

From Civility to Surveillance: The Cultivation and Contestation
of Colonial Values in Naarm's Fitzroy Gardens

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I wrote the essay that follows from Naarm – also known by its colonial name, Melbourne – on unceded Wurundjeri Country. I acknowledge the First Nations Peoples of this place and their elders, past and present, whose enduring relationship to the soil, plants, animals and seasons of this land has persisted for over 65,000 years. Through my research for the Miegunyah award, I have examined how imperialist practices and technologies of urban restructuring, which involved horticulture and artistic production, attempted to ethnically cleanse Naarm and its surrounds. Furthermore, such practices are still used today to displace First Nations Peoples on this continent and around the world (Porter et al., 2020). I would therefore like to extend my respect and express solidarity with all those who resist colonial oppression today.

Through this project, I have enquired into the sowing and cultivation of colonial and Victorian-era values within Naarm's Fitzroy Gardens. Philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2005) asserts that when gardening aims to impose Eurocentric notions of beauty on a place to recreate a foreign land, it must employ force in its attempt to attain mastery over nature rather than engaging in a collaborative, interspecies process of becoming. As will be explored below, the deployment of force was not only central to the creation of Naarm's public parks but a key component of their function within the urban landscape. A study by Churchill et al. (2017) examined how the expectations and experiences of Woodhouse Moor, a Victorian-era park in Leeds, continue to shape the park's future in the present. They describe public parks as "...both enduring and precarious places in and on which wider forces of change are played out ...[that] embody and express many of the deep ambiguities and contradictions within cities..." (Churchill, 2017). Similarly, the course of my research has traced the colonial and middle-class aspirations and ideals laid into the foundations of the Fitzroy Gardens and considered how they continue to play out across the park today.

This essay is laid out as follows: Firstly, I discuss the formation of British public parks as tools of social control within newly industrialised cities and how, when exported to the colony of 'Port Phillip', the park model was used to displace First Nations Peoples. In the second section of this essay, I utilise Susan Sontag's theory of photography to analyse three photographs of Fitzroy Gardens from the Miegunyah collection, exploring how both gardening and photography were used as ways to reappropriate place in the colonial settlement. Finally, I jump to the Fitzroy Gardens of today to consider how the confluence of surveillance systems and heritage status work together to enshrine the moral code of their colonial past. Moreover, I reflect on how a frustrated public has sought to contend with the meanings embedded within the Gardens, turning one of their monuments, Cook's Cottage, into a nexus of anti-colonial protest.

Part one: control and the colony

In early 19th-century England, after successive enclosure acts had decimated the commons, public parks were conceived as an antidote to the social ills that proliferated in the newly industrialised city; these included pollution, overcrowding, poor health, crime, and the much-frequented public house (Conway, 2023a). The utilitarian proponents of public parks primarily touted them as the lungs of the city, Arcadian respites that provided fresh air, free and accessible throughout the week, to people of all ages, classes, and genders. However, as more critical perspectives of the park movement point out, increasing the availability of open space was not purely altruistic, as the ruling elite had secondary motives: to find ways to quell growing revolutionary sentiment within the lower classes that stopped just short of the equitable distribution of rights and resources (Conway, 2023b; Taylor, 1995). Increased spatial separation within stratified Victorian society had led to a state of mutual class mystification that threatened social cohesion (Ward, 1975). To address this, circumstances were established that allowed poor sections of society to be uplifted through exposure to those of higher social standing, who provided a model of civilised behaviour (Ward, 1975). Thus, parks were envisioned as places where controlled class contact could occur, with the hope that the demonstration and observation of middle-class conduct would improve both the outlook and etiquette of working-class individuals (Churchill et al., 2017; Conway, 2023a, 2023b; Ward, 1975).

