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1. Gardens and discourses of hierarchy

Gardens have long figured in two seemingly distinct discourses of nature and hierarchy. The first of these discourses addresses hierarchies *within* the natural order. Distinctions have been made between, for example, 'higher' and 'lower' animals, or between 'living' and 'barren' landscapes, or 'essential' and 'accidental' aspects of nature. A nice and familiar example of a hierarchical conception is the idea, prevalent in the Christian West until well into the eighteenth century, that mountains were blemishes on nature that should never have been there.

A second discourse – or better, set of discourses – concerns hierarchical relationships *between* nature and what is deemed to be 'Other' than nature. In several religions, for instance, the natural world has been conceived as occupying a place on a scale with hell at the bottom and heaven at the top. More germane to the topic of this paper, there is a long-standing debate over the relative positions of nature and *culture*. From the Daoist sages of ancient China to Rousseau, Thoreau and Robinson Jeffers, there have been those who have elevated the natural condition over culture and civilization. Equally there have been those, from Confucius and Socrates to J. S. Mill and Bertrand Russell, who would agree with Matthew Arnold that

> [M]an hath all which Nature hath, but more,
> And, in that more lies all his hopes of good . . .
> Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends.[1]

One of many things that makes the garden a place of philosophical and cultural interest is the way it is situated in both these themes or discourses of nature and hierarchy. That it is so situated owes to the claims made by makers

1 Matthew Arnold, 'In Harmony with Nature' in G. Cotter (ed.), *Natural History Verse: An Anthology* (London, 1988), 321.

and admirers of gardens alike about the expressive powers of the garden. Gardens, it has been held, are able to express and communicate the 'essence' or 'truth' of nature. Equally, it has been maintained, they are able to represent or exemplify important aspects of the relationship between nature and what is Other than nature – the divine, for example, or the realm of culture. It is difficult to see how the garden could achieve any of this without making or presupposing hierarchical distinctions – between, for example, 'authentic' and 'superficial' features of nature, or between the value and status of nature relative to those of divine being and human artifice.

The garden then is a good place to explore in order to reflect upon the themes of hierarchy, for it is a place in and through which men and women have communicated their conceptions of nature and of the relationship between nature, culture and the divine. There is good sense in the encouragement, in Chinese and Japanese traditions of garden making, to 'regard the universe as a garden' and the garden as 'the world in miniature'.[2] Experience of the garden may aid, as well as reflect, people's understanding of the cosmos and of their place within it.

In this paper, I want to consider some of the ways in which gardens have been designed or perceived to communicate or exemplify conceptions of both the essence of nature and of nature's relationship to what is traditionally contrasted with nature, notably human culture. Having considered these ways, I draw some lessons that might contribute to the themes and discourses of nature and hierarchy.

Let me begin, by way of illustration, with a well-known kind of garden that was manifestly intended to express something about both nature itself and nature's relationship to what might be labelled 'non-nature'. I have in mind the so-called Paradise gardens of the Islamic and medieval Christian worlds. These were gardens that were meant to recall the Garden of Eden, from which human beings were expelled, and to anticipate heaven, to which they should aspire. Typically, a Paradise garden was fertile, well-watered, and a place of evident peace and order in which men and women might enjoy harmony with their surroundings and other creatures, such as birds. This was nature as God had intended it, unlike the barren, desert landscapes to which Adam, Eve and their descendants were exiled after the Fall. Such landscapes were degenerate forms of nature, the result of human sin and not part of God's original plan for the natural world. If the Paradise garden represented authentic nature

2 Examples of such metaphors are given in Jean C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism* (Bloomington IN, 2010), Ch. 11.

– nature as it should be – it also depicts the ideal relationship between nature, the divine and the human. It depicts a place where there is harmony between the three, a place designed by God for human life to flourish in.

2. Gardens and 'the essence of nature'

The East Asian metaphor of the garden as the world in miniature encourages the thought that a garden may reflect and convey the 'essence' of natural things and be 'a distillation of the universe'.[3] This thought is not, of course, confined to Asia, and in this section I identify three broad conceptions of the garden that have in common the idea that gardens may distil, exemplify or otherwise express fundamental aspects of nature as a whole. I shall call the gardens that respectively correspond to these conceptions 'structuralist gardens', 'gardens of transience', and 'vitalist gardens'.

