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MIGRANTS' DOMESTIC GARDENS: A PEOPLE PLANT EXPRESSION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF MIGRATION

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With the recent interest in cultural diversity in Australia, there has been a growing recognition of the value of intangible heritage - the heritage which lies in cultural practice and ways of life. Migrant gardens are an aspect of this intangible heritage. They are frequently unselfconscious expressions of the complex way people relate to places - new places and old places.

Australia has a long history of migration and since 1788, the garden has been significant in creating a connection with the new landscape. Even before 1788 migration was also a way of life for the Aboriginal people, namely, the internal migration associated with nomadism. The process of creating a garden for the Koori and Murri people was just as important as for the Europeans - but it was represented as stories and narratives of the dreamtime where gardens were encoded into silent songs and initiation rights.

The first gardens, the Aboriginal gardens, were conceptual ones derived from mystical and intimate readings of the landscape. Later, the 17th century Dutch and Portuguese naval men read this same landscape from the edge, but it did not appear to offer what they were looking for. It was not until the 18th century that Cook and Banks looked more closely at the Australian continent. Banks was so entranced by the plants that he declared the late 18th century to be the era of Australian plants. Because of Banks' work the first British settlers came with knowledge of Australian plants, albeit somewhat sketchy.



View of early settlement taken from *Antipodes Observed* by Cedric Flower

Thus the British migrant/colonists had visions for this new country which were complex and some were quite utopian. Many imagined that they were coming to an antipodean Garden of Eden and this attitude was still evident in the British and European migrants in the 1950s. Even the convicts were aware of Utopian possibilities in the new settlement, despite the fact that their realization of such dreams would have to be deferred. Of course the shattering of these dreams on first arrival was universal for convicts and officers alike. Many immigrants in the 1950s were similarly disturbed and shocked by the reality of this large, open, flat place of strange colours, sounds and smells. It was not the tropical paradise they had been led to believe.

Beatrice Bligh, in her seminal book *Cherish the Earth - a History of Gardening in Australia*,¹

opens with the following quote from Mark Twain, written in 1897.

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer,... It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises, and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.

- *Following the Equator*, Mark Twain, 1897, as cited in Beatrice Bligh, *Cherish the Earth*, 1980.

It could be that the history reads *'like the most beautiful lies and all of a fresh new sort'* because there appeared to be no tradition that the early colonists could comprehend. The immigrants were unable to see the complexity of the existing Aboriginal culture and its relationship to the land. To some extent in the 1950s the existing Australian culture and its lack of stridency was also mystifying to the migrants of the 1950s; thus all the immigrant groups from 1788 on have felt free to create fresh beautiful *'lies'*, much of which has been translated into the gardens.

Although the early immigrant settlers brought the concepts of British garden making, they also brought ideas for a new place and this was certainly evident in the plants in the gardens. They brought with them willow slips from St Helena near Napoleon's tomb, and coffee, cocoa, cotton, bananas, oranges, lemons and stone pines from Rio de Janeiro and figs, bamboo, sugar cane, apples, quinces, pears and oaks from Capetown, and later grape vines from France. This exotic combination was sometimes planted among remnant eucalypts creating gardens that were truly different - fresh beautiful lies that they were recreating England.



Brownlow hill – an early garden

Watkin Tench's description of a settlers farm in Parramatta in 1793 ² could be the description of an Italian garden today in Carlton or Leichhardt.

He has a well laid little garden, in which I found him and his wife busily at work. He praised her industry to me. He who looks forward to eating grapes from his own vine, and to sitting under the shade of his own fig tree must labour in every country; here he must exert more than ordinary activity ...

- Watkin Tench, *Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson*, 1793.

In recent discussions with members of the Greek community in Australia, I asked how one would know if one had walked into a Greek area in Melbourne. Every person in the group said - by the plants in the garden - the fig, the lemon, the grapes, the oregano and the olive.

The migrant experience after arriving in Australia tends to follow a certain sequence. There is the initial grief over a lost place, particularly for the refugees, then there is a recognition of the value of their specific migrant community within Australia, especially the extended family and the cultural practices that have been transposed. In a paradoxical way it is the very sharing of memories in the extended family and in the migrant community which helps the migrant to accept the new country. Creating a garden is an early stage of the process of such acceptance. It provides a way for the migrant to start to make the unfamiliar feel familiar, but it also does much more. Creating a garden helps assuage the experiences of war and repression. There is a strong healing process in recreating a natural order, in responding to seasons, and in producing food. Once the unfamiliar begins to assume aspects of the home

country, then the migrant can selectively assimilate those aspects of the host culture which are appealing. Often, however, the process of assimilation is unconscious and it is this unselfconscious hybridisation which results in the most intriguing aspects of migration, for example, the Latvian gardens at Amity Point, Queensland have unselfconsciously assimilated much of the tropical Queensland garden practice.