The didactic and *disciplinary* foundations of the park meant activities were restricted to those deemed appropriate by middle-class standards and enforced through heavy policing (Conway and Rabbitts, 2023). Discipline, described by Foucault (1975), is “...a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy...” that can be embedded into space to:

[P]ermit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it ... an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them. (p.172)

Following Foucault, the Victorian-era public park can be seen to exemplify such an architecture of control, elements of which can still be seen in parks today: paths direct movement, signs regulate behaviour, lights facilitate round-the-clock surveillance, botanical signage and garden monuments enable education, and when activities such as sport are provided for, it is through the careful designation of space. This inverted logic, which at once provides a subtle means of social control to the ruling class while also attempting to better the circumstances and increase the autonomy of park goers, was a resounding success, evidenced by the park grounds of Britain that fast became emblems of civic pride, proliferating across the country (Denby, 2024).

The success of the public park was not limited to England, and parks became a centrepiece of urban planning and development across the British colonial empire (Whitehead, 1997). In the settlement of 'Port Phillip', superintendent of the district, Charles La Trobe, concerned with the provision of adequate open space for the welfare of the settler population, had petitioned for the integration of parks into the plans of Naarm/Melbourne as early as 1839 (Swanson, 1984; Victorian Heritage Database, 2015; Westbrook, 1995). As explicated by urban geography researchers such as Gallagher (2025), Jackson (2018), and Porter (2010), the surveying and planning of settler cities stems from a set of colonial relations based on the exploitation of land for the benefit of the colonial population while displacing and segregating Indigenous peoples. Therefore, when it came to planning public parks, the invaders of 'Port Phillip' cannot simply be described as early adopters of a British model, as the values and motivations that underpinned urban restructuring in colonial outposts, like Naarm, differed fundamentally from their European counterparts (Gallagher, 2025; Porter, 2010). Thus, urban restructuring was done through a process of reimagining; cartographers would first re-present the cleared terrain as a blank slate before carving it up into a cadastral grid for ease of sale (Jackson, 2018). When integrated into these grids, parklands were often designated to sites that were important to First Nations' Peoples, such as camps, meeting grounds, or those where food could be harvested (Mapping Aboriginal Melbourne, The City of Melbourne, n.d). This method of dispossession coincided with La Trobe's persistent mandates to exclude Traditional Owners from the township and surrounding hinterlands, a pattern observed across the eastern coast of the continent (Johnson, 2018; Kerkhove, 2015; Victorian Heritage Database, 2015).

Part two: cultivation and the camera

Arranged as an 'accidental' union jack, Fitzroy Gardens provides an idyllic backdrop to several critical state and religious buildings within Naarm's central business district. The parkland was reserved in 1848 as Fitzroy Square and remained as 'wasteland' for the better part of a decade (Swanson, 1984; Whitehead, 1997). Despite its neglect, the significant location of the Fitzroy Gardens was not overlooked, and periodic disputes over who should control the land led to it being transferred from the Government to the Melbourne City Council and then back to the Government (Swanson, 1984; Whitehead, 1997). For this reason, when work commenced to develop the gardens in 1858, it was not a landscape designer who headed the project, but Clement Hodgkinson, an engineer and senior administrator in the Lands Department. Hodgkinson was deeply invested in the Gardens' design and management, taking responsibility for laying out the straight, fenced paths overlooked by 65 classical statues, and the dense plantings of fast-growing conifers, ornamental grasses, and eucalypts that gave the illusion of a park more established than its years (Whitehead, 1997). Hodgkinson's early curation of Fitzroy Gardens demonstrates how colonial planners used public parks to intimate that the cities they

built were of a similar calibre to the prominent cities of Europe (Webber, 2019; Whitehead, 1997). This reimagination of space simultaneously celebrated Western culture, education and civility, while attempting to erase the land of its pre-colonial character and its Peoples.

The imperial reappropriation of space did not stop at urban planning and development but was carried on through the production of art and literature (Ryan, 1997). One such medium was photography, a crucial invention of the 19th century. Susan Sontag (1977) describes the camera's ability to define reality as both a spectacle for the masses and an object of surveillance for the rulers. This tenuous ability to subjectivise and objectify reality was quickly embraced by colonial powers to document the world and propagate images of Britain's expansion throughout it (Ennis, 2007; Ryan, 1997). In their book *Photography and Australia* (2007), curator and historian Helen Ennis discusses how early Australian photography was inextricably linked to the colonial, imperialist, and capitalist forces of invasion, as photographs were used to justify and promote the fabrication of a white 'Australian' national identity. This ideological motivation led to a dominant, outward-looking, publicly oriented, and realist tradition that blossomed throughout the 1870s, with state-commissioned works that sought to document natural, urban, and industrial subjects (Ennis, 2007).

