and vanishing gardens

- Garden/ing as identity, ethnicity, resistance
- The spatiality and temporalities of gardens/garden archives
- Garden economies
- Garden aesthetics: gardens as aesthetic objects and aesthetic experiences
- ...

Confirmed Speaker:

Sladja Blažan (University Marburg)

Earth Spirits: Reading the (Post) Colonial Garden Archive in Elizabeth Nunez' *Prospero's Daughter* with Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden* (Book)

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