Migrant Influences on Australian Gardens

The process of settling in the young colony resulted in a number of garden styles. The early geometric survival gardens were soon replaced with larger ornamental gardens. Most of the migrants up to the 1830s came from England, Scotland and Ireland, but by the late 1830s a large group of Germans (or more correctly Prussians) who were fleeing political problems came to Australia and settled in South Australia. Here they created gardens which reflected their relationship to the Prussian landscape. They created vineyards, olive groves and utilitarian gardens.

In the 1850s with the discovery of gold, there was a massive migration to Australia. Large numbers of Chinese came from Asia and California. As well, British, European and North American migrants came to the goldfields. The Chinese brought a particular type of garden style - the Chinese market garden. This was a garden style derived from rural peasants who worked the land. The highly evolved Chinese garden style of the nobility had a much more contorted journey before it arrived in Australia - going firstly to Britain and Europe as Chinoiserie, and later to Australia through the British gentry who established their gardens in the late 19th century.



Bunnerong Chinese Market Garden



Rockdale Chinese Market Garden

After the 1860s, migration to Australia fell back to the relative small flow which had preceded the discovery of gold. The immigrants were predominantly British, although there were still a number of Germans and Scandinavians. The Scandinavians went to Tasmania and Queensland and the Germans to South Australia. The German botanists during this time played a fundamental role in Australian garden styles as Directors of the Melbourne and Adelaide Botanic Gardens.



Adelaide Botanic Gardens



Tasmanian early garden

In the late 1890s diverse immigrant groups were starting to arrive - a few Greeks and Italians, more French but again the largest immigrant group were the Germans. Most of the European immigrants went to rural areas, often as single families in country towns. The French, however, settled in Hunters Hill in Sydney, where they developed interesting gardens which responded to the picturesque setting and the perception of Australia as an exotic tropical

paradise. This paradise notion of Australia was constantly evident in European perceptions, so one can consider that the tropical paradise garden was and is a continuing garden style in Australia.



19th century Picturesque garden, Canberra

By 1901, the burgeoning sense of nationalism along with the increasing growth of suburbs produced the Federation garden style. Although elements of these gardens idealized Australian flora and fauna, the garden style essentially followed the prototypes developed for the Garden City Movement of Britain. The gardens were now part of the street and footpath. The streets were wide and planted with dense evergreen avenue trees, only a grassy strip and path separated the boundary fence from the street. But it was the 'garden suburb' rather than the garden itself which was the style. Individual gardens were part of the whole. Haberfield in Sydney was the first garden suburb and exemplifies a collection of Federation gardens. In the late 1980s, migrant gardens in Haberfield created particular tensions in relation to the heritage qualities of a garden suburb.



Federation Gardens overtaken by palms in 1980s

The migration flow between the wars was similar to that before World War 1, however, migrants were predominantly English and European; usually individuals seeking to create a new life. One such individual was Paul Sorensen, a Danish gardener who set up a garden design practice in the Blue Mountains. He developed a particular garden style which is characteristic of some upper Blue Mountains gardens.



1930s garden at Leura Everglades by Paul Sorensen

The European migration intake between the wars was still relatively low, most migrants preferred to go to the USA. But by the mid 1930s the predominant European immigrants were Italian, then Greek and Yugoslav - the flow from Germany and Scandinavia being

reduced considerably. Many of the Italians came out as single men and moved to Queensland to work in the cane fields. Others went to large mining areas such as Broken Hill and Wollongong, so the influence of gardens was not strong. By 1935, Jewish refugees from Germany and Russia started to arrive in small numbers. These immigrants were middle class professionals, used to urban living and bringing with them the spirit of the Bauhaus as modern architectural ideas. The gardens associated with these buildings were simple uncluttered expanses of grass.



'Ship' architecture Dover Heights

After the Second World War, Australia went through a highly significant change. The prevailing Anglo Celtic Australian began incorporating many American cultural values. Meanwhile a huge immigration project was initiated to provide the workforce for many highly ambitious development projects such as the Snowy River Scheme, the MIA, industrial enterprises in cities and so on. The effect of this massive immigration programme, which was predominantly British and European, was to influence small domestic gardens.