My research into Fitzroy Gardens began with three photographs taken circa 1875, acquired by the Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund in 1993. At the outset of my project, it was believed that all three photographs were taken by Charles Nettleton, a significant figure due to his roles as special photographer to the Government, the Melbourne City Council, and a police photographer (Gittins, 1974). However, the authorship of two of the photographs is now under dispute, as several sources outside The University of Melbourne credit them to lesser-known photographer, Donald McDonald. The oeuvres of both men primarily consist of outdoor work documenting the gradual domestication of land into landscape within the city bounds. Ennis (2007) links the tradition of Australian landscape photography to the discomfort caused by relocation within the settler population, giving rise to the dominant subject of mundane settings that, unlike the sublime, could bring comfort to those who found themselves lost in an unfamiliar place. Through these scenes of ordinariness and processes of familiarisation, landscape photography reinforced the claims of settler occupancy both literally through depicting systems of planning, privatisation and transformation but also symbolically as photographs, slices of time and space that could be miniaturised to fit in the palm of one's hand (Ennis, 2007; Ryan, 1997). This exercise of possession is visible in Nettleton and McDonald's scenes of Fitzroy Gardens, which portray Naarm/Melbourne, despite its rapid modernisation, as supporting the intimate processes of white-settler place-making.

Taken on the park's central avenue, this first image of Fitzroy Gardens, *figure 1*, overtly demonstrates the instructive potential of both imperial photography and the public park through the clear views drawn through the gardens' expansive grounds. The camera's elevation accentuates this semblance of

openness, positioned level with the Borghese Gladiator in the foreground, looking down at the path and affecting a lowered tree line. At first glance, the image appears candid, the men in the distance turned around as if happened upon mid promenade. However, on closer inspection this image is far more idealistic, emphasising the ideal structure of an imperial society: nature is neatly sectioned off, the well-dressed men are surveyed by the ghostly statues (Western education) and the omniscient gaze of the camera (Western technology), while the treasury building, the state's seat of power, rises above all else in the background. This photo demonstrates how, like the public park, photography is grounded in a covert didacticism. Sontag (1977) describes photography as "...a grammar and ...ethics of seeing..." that, from its outset, instructed viewers on what should be looked at and how it should be seen. It achieves this through its immediacy, acting upon the viewer to convey a kind of knowledge that conceals the interpretative processes of image creation behind the medium's mimetic qualities, rendering the photograph a product that is 'aggressive' through its passivity (Sontag, 1977). This indifference was harnessed by the photographers of the 19th century who claimed their medium as primarily descriptive, just as much a science or craft as it was an art form (Ennis, 2007). These utilitarian claims allowed ideology to pervade urban landscape photography without being immediately apparent. As a standalone image, the ideological underpinnings of *Figure 1* may initially appear tenuous. However, it is just one in an array of near identical shots, shown in *Figure 2*, whose multitudes demonstrate both the popularity of this composition among 19th-century documentarians and the uniform way that photography could be used to promote the apparatus of the state.

Unlike the clear view of the garden path seen in *Figure 1*, the gaze within this second image of Fitzroy Gardens, *Figure 3*, is disrupted by the dense foliage of willows, ferns, and pines that hid the gully of wastewater running through the centre of the park. Similarly to *figure 1*, the camera is level with the statue in the foreground, a Diana of Versailles, behind which, peeping through the arch, the tiny figures of a mother and three children can be seen. Although the elevated camera still watches over the people within the photograph, the statue's position, facing the lens, lends it a protective quality, imbuing the gardens with an atmosphere of security and privacy. Industrial capitalism had intensified the conceptualisation of the public-private dichotomy, resulting in the ideological construction of gender and labour relations that excluded women from public life by naturalising their status as economically dependent, caretakers within the private sphere (Rose, 1993). While recognising the work of the feminist critics of labour historiography who point to the myriad of ways that women *did* participate in 19th-century public life (Rose, 1987; Peiss, 1991), the term 'public' here hinges on the advent of middle-class political and cultural power that conflated civic duty with the masculine (Peiss, 1991). As a result, women's political and geographical mobility was greatly limited, and their appearance in public was reduced to the symbolisation of a set of abstract virtues (Peiss, 1991). Born out of these middle-class principles, the public park sought to uphold the sanctity of the family unit by providing recreational spaces that were also suitable for women and children (Conway, 2023b; Denby, 2024). It seems

