Of Other Places: The Garden as a Heterotopic Site in Contemporary Art

Melanie Nakau
Fullerton College and University of California, Riverside

Abstract: According to Michel Foucault, a heterotopia is a site where the differentiation between a location and its temporality is related to theoretical and societal concerns that challenge the notion of history, location, and subjectivity. Contemporary artists such as Stan Douglas and Hew Locke utilize the garden as heterotopic space for intervention in their work in order to investigate and challenge linear notions of time, space and subjectivity. Stan Douglas examines the historical and social underpinnings of the community gardens in early nineteenth century Northern Europe, otherwise known as the potsdamer schrebergärten, and recreates the tableau of the garden in his piece, Der Sandman. Similarly, artist Hew Locke draws upon the art of the topiary and creates an assemblage topiary sculpture, titled Black Queen, where found objects are utilized to recontextualize the concept of the garden topiary as a site of a postcolonial experience. This article investigates the way that nature, in this case the garden, is utilized and represented in contemporary art. By analyzing and applying Foucault’s lecture, “Of Other Spaces” and definition of heterotopias to the work of artists such as Douglas and Locke, the paper aims to illuminate the connection between site and subjectivity, and the multiplicity of meaning that results from the garden as being the quintessential site of postmodern experience.

In contemporary society, is there a location that could reference the past as well as the future? In his 1967 lecture, “Des Espace Autres” (Of Other Spaces), Michel Foucault proposed his idea of such a location: a heterotopia. Specifically, Foucault identifies the garden as a heterotopic site, and is chosen since the arbitrariness of its definition is subjective, because its location is both physical and psychological. The garden is a location that can be contextualized within the study of displacement, or transgression, while simultaneously referencing and contesting the normalized view of “gardens [that] have often been utopian in impulse, design and meaning.”

Foucault’s notion of heterotopic spaces is related to the idea of the postmodern, which is the renunciation of meta-narratives and relies on the displacement of time and space and the reconsideration of history. In addition, one of the many functions of the heterotopia is the disruption of linear time and narrative. This is similar to scholar Homi Bhabha’s concept of the postcolonial condition of the “third space,” which is “unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.” The postmodern condition parallels Bhabha’s postcolonial definition of a third space as a contestation between meaning and categorization. Foucault’s heterotopia is a definition that challenges the spatial and temporal logic of space and time, thus encapsulating both the notion of the postmodern, and the postcolonial condition of displacement. In the context of contemporary art, the artists Stan Douglas, Hew Locke and Shirin Neshat use the garden as a heterotopic space and as a site of postmodern displacement.
By analyzing and applying Foucault’s six organizing principles to the work of these artists, this paper aims to illuminate the connection between site, subjectivity and the multiplicity of meaning that results from re-visioning the garden as the quintessential site of postmodern experience in contemporary art.

Foucault’s first organizing principle of the heterotopia is that it normalizes a state of crisis or deviation. One example of this is the retirement home, where according to Foucault “old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation.” The retirement home is viewed as a heterotopic space in Foucault’s definition, since it serves to normalize the deviating condition of old age, or impending mortality within an institutionalized context. Similarly, the role of the Potsdamer Schrebergärten in the film Der Sandmann (1995) by Stan Douglas, the garden as a site of crisis or deviation applies to the definition of the heterotopia.

Der Sandmann references the history of urban gardening in early 19th century northern Europe, which was originally based upon a social welfare system in which the rural proletariat were allotted small plots of land where they could grow food to supplement their low wages. Germany’s first Armengärten (poor gardens) began when “municipalities gave the poorest a piece of land for vegetable production which they could manage independently. [The] First attempt was made in the northern Germany city of Kiel. These gardens were seen as an eradicative measure against poverty and riot.” Doctor Moritz Schreber, who popularized these gardens is still “associated with the idea of allotment gardens in Germany sometimes they are called ‘Scherberggardens’[sic].” Dr. Schreber intended for the gardens to create possibilities for children in urban environments to encounter nature and fresh air. The site of the Schrebergärten, or Armengärten, implements Foucault’s first organizing principle of a heterotopia since it serves as a site that normalizes a state of deviation. Poverty is a condition that deviates from the condition of being in plenty, and the gardens are designed to restore the condition of plenty. However, the purpose of the gardens was soon abandoned and their origin rested in infamy until further resurrected by the writings of Schreber’s son, Paul. As a boy, Paul was subjected to strict regimens by his father; he later developed a series of severe neuroses as an adult. In Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken [Memoirs of Nervous Illness], he described the insomnia and anxiety that led him to believe the world was being depopulated and repopulated with walking corpses and miraculous talking birds, among other things. Paul Schreber’s memoir later became the inspiration for studies on paranoia by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud.