Meanwhile the prevailing Anglo-Celtic Australian gardens in the late 1940s early 1950s were going through a period of conservatism. Suburbia was growing rapidly and there was a general swing to neat front lawns and an interest in small colourful trees. Everything was to be ordered and controlled with the main interest in horticultural specimens

In contrast to this movement and yet occurring at the same time was the new migrant garden. Once again the process of migration was generating a particular garden style as the new immigrants from Europe went through the painful process of relocation into a strange country. In the late 1950s, the situation for the immigrants from Europe was similar to that of the immigrants of 1788. The first imperative was food with which one was familiar. The immigrants of 1788 could have eaten the food of the resident population, but they didn't understand it and so were compelled to grow their own in their first gardens. Similarly, the European migrants could have eaten the food of the resident population in the 1950s but they couldn't understand it - (why was olive oil only available in tiny bottles in pharmacies?) and so they were compelled to grow their own food. The migrant garden of the 1960s was characterised by lemon trees, fig trees, grape vines, olives, vegetables like tomato, aubergine, courgette, special beans, garlic, chives, basil, oregano, parsley - few of which were growing in the resident population's gardens.



Lebanese Garden, Marrickville



Fijian-Indian Garden, Brisbane

Again, as the different immigrant groups began to settle in to their new country, the garden was able to go beyond the basic essentials and gardeners started to grow the exotic things

that one would expect in a tropical Garden of Eden. Olive trees were now juxtaposed against mangos and paw paws, banana palms and macadamias. As well, some of the nostalgic plants were included in the gardens - orchids for the Portuguese from Madiera, Bay trees for Croatians, Cedars of Lebanon for the Middle East and walnuts and hazels beside the pizza oven for the Italians.



Portuguese Garden, Petersham



Vietnamese Garden, Cabramatta



Greek Garden, Brisbane

In the mid 1970s, a new wave of immigrants, predominantly Lebanese and Vietnamese, arrived. Many of the Lebanese were from large cities and had been apartment dwellers. The garden became a social gathering place, rather than a produce garden. Gardens were paved or tiled and herbs were grown in narrow beds. There was, however, a delight in colourful flowering plants such as roses planted in the front gardens. The Vietnamese predominantly saw the gardens as places to grow food. Two types of Vietnamese gardens have emerged in Australia; the warriors' garden and the spiritual garden. Many of the men who came after the fall of Saigon experience their time in Australia as being in exile. Some of these displaced warriors have transferred their energies into creating eccentric gardens where they experiment by developing unusual hybrid plants and unusual horticultural distortions. Other Vietnamese migrants have transferred deep spiritual traditions into their gardens in Australia.

The Mediterranean migrants arriving in the early 80s have been predominantly Portuguese. But by this stage the supermarkets in Australia were stocking the same food as the supermarkets in Portugal, so there was not the same need to grow one's own food. Gardens for the new arrivals in the 1980s became places where one could create aspects of the country one had left behind as decorative elements. For many of the Mediterranean groups this took the form of statuary, columns and balustrades and richly ornamented cast iron work.



Second Gardens by Mediterranean migrants

Also the immigrant groups and their children who had come in the late 1950s and 60s were now quite affluent as a result of their hard work and were able to build new homes and create gardens that evoked qualities of their remembered homes and gardens - often very exuberant examples. In Sydney, many Italian-Australians moved from Leichhardt to Haberfield creating interesting new gardens. Some are lyrical expressions of Italian design; others have added tropical elements to existing Federation gardens. As stated earlier this has created tensions between those who wish to preserve the heritage character of the area and those who wish to create something new.

Sam Bass Warner, an exponent of the value of community gardens in North America, writes in *To Dwell is to Garden*,³ of Heidegger's observation that the word to 'to dwell' fuse two older words which had two distinct meanings: both to build and to cultivate land. Bass Warner explores the depth of human meaning involved in carrying out every day tasks, considered within the framework of people seeking food, land and re-instating their identity. He suggests that it is the results of these tasks which give the subtle quality evident in the fabric of cities.

Bass Warner observed the multiple meanings of every day tasks undertaken on the vacant lots in Boston. In Australia, one can see similar multiple meanings being expressed in many private migrant gardens through the simple tasks of growing food. This re-establishes a particular cultural relationship experienced through the cultivation of land. As an historian, Bass Warner recognises that the small individual gardens within the larger community gardens contain the history of the gardener's people. He speculates that if one knew the history of the different vegetables, their history would tell of the migration of people across the world as well as revealing the nature of their gardening exchanges with each other.

To Dwell is to Garden focusses on the vital role community gardens play for migrants in North American cities. Migrants traditionally have started their lives in the new country in cheap accommodation which, in the cities of United States, has been inner city tenements and large public housing apartment blocks. This has meant that gardening on communal blocks has been the only way migrants could express their need to garden. In Australian cities, migrants have been able to live in houses, although often shared with other families. As a result the Australian migrant garden has been an expression of an individual or the family rather than the community.

