

GARDENS ARE US, WE ARE NATURE: TRANSCENDING ANTIQUITY AND MODERNITY*

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ABSTRACT. The history of gardens and the history of humans are linked inextricably, especially in the context of environment. As people and their institutions have changed, so too have gardens. This brief essay illustrates some important aspects in the evolution of gardens, exploring three seemingly discrete, but actually interconnected, notions: the antiquity of gardens, combining archaeological data with ethnographic parallels; the role of gardens in the changing spatial manifestations of agriculture, from dump heaps to amber waves of grain; and the transformation of domestic space, the literal and figurative reconstruction of garden fences into house walls. Changes are discussed as inadvertent products, rather than as consequences of deliberate actions. Modern ideas about categorizing landscapes are challenged further. The nature/culture dualism is a myth even at the household scale, as is our traditional way of looking at the world. *Keywords:* gardens, houses, landscapes, modernity, nature.

Il faut cultiver nôtre jardin.

—Voltaire, 1759

The relationship between people and plants is as old as the human species itself, and it is certainly as strong as ever. By extension, the relationship between people and gardens has great antiquity. If one accepts a biblical interpretation, people were created in a garden. If one accepts a scientific explanation, early people were gatherers who harvested the bounty of the land and over time became so familiar with certain plants that they domesticated them, most probably in protected areas near their homes—in protogardens (see, for example, Gremillion 1997). Gardens remain of fundamental importance to people in the twenty-first century. To illustrate, a recent online search of one major “dot-com” book dealer revealed no fewer than 109,852 books for sale on the topic. Over time and across continents, the morphologies and functions of gardens have changed (for instance, Kimber 1973; Westmacott 1992), but their nature—their importance—has not. This essay traces, albeit briefly, the transformation of gardens and, by extension, of people and nature. It is a personal contemplation based on more than twenty-five years of experience studying gardens as agricultural landscapes in prehistoric, historic, and present-day contexts, mainly but not exclusively in Latin America, and reflecting on commonalities and linkages, particularly in the context of contemporary geographical thought. In so doing, this article adds a new dimension, one of scale, microscale, to recent chal-

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