The Schrebergärten, poised as it was between freedom and control, life and death, becomes the historical and filmic backdrop for Stan Douglas’s film, Der Sandmann (Fig. 1) and demonstrates the garden’s potential as a heterotopic site of crisis and deviation. Here, the first principle of the heterotopia is explicated in the historical context of the garden in the film. The social history of the garden as a site of economic crisis and of life is juxtaposed with the historical background of the Schrebers as well as Freud’s notion of the uncanny, simultaneously existing as a site of psychological deviation and death. Der Sandmann is also based in part on ETA Hoffman’s story of the same name and “part of Hoffman’s story was utilized in Freud’s 1919 essay The Uncanny.” These two metaphoric sites of deviation are visually represented in the film by the use of the Schrebergärten as a filmic backdrop that the walking corpse or the Sandman (referencing Paul Schreber’s anxiety-induced insomnia as well as Hoffman’s story) traverses menacingly throughout the duration of the film.
The film “consists of two 360-degree rotations in a continuous pan, the second a visual and verbal repetition of the first...the screen is at all times split down the middle...there are two gardens, an old one and a new one, and they occupy different sides of the split screen.” In *Der Sandmann*, life and death are inexplicably interwoven in the same location. The *Schrebergärten* as heterotopia functions as a postmodern site: a location of contestation of meta-narratives of the past as well of the present.

The character of the Sandman himself has dual roles: on the one hand, the character is actually a man strolling about in the garden in the distance and on the other hand, he resembles a corpse and introduces the idea of death into a site that is intended to promote vitality. In the film the garden becomes a haunting ground for Paul Schreber’s fear of the not dead and not-living, as well as, references Hoffman’s tale of the Sandman. Similarly, the site of the garden also references the duality of life and death: the garden in the film could be viewed as a double for the site of a graveyard. Foucault’s second organizing principle of the heterotopia is one that “according to synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another.” According to Foucault, the cemetery is the perfect example of a site that has multiple functions (or belief systems) according to the different stages in history. For example, in medieval times, the cemetery was located at the center of the city where the living and the dead coexisted in the city environment. However, in the 19th century, due to the concerns about hygiene and a growing doubt about the doctrine of resurrection, the cemetery was placed on the outskirts of the city. Foucault utilizes the cemetery in order to illustrate that “these [heterotopic] spaces change their function at different stages in history and reflect wider attitudes in society.” Similar to the filmic backdrop and changing historical implications of the *Schrebergärten* in Douglas’s *Der Sandmann* and the synchronicity of site to cultural history is the representation of the garden topiary in the sculptural work of artist Hew Locke.

The history of the garden topiary starts at the beginning of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. During this time, Renaissance humanists led them “to see geometrical transformations of plant forms as a ‘mathematical domestication of nature.’” However, with the popularization of landscape
gardening, the topiary garden fell out of fashion. During the Victorian age in England, the revival of the topiary began with the “geometrical forms and reconsideration of past styles, together with a passion for botanical extravagance, found natural expressions in this art.” In this context, the function of the topiary is one of natural wonder and artistic engagement.

The sculptures *Black Queen* (Fig. 2) and *El Dorado* (Fig. 3) by Hew Locke reference the cultural history of the topiary garden through their formal elements. *Black Queen* is a visually arresting representation of the British monarch, Elizabeth II, as a larger-than-life artificial topiary. It is constructed out of found materials, artificial plants, wood and cardboard. Not only is the artifice of the sculpture deliberate in its reference to nature, but it also comments on the European tradition of the garden topiary as an art that is as much about constructed-ness and the idea of nature and the natural as it is about the control inherent in creating such feats of nature. Similarly, *El Dorado* is a “mixed-media collage of the queen of England...At nearly 10 feet high, the bejeweled bas-relief bust is made up of thousands of plastic toys, flowers, animals, guns, and silver swords, which, extending outward like quills, transform Her Majesty into a porcupine broach.” The massive amount of plastic toys and objects utilized in the sculptures references the botanical excess and frivolity inherent in the creation of topiaries. Locke’s work applies to Foucault’s notion of the synchronicity of culture in the cultural significance of the topiary. The topiary changes its significance from ornament in the Baroque era to a site of postcolonial discourse and colonial critique. These two events and elements have no relation to one another, but are created as relational in the work of Locke.


The history of the topiary as an art form that represented nature in a controlled and perfected state is in contrast with the socio-political concerns that are found in the formal properties of Locke’s sculptures. According to Foucault, as “history unfolds, it makes an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can…have one function or another.” The constructed-ness of the sculptures, with the excessive use of artificial materials represents the monarchy as a representation of power and forced control. The garden topiary is also similar to Douglas’ use of the garden as it serves as a heterotopic site of contestation by destabilizing old modes of governance and institutionalized control, while similarly operating as a postmodern site of dislocation of meaning and representation.