(i) According to a long and varied tradition, the garden can and should expose the underlying forms or structures of nature that, it is held, constitute the essence or fundamental reality of nature. This is an idea embraced by several important eighteenth-century writers on gardens. Sir William Chambers, for example, insisted on garden designers' respecting a distinction between 'true' and 'vulgar' nature, their job being to represent only the former.[4] In a similar vein, Horace Walpole urged that gardeners should 'restore' to nature her 'honours', by removing the blemishes and excrescences that may otherwise disguise her true character.[5]

The general thought attested to by Chambers and Walpole goes back much further than the eighteenth century. The fourth- to third-century garden of Epicurus was intended to be 'a form of education in the ways of nature', above all by representing in its lay-out the 'greater harmonies' of the cosmos.[6] This ambition of the garden was inherited by Renaissance writers and garden makers. In what was in effect a secular version of the ambition of the Paradise

3 Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, trans. A. Hardie (New Haven, 1988), 121. Thomas Hoover, *Zen Culture* (New York, 1977), Ch. 7. See also Jeffrey Meyer, 'Salvation in the garden: Daoism and Ecology' in N.J. Girardot, J. Miller and Xiaogan Liu (eds.), *Daoism and Ecology* (Cambridge MA, 2001), 219–36.

4 Quoted in J. Dixon Hunt and P. Willis (eds.), *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620–1820* (Cambridge MA, 1988), 322.

5 Ibid., 316.

6 Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago, 2008), 73–4.

garden, such prominent figures as Leon Battista Alberti and Marsilio Ficino saw the task of the garden designer, like that of the architect, to be one of rendering salient the *concinnitas* (congruity, harmony) that underlies and characterises the universe as a whole. As contemporary projects such as Charles Jencks' 'Garden of Cosmic Speculation' indicate, the 'structuralist' idea that gardens have the capacity to exemplify and communicate the fundamental forms or essence of nature is still alive today. This is despite the familiar accusation that structuralist gardens, which are typically formal and regular in design, are unacceptable 'impositions' on nature, exercises in effect of human domination. This is not an accusation that garden designers inspired by such figures as Chambers and Alberti could accept. They were not saying 'Nature is a mess that needs *replacing* by well-ordered human artefacts': they were claiming, rather, to be *revealing* how nature really is beneath its often messy surface.[7]

(ii) According to a second tradition – also ancient and varied – the garden is an ideal vehicle for embodying and communicating the essential ephemerality of everything in the natural world. Gardens of transience, as I called them, serve to convey that nature is an ever-changing process, that even apparently stable and enduring things are, in reality, only slowly unfolding events. Gardens of this kind are especially prominent in countries strongly influenced by Buddhist philosophies in which 'impermanence' (*annicatā*) – the rising, passing, changing, and disappearance of things – is held to be one of the three fundamental 'characteristics of existence'. Permanence, in effect, is an illusion that mindful experience of appropriately designed gardens can help to dispel. This is why it has been said of Buddhist gardens in Japan, for example, that they afford and confirm a view the world 'as it appears to a Zen-enlightened sensibility'.[8] A predilection for viewing the garden when blossom is falling from trees, and the practice of scattering dead leaves on the path leading through the garden to the tea room, are among the many testimonies to the intention that the garden should offer intimations of the ephemeral.

Gardens of transience, however, are not confined to Buddhist tradition. Several twentieth-century English garden designers, for example, emphasized that the garden, precisely because it so clearly subject to change, is able to provide a sense of the transient quality of nature at large. Characteristic of

7 For more on the 'structuralist' garden and the figures mentioned in the last two paragraphs, see David E. Cooper, 'Gardens and the Way of Things' in A. Giesecke and N. Jacobs (eds.), *Earth Perfect?: Nature, Utopia and the Garden* (London, 2012), 20–33.