Although there are differences between the migrant gardens in North America and Australia, there are also similarities. The traditions embedded in the African-American gardens have been documented in Richard Westmacott's study, *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South*.⁴ These gardens provide a rich history about the African-American experience. These gardens also exhibit the ways self-sufficiency, independence and resourcefulness are valued. Westmacott describes how

*Many of the symbols of self-sufficiency and resourcefulness in these gardens may be seen as backward or even ugly by the casual observer - for instance, piles of disused materials awaiting re-use, and animal pens and shelters...but in a self-sufficient system, chickens and pigs mean more than eggs and bacon. They are symbolic of an integrated system where scraps and crop residues are turned into manure and returned to the land. To a gardener a manure heap is a source of satisfaction, symbolic of fertility and growth.*⁵

Many migrant gardens are examples of such self sufficiency which is often seen as untidy. In Australia however, it was the private garden rather than community gardens which became the vehicle for such self-sufficiency traditions. In the 1950s, migrants were subjected to the policy of 'Assimilationism'⁶ which meant that all migrants were to become 'New Australians' and were to relinquish practices associated with their former culture. Such policies meant that Australian gardens should look Australian. So it was only in the back garden that migrants felt free to carry out their cultural practices. Many of the Greek, Italian and former Yugoslavian gardens of this time were back gardens. To quote one Italian migrant who was

a young girl during this period 'If you grew vegetables in your front garden as well as the back, you were considered a real Wog.'⁷



Second Gardens by European Migrants

The Migrant Garden as an Ephemeral Gardens

Yet another dimension to the migrant garden is brought out in Balmori and Morton's book, *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*.⁸ This is a study of the gardens of the homeless in large American cities. The authors explore the collections of junk which make up such gardens and ask why these gardens exist. They suggest that such ephemeral gardens indicate the essential human need to garden. The gardens of the homeless and the gardens created by migrants reflect people's need to transform their environment so that it helps sustain them emotionally. Balmori and Morton suggest that more than any other art, the garden is 'positioned in impermanence'.⁹ The migrant garden is an ephemeral phenomenon, frequently only lasting as long as the migrant gardener. This is not true of all migrant gardens, however, as evidenced by the Chinese market gardens in Australia which have been handed on from one generation to the next. There are some Chinese market gardens in large Australian cities which were established in the 1870s and are still operating.

In Australia, the Chinese market gardens provisioned the whole of the east coast of Australia in the second half of the last century. They have played an important role in Australian history. It is therefore intriguing to find that some of these gardens still exist in the major Australian cities. The Chinese market gardens are economic enterprises and they appear to have withstood the impact of increasing suburban development, unlike the Italian, Croatian and Maltese market gardens, most of which have been lost. . Despite the length of the Chinese gardens, some migrant gardens only last a few generations.

One Italian family who arrived in Australia in 1949, now have four generations living in Australia, but their gardens have only lasted for three generations. Salvatore and Rosa came from Bombile in Italy and kept their traditions alive in their productive Australian garden. Their oldest son and his wife, Bruno and Caterina, have the vestiges of their former productive garden; whereas the younger sons have gardens of palms and statuary, reflecting the new Italian–Australian opulent gardens. Salvatore and Rosa's grandchildren now have gardens, none of which have any Italian elements.

Both the Chinese market gardens and Italian domestic gardens are examples of intergenerational gardens. Both ephemeral and long lasting, intergenerational gardens indicate the diversity of reasons for migrant gardens in Australia. The traditions become diluted and change. This is particularly true of the 1990s when Australian supermarkets have the same foods as were in the gardens of the home country, thus removing the need to grow food.

Summary

There are many interesting stories about migrant gardens in Australia. The Vietnamese garden, The Greek, Italian and Lebanese gardens, the Croatian garden, the Portuguese garden, to name a few, are all intriguingly different. It is clear that these gardens are rich in cultural meanings, both in the ways they are used and in the plants within them.

Migrant gardens are a gift to the culture of Australian cities. Such modest common place expressions of ordinary people are part of the on-going historical process in which people, their plants and the way they are grown and used are in continual change.

Endnotes

- 1 *Following the Equator*, Mark Twain, 1897, as cited in Beatrice Bligh, *Cherish the Earth*, 1980.
2. Watkin Tench, *Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson*, 1793.
3. Bass Warner Jr, S.1987. *To Dwell is to Garden*. Northeastern University Press: USA.
4. Westmacott, R. 1992. *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South*. University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville.
5. Ibid. 92.
6. Assimilationism was developed as a policy by Arthur Caldwell, the founder of the post war migration program. It was used to placate the Anglophone Australians who were afraid of difference.
7. Lia's comments were recorded in 1993 at an Italian Club.
8. Balmori, D. & Morton, M.1993. *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*. Yale University Press: New Haven.
9. Ibid. 1.