The heterotopic site of the garden topiary as referenced in Locke’s work displaces the original site and concept of the topiary into a postcolonial critique of power and control. According to Foucault, the third organizing principle of the heterotopia is a site that “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place, several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” In both sculptures, Black Queen and El Dorado, Locke’s intervention of socio-political commentary with the discourse of the history of the topiary and the British monarchy creates a new space or discursive framework of the postcolonial subject. Locke’s juxtapositions are illustrative of the postcolonial notion of the third space, which “challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of people.” Locke utilizes his own subjectivity and the relationship to the British colonial power he developed while growing up in British Guyana. In his work, he attempts “to subvert the cliché that as a colonial, I would be expected to be inspired by the Queen.” Locke incorporates the socio-political history of his country, which changed from a “colony of respectful subjects, to an independent member of the Commonwealth, to a country that voted against acknowledging the Queen as its head of state” by contrasting the formal materials and historical representations that encapsulate his art. Locke transforms the Western tradition of topiary into a critique of colonialism and the representation of power, which functions to create a new site for discovery and discourse.

Similar to Locke’s work employing the gardening history of topiary construction into a postcolonial critique and Douglas’s use of the site of the Schrebergärten (both metaphorically and literally) as a site of both life and death, development and decay. Der Sandmann utilizes the garden as heterotopia set forth by Foucault and how it references a heterochrony: the loss of life, but at the same time, the possibility of immortality. Shirin Neshat’s film, Tooba (2002), utilizes the duality of the garden as a site that represents lost innocence and redemption though resurrection. Tooba illustrates Foucault’s fourth organizing principle of the heterotopia is a site that is heterochronious, or has the ability to reference multiple spaces in time and history. These sites are able to function when they arrive at an “absolute break with their traditional time [and site].”

In Tooba, the garden is the focal point of reference with a tree of Tooba (tree/woman) at its center (Fig. 5). The space of the garden is utilized in order to conflate historical and socio-political narratives together within the context of the both Persian and Islamic traditions. The history of the Islamic garden is a place where all negative symbols are banished, and where all elements conform to a specific symbology. It is regular in form and divided in four parts—corresponding to the four parts of the world (see, for instance, Fig. 4). The geometrical layout conveys a sense of order, unity, serenity in an enclosed space.
The importance of the garden in Islamic culture also “derives from the ancient Persian tradition of offering the king, on the tenth day of February each year, a painted wax miniature of a garden,” which represented the monarch’s blessing of nature and also the bond between the supreme power and his people. The Islamic garden references the religious and cultural traditions and beliefs and is a metaphor for the ties between the spiritual and natural world, it represented the “early embodiment of celestial paradise.”

Tooba references the tooba tree, which is also the “Koranic name for a tree in paradise that provides sustenance and shelter to those in need.” At the same time, the tree is also associated with the “figure of a woman under assault in a world dominated by men.” The video is a projection on two separate screens on opposite walls. On one screen, an image of a tree is enclosed within a stone wall in a barren landscape. On the other screen, a crowd of men and women clothed all in black, move as if on a hunt or quest, circling the tooba tree and climbing over the wall. In the meantime, the hiding woman disappears, seemingly into the tree. The garden tree references the historical background of the Islamic garden in Persian culture. Neshat utilizes the site of the garden tree in order to comment on the displacement of the female subject in a male-dominated, postcolonial society. The dissolving of the woman in Tooba literally and figuratively represents the subaltern female, who exists, as Gayatri Spivak argues, between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation.” As a result of this, “the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernisation.”
According to Neshat, the use of the garden is not only defined in terms of the historical or religious values within the Persian culture but also metaphorically refers to a “place for freedom and/or independence.”

In addition, it is a commonly understood mythology within the popular culture:

Tooba is also a female; therefore Iranians always discuss and imagine Tooba as a tree/woman...the Tooba conceptually evolves around a space—a garden—that has the tree of Tooba (tree/woman) at its center. This space is progressively threatened and eventually invaded by a large crowd of men and women. With minimal narrative, the film functions as a visual poem than a narrative film. The dynamic here lies between the forces of opposites—what lies inside (peace/serenity) and what waits outside (violence/reality). Eventually, this leads to the disappearance of the female, the ‘magic’ of the Tooba tree.

The in-between spaces that Spivak references are the binaries that Neshat utilizes within her film to speak about the postcolonial condition of the female subject in contemporary society: a subject in a space in-between that “melds past and future” identities and spaces, similar to the notion of the heterochronous heterotopia. The site of the garden in Tooba references the past, while at the same time breaks from tradition by functioning as a postmodern and postcolonial site for contesting meta-narratives pertaining to meaning, culture and power in society.