8 Yuriko Saito, 'Japanese Gardens: The Art of Improving Nature', *Chanoyou Quarterly* 83 (1996), 3.

these designers was, for example, the use of techniques of planting that would make salient, and even exaggerate, changes wrought by the cycle of the four seasons. Of Sissinghurst – the garden made by Vita Sackville-West and her husband – it has been said that it is a place that 'cannot be visited twice: it has always in the meantime become something different'.[9] Sissinghurst, it seems, conveys - and was intended to convey - the same conception of an ever-changing world as Heraclitus' flowing river, in which, he held, it is impossible to step twice.

(iii) The third tradition I identify is that of, as I label them, 'vitalist' gardens. Many visitors to the 2016 Royal Academy Exhibition, *Painting the Modern Garden*, were struck by the large number of paintings – by Monet, Matisse, Kandinsky, Klimt and others – that depict the garden as a cornucopia of growth, fertility, energy and abundance.[10] The gardens portrayed in these works are, one might say, microcosms of sublime nature – of nature that exceeds or overflows the boundaries and categories that human beings construct in a vain attempt to regiment the natural world. The sublime, for these artists, may be encountered in one's own backyard as much as among mountains and gorges. It is no accident that the painters of these works were contemporaries of the most famous European philosopher of the day, Henri Bergson. The gardens that figure in the paintings are testimony, in effect, to the *élan vital* that, according to Bergson, courses through the universe and that, indeed, is responsible for there being a world for us to experience. Tundra, scrub and desert may be natural landscapes but they do not authentically manifest – do not 'body forth', as it were – the vital energy that is the essence of nature. The gardens that figures such as Monet both made and painted exemplified this essence in miniature.

The vitalist conception of nature as fertile or erotic energy inspired other garden makers of the period, notably such champions of the 'wild garden' as William Robinson.[11] The wild garden was not wild in the sense of being untended or uncultivated, but in that of giving powerful expression to the processes of abundant growth that in turn embodied the *élan vital* with which nature, in the final analysis, is identified. Wildness is there to experience in the garden, for those who are receptive to it, as much as it is in a virgin wilderness.

9 Charles W. Moore, William J. Mitchell and William Turnbull, *The Poetics of Gardens* (Boston, 1993), 111.

10 See Monty Don, Ann Dumas et al, *Painting the Modern Garden: From Monet to Matisse* (London, 2016), and David E. Cooper's review of the exhibition, 'Nature in close-up', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 April 2016, 3–4.

11 See William Robinson, *The Wild Garden* (1870; London, 1979).

The vitalist conception of the garden did not, however, begin in the nineteenth century. Some picturesque gardens of the previous century were inspired by paintings that, like those of Monet and Matisse, depicted nature in its wild abundance. Earlier still, during the Renaissance period, there were painters for whom the ideal garden was precisely a place of unordered plenty and energy. Jan Brueghel the Elder's painting, *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*, for example, depicts this paradise – very differently from the Islamic and medieval Christian works mentioned earlier – as teeming with prowling, powerful animals and luxuriant, untamed vegetation.[12] The tiny human figures in the distance add to the impression of nature as a sublime force to which they, like everything else, are subject.

There, then, are three traditions of garden design and the horticultural imagination that attribute to the garden a power to capture, express and communicate conceptions of the essential character of nature. In the following section, I turn to traditions of gardening that seek to do the same for the relationship between nature and human culture.

3. Culture and nature

The garden, we saw earlier, has been credited with the capacity to express important truths about the relationship between nature and what is Other than nature. The idea, for instance, that it may express truths about nature in relation to what is deemed to transcend it – the divine or some other less theistically conceived spiritual realm – has been an important one in the past. And perhaps it is still with us. Gardens commemorating the fallen of the First World War, modern-day Shinto shrines, and New Age kitchen gardens come to mind. Arguably, such gardens are simply places that are hospitable to religious feelings or spiritual moods rather than ones that – in the manner of the Islamic Paradise gardens – seek to represent or otherwise express something about nature's relationship to a divine or spiritual order. Be that as it may, it is clear that, in recent times, it is with nature's relationship with *human culture* that has been the larger concern of people who make or reflect upon gardens. And it is with this relationship that I am now concerned, as I proceed to identify three garden traditions that have been inspired by, and that in turn have

12 See Vanessa Remington, *Painting Paradise: The Art of the Garden* (London, 2015), 32–3.

contributed to, reflection on this relationship. These traditions have respectively issued in what I shall label 'triumphalist', 'sanctuary' and 'productive' gardens.