pertinent to reflect on how *Figure 3* alludes to this familial moral code, compounded by the centring of Diana, the chaste goddess of nature and the hunt, as well as fertility and childbirth. Here, the political messaging evident in *Figure 1* is all but gone. Instead, the wall of vegetation, like the walls of the private suburban garden, restricts an outsider from looking in, therefore refusing to compromise the middle-class ideal of what was believed to be women and children's rightful place, giving only a partial glimpse into what parks had to offer for those usually confined to the house.

The last image, *figure 4*, offers an even more secluded view of the gardens with several marked differences in composition and subject from the first two images: instead of the elevated perspective looking down, it appears to have been taken close to the ground, looking out at the paths from within the garden bed, enshrouded in the vegetation surrounding the Grey Street Fountain. There are no people in this image; rather, it frames a moment of personal experience, placing the viewer in the position of an imaginary parkgoer in a moment of repose, away from the bustling city. The fabrication of this as an acceptable viewpoint must be stressed, as the gardens' fences were erected to keep people out of the beds, therefore, making this a perspective known only to the loiterers and deviants that police and park managers worked so hard to expel (Whitehead, 1997). Sontag (1977) describes the camera's instrumental and aesthetic functions as embodying the contradictions that arise from a society that separates the public from the private, thereby reflecting and preparing us for society's split between state power and personal expression. The prohibited viewpoint in *Figure 4* encapsulates this conflict. Whether it is in defiance of or oblivious to the state's hegemonic eye, the duplicitous depiction of a vantage point that appears tranquil but in reality would result in penalisation exemplifies the contested nature of a strictly regulated public space that caters to private experiences.

Through the camera's gaze in each photograph – from the omniscient, the protected, to the concealed - the park can be seen as a paradoxical space whose function depends on surveillance while still accommodating privacy, security, and seclusion. The images also show how the imperial reimagination of space was an interdisciplinary endeavour. Together, urban planning, horticulture and photography attempted to create a landscape that promoted the colonial state, substantiating a false public-private dichotomy based in middle-class ideology. Neither parks nor photography sought to resolve this conflict between the separation of public and private; instead, they profited from the regulated individual experiences, whose processes of familiarisation allowed white settlers to lay claim to stolen land.



Figure 1. Donald McDonald [Formally attributed to Charles Nettleton], *Fitzroy Gardens, Victoria*, c.1875, albumen silver photograph, 13.0 x 18.1 cm (sheet) 40.9 x 55.9 cm (mount), The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Purchased through the Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, 1993.



Figure 2. Clockwise from top left: Charles Nettleton, *Middle Avenue Fitzroy Gardens*, c.1880, albumen silver photograph, 14.2cm x 20.3cm, State Library of Victoria; *Fitzroy Gardens, The Middle Avenue (looking towards the city)*, c.1880, albumen silver photograph, 13cm x 22cm approx, State Library of Victoria; *The Middle Avenue in the Fitzroy Gardens*, ca.1870- ca. 1880, albumen silver photograph, 14.5cm x 19.0cm approx, State Library of Victoria; Donald McDonald [Formally attributed to Charles Nettleton], *Fitzroy Gardens, Victoria*, c.1875, albumen silver photograph, 13.0 x 18.1 cm (sheet) 40.9 x 55.9 cm (mount), The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Purchased through the Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, 1993.



Figure 3. Donald McDonald [Formally attributed to Charles Nettleton], *Fitzroy Gardens, Victoria*, c.1875, albumen silver photograph, 13.3 x 18.3 cm (sheet) 40.9 x 55.9 cm (mount), The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Purchased through the Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, 1993.