The multiplicity of meaning and questioning of cultural and social paradigms in the work by Douglas, Locke, and Neshat operate within a specific and oftentimes closed system in relation to the public. Foucault’s fifth organizing principle of the heterotopia, is a site that “presupposes a system of
opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.” In order to understand the subtext of the work by these artists, to decode, or “read” works of art, one must first be a part of the circuit of culture that operates under the assumption of shared meanings and language.

The understanding of the social, cultural, and political histories of the specific gardens referenced in the artist’s work is essential to fully comprehend the discursive framework inherent in it. This illustrates Foucault’s fifth principle of a heterotopia as having a closed system that references a subtext to be understood by a trained viewer. At the same time, these works have the ability to be appreciated formally and aesthetically (referencing Foucault’s open system that makes these works penetrable) even if one is not fully cognizant of the socio-political and historical references. The work by Douglas, Locke and Neshat function as heterotopic spaces, since heterotopias “produce an unthinkable space that could only take place in language. Unthinkable spaces reveal the limits of our language.”

This unthinkable space is referenced in the strategy in the work of each artist to displace, formally and conceptually, the notion of time and space within their work. However, the notion of historical context is related to the site as a space of contestation, which relies on the postcolonial critique of the “splitting of the subject of enunciation destroys logics of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge.” The historical background required in the understanding of the artwork functions as the limits of language: how does one fully represent an experience in order for another to understand it? The site of the garden in the works by Douglas, Locke and Neshat reflect the heterotopic notion of open and closed systems of reception.

Der Sandmann and Tooba represent the space of illusion in that each utilizes the literal and metaphorical construct of the garden in order to contest binaries of time and space, as well as the constructs of power and subjectivity. The site of the garden represents the heterotopic space as defined by the sixth and last organizing principle of the heterotopia as a space that

function[s] in relation to all the space that remains…either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space…Or else on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation.

Furthermore, the use of the screen or the projected image on the screen in the work of Stan Douglas and Shirin Neshat refers to the self-reflexivity inherent in the material of moving image work. The projected image on the screen serves as a Lacanian mirror for the way in which we see our history and surroundings sublimated through a specific subjectivity. It is the projected image on the screen that functions as a theoretical mirror of difference. Instead of reinstating notions of the gaze and objectification, the subjects that are represented in the films counter against dominant modes of perception by representing dissenting voices. In Der Sandmann, the layered history of the urban garden in Germany is utilized to destabilize and critique the project of Modernism (Fig. 6). Likewise, in Tooba, the literal and metaphorical representation of the disappearing woman visually articulates the reality of the third world female as postcolonial subject (Fig. 7).
Fig. 6: Stan Douglas, Der Sandmann, 1995. Still from 16mm film loop installation for 2 optical sound 16mm projectors, 2 loop devices. Release prints in English. © Stan Douglas. Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery

Fig. 7: Shirin Neshat, Tooba Series, 2002. Cibachrome print, 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm), 51 x 63 inches (129.5 x 160cm) framed, Edition of 5. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.
By making these disparate elements tangible in visual form, the projection causes the site of the garden to function as a heterotopic site: that which represents a mirror of a placeless place and at the same time, an actual site that disrupts our spatial position and also references sites both real and unreal which creates a dislocation of space and time. Garden as concepts and as real spaces exist as heterotopias and the projections in general also create heterotopic spaces. This in-between space of the projected image as mirror functions similarly to a postcolonial in-between space that “melds the past and the future.”

The garden is utilized in the work of Stan Douglas, Hew Locke and Shirin Neshat to challenge the fixed conventions of time, space and subjectivity. The bricolage of experiences and liminalities brought forth by the use of the garden is at the heart of the postmodern experience.

4. Meta-narratives refers to all encompassing definitions or categories.
10. Drescher.
13. According to Freud, the uncanny is a particular feeling of having been somewhere before, or having seen something in the past, on a subconscious level.
17. Miskowiec, 4.
23. Miskowiec, 4.
25. Bhabha, 37.
27. Koenig.
29. Miskowiec, 5.
31. Ibid.
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32 Penelope Hobhouse, *Gardens of Persia* (Hong Kong: Kales Press, 2003), 66.
34 Cotter.
35 Cotter.
37 Spivak, 306.
38 Padon, 136.
39 Padon.
40 Miskowiec, 5.
42 Johnson, 85.
43 Bhabha, 36.
44 Miskowiec, 6.
46 As described by Homi K. Bhabha, the in-between space is a theoretical notion that recognizes the possibility of difference and the elimination of binary oppositions as defining characteristics. Source?
47 Bhabha, 219.

**Bibliography**