(i) The intent of the 'triumphalist' garden is to proclaim the superiority of human civilization over 'mere' nature. In its crudest form, such gardens may be announcements of the personal power of people who congratulate themselves on their achievements and status. Such is the usual judgement on Louis XIV's gardens at Versailles. It is French gardens like this that Arthur Schopenhauer described as 'tokens of [nature's] slavery' in which 'only the will of the possessor is mirrored'.[13] But there are less vainglorious and less toxic forms of the triumphalist garden. A familiar technique of Renaissance gardeners, imbued with the spirit of Humanism, was to place the garden – not necessarily a 'grand' one – so that it could be viewed against the distant background of a wild natural landscape. The point was to emphasize how thoroughly human beings have extracted themselves from 'a state of nature' so as to ascend to a high level of artistic and civilized accomplishments.

This was a point taken up by G. W. F. Hegel in his remarks on gardening. This, for him, was an 'imperfect art', precisely because the gardener is so reliant upon the cooperation of nature. The great achievement of humankind is to have risen from a condition of being 'sunk in nature' to one where they may enjoy freedom. In the best art, 'man is the chief thing', and the products of art should wear on their sleeve that they are products of human creativity and purpose. Hence Hegel's marked preference for the formal French gardens that Schopenhauer disliked, and his corresponding antipathy to 'English', 'Chinese' or picturesque gardens that 'tr[y] to imitate nature' and disguise their artificiality.[14] The albeit modest triumph of the formal garden, for Hegel, does not belong to this or that individual or society: rather, such a garden aims to emulate higher art forms, like poetry, in marking the victory of spirit, reason and freedom over dumb nature.

(ii) There is a long history of the garden as a place of sanctuary – not in a narrow religious sense of the term but, more generally, in the sense of a place of retreat or escape from the world outside. At its simplest, entering such a garden erases 'memories of a bumper-to-bumper ride from work' along a Los Angeles freeway.[15] But the deeper thought that inspires sanctuary

13 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. Payne (New York, 1969), II, 404.

14 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. J. Knox (Oxford, 1975), 248 and 699.

15 Thomas D. Church, *Gardens are for People* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), 6.

gardens is that human beings have lost something important through becoming caught up in the frenzy and busy-ness of urban working life – something that these gardens might help to retrieve and protect. It is in such a garden that Andrew Marvell not only sought 'Fair quiet' and solitude, but a recollection of 'innocence'.[16] But it is perhaps among Chinese poet thinkers that the ideal of the sanctuary garden has been most prominent. The famous 'literati' gardens of Suzhou and other cities were places where harassed officials and civil servants could, however intermittently, recapture a relationship to nature and a spontaneity that their professional lives threatened to destroy. The eleventh-century Sima Guang's 'garden of solitary delight' was a place where he could be 'uninhibited', his life once more 'under [his] own control'.[17] Some centuries later, another writer referred to his garden as affording escape from 'the dust and grime of the city', not just in the literal sense but also in the figurative one of protection against everything that is most detrimental to the spirit in frenzied urban existence.[18]

It would be a mistake to think of the sanctuary garden as necessarily being a place in which a person simply rests and contemplates, for it may also be a place where people pursue various activities, where they conduct their lives for a good deal of their time. The modern idea of garden *rooms* is that areas of the garden, like the rooms inside the house, invite people to *do* things – play, cook and eat, feed birds, make music, swim or paddle, and pursue a hobby, as well as engage in gardening. Whatever it is that people do in these 'rooms', the wider thought behind the sanctuary garden is that of an arena in which lives become less cramped and constricted by the conventions and economic constraints that govern our activities, beyond the garden wall, in the outside world. The garden, so imagined, allows at least some of that contact with the natural world, largely lost to us, that is essential to leading lives that are more authentic, more truly human, than the ones most of us have now come to lead. A picnic on your lawn, beneath an apple tree, may represent a better relationship to food, nature and other people than a sandwich gobbled down in your car during a traffic jam on the freeway.