Figure 4. Charles Nettleton, *Fitzroy Gardens, Victoria*, c.1875, albumen silver photograph, 12.9 x 18.4 cm (sheet) 40.7 x 55.9 cm (mount), The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Purchased through the Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, 1993.

Part three: conservation and the cottage

Over the past 150 years, colonial and Victorian-era anxieties surrounding social control and the assertion of national identity have continued to inform the appearance and use of Fitzroy Gardens, despite the site's natural evolution. Throughout the 1880s, a process of vegetation thinning began within the Gardens (Swanson, 1984). Clearing included the disposal of a significant number of *Eucalyptus globulus* spp. *globulus* planted by Hodgkinson as windbreaks and whose 'unsightly' and 'ungainly' appearance (according to two contributors to the Leader) would be better replaced with much desired lawns ("The Fitzroy Gardens," 1886; "Fitzroy Gardens," 1889). This is indeed what happened in the 1890s, when, in line with English Landscape Principles, the Gardens' new curator, John Guilfoyle, introduced the now characteristic floriferous displays and sweeping lawns, removing the gardens' internal fences along with many trees (Swanson, 1984; Whitehead, 1997).

With this change in scenery came a relaxation in park regulations as the grounds were modified to accommodate a broader range of recreational activities (Swanson, 1984; Whitehead, 1997). However, greater freedoms did not alleviate the persistent anxiety that parks might be settings for antisocial behaviour, and vegetation thinning continued in the name of public safety throughout the twentieth century (Swanson, 1984). The Victorian State Government's (Plan for Victoria, 2023) current recommendations for public tree plantings advise that gardens retain sightlines between 600mm and 2500mm above ground. These guides align with the techniques of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), a framework for public safety that focuses on natural surveillance to reassure residents apprehensive about open spaces while deterring criminal acts (Despard, 2012; Martin, 2018). However, Despard (2012) states that the connection between crime and vegetation is only hearsay; therefore, the usefulness of CPTED is based solely on its ability to create the perception of a safer space.

Furthermore, both Despard and Martin warn that CPTED has been used to make urban environments less accessible to minority groups; Despard stating that through plant based CPTED techniques "...the elimination of opportunities for concealment can be seen as a way of naturalising practices of social exclusion and effectively inscribing what counts as desirable, or who is an "intended user" into the landscape itself." Similar concerns resound through an article by Sykes (2025), who, writing from a North American perspective, points to how the racialised and classist legacy of park development continues to subject marginalised groups to heightened scrutiny. To exacerbate the matter, not only do these inherited suspicions make parks less accessible to diverse groups, but they also detract from the experience of those seeking the gardens' historical function as a place sheltered from the commotion of the city (Swanson, 1984).

In contrast, another key driving force behind the garden's appearance today is the heritage status it was awarded in 1998. In *Melbourne's Historic Gardens: A Management and Conservation Guide*, Rex

Swanson (1984) conveys the overall benefit of recognising the gardens' historic, cultural and ecological value; however, warns against these listings being interpreted as a reason for opposing any sort of alteration, especially in a living landscape that exists in a perpetual state of change. In accordance with this sentiment, the Statement of Significance for Fitzroy Gardens' heritage listing describes the gardens' character as a result of their layered development phases (Tonkin, 1999). However, tension arises between these two statements and the state government's guidelines for managing heritage gardens (Heritage Victoria, 2001), which specifically advise against the planting of native vegetation, as it can "...result in the original character of the gardens being lost...". In their landmark speech, *Whose heritage? Unsettling 'The Heritage', Reimagining the post nation*, Sociologist, Stuart Hall (2023), discusses the mechanics of heritage as a way of reflecting the beliefs and values of the hegemonic ruling class, asking the questions "...who should control the power to represent? [and] Who has the authority to represent the culture of others?". Following Hall's questions, the contradictions implicit in these statements on heritage garden management bring me to ask: what constitutes original character in a landscape said to be comprised of layers of history? Moreover, what can be said about the lands' pre-colonial history and the endemic plants it once hosted? And finally, is the garden's heritage status, like the adoption of CPTED, just another reflection of the colonial status quo?