(iii) The third of the traditions I discuss is that of the 'productive' garden. As the name suggests, I have in mind, in part, kitchen gardens and allotments – gardens that yield 'produce'. When people are asked why they like to 'grow

16 Andrew Marvell, 'Thoughts in a Garden' in *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford, 1955), 402.

17 Sima Guang, quoted in Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, 124.

18 Chen Fuyao, quoted in Joseph Cho Wang, *The Chinese Garden* (Hong Kong, 1998), 23f.

their own', they will usually cite reasons of cost and of the freshness of what they eat. But it is difficult not to suspect that, often, there is a deeper reason that they may be shy or unable to articulate. This is the sense that productive gardening affords of drawing upon, cooperating and creatively engaging with nature. The productive gardener merges his or her own energy and resources with those of nature in order to grow things that are beautiful to look at or good to eat and give to friends.

This sense of cooperation and engagement with nature is not confined to kitchen gardening. In one of the rooms housing the Royal Academy exhibition, *Painting the Modern Garden*, mentioned earlier, there was a striking photograph of Wassily Kandinsky. Fit, tanned, muscular and hoe in hand, the proud figure of the artist in his garden in Bavaria conveys – like some of his own paintings – the idea of the garden as a source for a person's productive energy that is then expended on the garden itself. The productive garden, like the photograph, exemplifies the conception of a place in which through cultivating plants in cooperation with nature, people are also cultivating themselves. Implicit here is an ideal of a human life that, drawing upon and charged by nature's energies, is itself vital, creative and productive.

In this and the preceding section, I have briefly described a number of traditions of garden making and commentary. They have in common the thought that the garden is able to express or exemplify important truths about the natural world or the relationship of human beings to nature. The task is now to connect those traditions to the issues of hierarchy with which this paper began, but before proceeding to this I want first to emphasize two points that, I hope, emerge from my survey of these garden traditions.

The first is that the aspiration of garden makers to express and communicate truths about the world and ourselves is neither absurd nor trivial. The conceptions of nature and our relationship to it that I have rehearsed are ones that deserve to be taken seriously. This will not happen, however, unless one resists the modern prejudice to the effect that only the natural sciences can have anything valid to say about nature. The sciences of course provide accounts of nature that are essential for various purposes, notably those of predicting the course of natural events and thereby enabling us to have some control over them. But there is no reason to privilege such accounts over conceptions of nature that are closer to human experiences of nature than is the theoretical and mathematical understanding furnished by the sciences. Bergson's perception of nature as manifesting vital energy, or a Buddhist perception of it as a cauldron of transient, impermanent phenomena are not

of a kind that the findings of physics or biology could dispel, and they clearly correspond to how nature becomes experientially present to many people.

Second, it is not only possible for the garden to express conceptions of nature and our place in relation to it, it is surely an especially apt vehicle for such expression. There is no more reason to think that a garden is an 'illusory representation' of nature, on the ground that it 'simplifies' nature,[19] than to suppose that a painting by Turner is a purveyor of illusion because it cannot possibly register every feature and nuance of the natural landscape. Nor should we accept Hegel's judgement that the garden is an 'imperfect art' because of its special dependence on the cooperation of nature. Indeed, it is precisely the intimacy or 'dialectic' between human practice and natural processes of growth in the art of gardening that makes it an especially apt means for communicating conceptions about the interface between culture and nature.

4. Hierarchy, nature and culture

How might reflection on the garden traditions I have described contribute to discourses about hierarchy, both within the natural order and between this and what has been held to be Other than nature, above all human culture? The first thing that it shows, crucially, is that the two allegedly distinct discourses or issues – about nature and about its relationship to culture – are in fact inseparable. This is because a conception of nature typically carries with it a view of human beings' relationship to it, and vice-versa. Consider, for example, the insistence on a distinction between 'true' and 'vulgar' or 'degenerate' nature that informed some garden traditions, such as the 'structuralist' one. This typically pairs off with a conception of human beings as 'stewards' or 'improvers' of nature – charged with returning to nature her 'honours', as Walpole put it. Human beings are related to nature as creatures who are blessed or burdened with a responsibility to care for nature, to bring out and emphasize its essential character, perhaps by returning it – not least through garden making - to its condition before the Fall.