Heritage dissonance within Naarm's historic gardens is not limited to their plant selection but also extends to the installation and retention of statuary and monuments. Today, when Fitzroy Gardens is in the news, a common thread emerges – the defacement of Cook's Cottage.

Russell Grimwade bought the Yorkshire-based cottage in 1933, where it was meticulously dismantled (*Hedera helix* cuttings and all) only to be reconstructed in the bottom corner of Fitzroy Gardens for the Melbourne Centenary (Healy, 2020). Even in 1933, the purchase of the cottage was controversial, due to the building's tenuous historical relevance, as Cook never reached Naarm, nor did he ever live in the cottage, which belonged to his parents ("Captain Cook's Cottage," 1933; Healy, 2020). Instead, cultural theorist Professor Chris Healy places Russell's purchasing of the building in the context of the white settlers' search for belonging and, in so doing, contributes to the lionisation of a colonial figure and the whitewashing of this continent's history. In *The Blak Cook Book: New Cultural Perspectives on Cook's Cottage*, Wemba Wemba and Gunditjmara artist and researcher Paola Balla, alongside non-Aboriginal artist and researchers Kate Golding and Clare Land, share First Nations' perspectives on Cook that differ from the one-sided, pro-colonial accounts taught in schools. In their introduction, they state that despite the number of monuments that commemorate the colonial invader

"...members of the public have registered a different perspective on Cook's legacy by vandalising such monuments and using them as a rallying point...generat[ing] debate over how Cook and his legacy should be dealt with by officialdom and represented to the public."

Since its re-materialisation in Fitzroy Gardens, Cook's Cottage has been a site of protest (Balla et al., 2021), and as public awareness of the atrocities that came with British invasion increases, so too do attempts to reappropriate public symbols that romanticise colonial history, these range from low-intervention tactics such as yarn bombing through to the more intensive techniques of spray painting, paint bombing, decapitation, or toppling. Hadley et al. (2022) argue that ideological vandalism, in its anti-racist and anti-colonial forms, can help initiate discourse around racial justice within our society, and through altering the monument's material condition, can help reframe public memory. In this way, Hadley et al. (2022) state, the monument 'speaks back to itself' as a new work, a counter-monument or anti-monument with the capacity to have a more immediate impact on the viewer than other strategies of heritage recontextualisation, such as plaques, that subsume legitimate protest back under state control. Given the cottage's tenuous historical value and dwindling economic value as a tourist attraction (Anti-Cottagecore Collective, 2025), the cottage's defacement as a ritualised cultural practice may indeed be of greater relevance to the histories of Naarm than its affiliation with a deceased Englishman. Regardless of one's views on political graffiti – whether dismissed as a criminal affront to private property or legitimate protest, against the enclosure of public space – these acts not only carry meaning but have the capacity to confront complex histories without committing the fallacy of their erasure.

In response to the effects of control and domination resulting from imperialistically motivated gardening, Val Plumwood (2005) proposes a theory of 'adaptive gardening' as an anti-colonial solution for tending the land. Adaptive gardening is not simply the reactive, all-native garden, which, in its tokenistic thirst for purity, reifies the problematic binaries it seeks to upset. Instead, Plumwood deems adaptive gardening to be a "...critical, ecological, interspecies and place-sensitive ethics of gardening..." that acknowledges the significance of antecedent presences and their histories. I mention Plumwood's theory of adaptive garden now for its similarities to the heritage statements that call for gardens to be recognised as socioecological tapestries created over long periods of time, and for its juxtaposition to the garden management practices that would rather cast living heritage sites into a purgatory of perpetual preservation.

It seems clear that until the histories of sites like Fitzroy Gardens and beyond are properly acknowledged and First Nations Peoples gain their right to self-determination and justice, these sites will continue to be used as places of protest, this protest in turn becoming part of their history. Like the colonial objects in the Grimwade collection, the reconsideration of parks and gardens' histories seems an important step towards making them more inclusive places that honour the rich fabric of their history, not just those decidedly European parts.

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