Or consider the idea of the garden as a 'sanctuary' in which people are able to live more authentically and spontaneously than in the convention-bound and utilitarian world beyond the garden. This idea typically pairs off with a view of nature as itself a realm of spontaneity, one that is free from the dictates of

19 Ian McHarg, 'Nature is more than a garden' in M. Francis and R. Hester (eds.), *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place and Action* (Boston, 1990), 36.

purpose and deliberation. For the Daoist sages and poets, the garden is a place in which to cultivate one's own true, spontaneous being precisely because one is engaging with natural processes that are themselves without artifice and constraint. Or, finally, consider the vision of an *élan vital* that courses through nature: this is typically found in conjunction with a corresponding vision of men and women as essentially creative beings who, as suggested by the Kandinsky photo, at once draw upon nature's energy and – not least in the garden – are sustained by this energy in shaping their environment.

The conclusion that such examples make compelling is that conceptions of how nature fundamentally is and how we stand in relation to nature cannot be finally separated from one another. Each serves to shape the other. But if this right, then it must also be right that conceptions of nature and of culture are not finally separable. This is because a crucial ingredient in any culture is precisely some conception of nature, one that is bound, in turn, to be culturally charged. It is not just gardens, but other cultural practices like dress, cuisine, painting, music, sport and much else that both register and help to form people's understanding of their relationship to nature. All significant forms of cultural practice, arguably, are always already informed and influenced by perceptions of nature, just as these perceptions are always already constrained and moulded by these practices. This is the element of truth, surely, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's remark that 'it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here'.[20] This remark was prompted by reflecting on the interface between Paul Cézanne's paintings and the natural scenes that these depict. It could just as well, and perhaps more appropriately, have been inspired by reflecting on the art of gardening, for the garden is a salient exemplification of the interdependence between experience of nature and creative human practice.

Earlier, we came across several rival claims concerning the rank order, as it were, of nature and culture. In one corner stood those, like Arnold and Hegel for whom culture is 'higher' than nature; in the opposite corner, those, like many of the Romantics, for whom nature has greater worth than any culture could have. Claims of this kind immediately become problematic once it is accepted that not only are conceptions of nature and culture interdependent – 'dialectially' related, one might say – but that our respective experiences of nature and cultural practice mutually inflect one another. The idea, crucial to any hierarchical judgement on the rank order of the two – that we could first

20 Maurice Merleau Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' trans. Carleton Dallery in idem, *Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London, 2004), 290–323, 319.

consider nature and cultural activity in separation and then compare them and weigh them against one another – is now dispelled.

If some ways of conceiving of nature may seem to place it above culture, then this needs to be corrected by recognizing that it is precisely our cultural practices that have made possible these ways of thinking about nature. If, conversely, some ways of assessing the achievements of culture seem to place it above 'mere' nature, then it needs to be recalled that it is only because of traditions of experiencing and engaging with nature that these achievements have been possible.[21]

Ultimately, therefore, there is something deeply confused in those age-old attempts to compare nature and culture and award the prize to just one of them. It is possible, of course, to focus on this or that cultural practice, or this or that aspect of the natural world, and express a preference. Many of us, for example, prefer trees in their natural state to topiary, or an imaginatively planted parterre to a dull expanse of tundra. But it is illegitimate to move from such particular comparisons and preferences to the passing of judgement on the relative merits of nature and culture at large. Acquaintance with and reflection upon the garden is as good a way as any to come to appreciate the artificiality of setting nature and culture up in contrast, even opposition, with one another. The good gardener, who at once exercises an art shaped by cultural tradition and cooperates with and understands the environment in and on which he or she works, is someone with a living sense of an indissoluble intimacy between the natural and the cultural.

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21 For more detailed developments of my remarks on nature, creativity and culture, see David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford, 2006), Ch. 7; and idem, 'Music and the presence of nature' in B. Bannon (ed.), *Nature and Experience*: *Phenomenology and the Environment* (London and New York, 2016), 175–86.