Nature/Culture/Words/Landscapes

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Abstract: Nature and culture are key terms in characterizing landscapes, whether in scholarly papers or zoning hearings. Despite decades of scholarship, the complex, circular yet polarized definitions of these terms continue to undermine clear thinking about landscapes.

This article is intended to encourage anyone who writes or speaks about landscapes in any professional capacity to use terms such as "natural" or "cultural" with greater clarity and richness. The linguistic usages and associations of nature, culture, and several closely related terms are considered. It is argued that these terms are not dichotomous, but irreducibly complex—and that their complexity is their greatest value. Those who would reject nature as an unclear concept or still accept culture as a given, or who hyper-idealize nature and distrust culture, need to look more carefully at both. The paper concludes with specific suggestions for writers discussing nature and culture in relationship to landscapes.

What he is looking for, he makes clear, is a reintegration of "man" and "nature," something like the conformity between a river and its bed.
Barry Lopez (1998)

Splitting Nature from Culture is an ancient habit of the "Western" or "European" mind. For centuries, if not millennia, philosophers have debated how and whether to draw lines between nature and culture, and whether those lines are watertight or permeable. This debate, once primarily abstract and speculative, has taken on increasing urgency in recent decades, as the practical consequences of separating humans, and human industry, from the larger environment have become more evident.

Increasingly, theories about whether nature is culture's slave, its master, or its partner are emerging as consciously applied (and misapplied) tools in the politics of land use and landscape design. Today, in community meetings and boardrooms, in decisions about sites both urban and near-pristine, nature/culture theories often underlie and override site-specific issues of style and stewardship. At this human scale, reconciling nature and culture, or dividing them, are key determinants in whether future human life will be livable or worth living. As such theories become strategic weapons in a high-stakes game, the words used to define the nature/culture paradox take on increasingly tangible importance.

Over the past thirty years or more, writers on landscape architecture, planning, and conservation have addressed nature and culture in a wide variety of ways. It is not the purpose of this essay to review the literature on this topic in detail. However, it is important to note that these writers have played a significant role in bringing nature/culture definitions into play in "real-world" professional decision-making. This is a two-edged accomplishment. These landscape-specific theorists have brought the nature/culture dichotomy out of the academic closet. By doing so, however, they have created a need for new standards of care, clarity, and honesty in writing about nature and culture, not only in academic and theoretical discourses, but also in the everyday communication of landscape architects and related professionals.

Some of the landscape theorists focusing on nature and culture have achieved considerable clarity on the issue. However, that clarity has not yet consistently "trickled down" to the many writings in which nature or culture play supporting, rather than starring, roles. For example, it remains distressingly common to see landscape writers casually describe particular site features as "natural" without specifying (or perhaps even considering) in what sense that description fits. Similarly, it is easy to find both pro- and anti-conservation...
decisions justified by quoting the adage that humans are not apart from nature.

The intent of this possibly quixotic essay is to encourage landscape authors of all persuasions to evolve away from such overconclusiveness, and toward a conscious and conscientious use of terms such as nature and culture. Editors and publishers can also help set new standards for clarity and concreteness on these topics. As long as key terms remain fuzzily defined and casually used, they can be turned to the service of wildly differing agendas (Steele 1997). Some areas of fuzziness, however, are both irreconcilable and valuable when describing such a complex topic as either nature or culture. Part of achieving real clarity is explicit acknowledgement of conflicting usage and complexity.

Neither Nor

It is a rare writer who can bring to bear on nature and culture the poetic concreteness of Barry Lopez’s simile, quoted above. Lopez’s metaphor of the river and its bed makes a fine antidote to fuzziness, yet retains both complexity and ambiguity. Without its bed, the river is formless; without the water, the channel is never cut. But does this mean that water and soil or stone are not different at all? Of course not. Does their being different mean that they never merge? The muddy banks and sediment-laden waters of a real river soon dispel that oversimplification, too. River and bed are neither separate nor unitary. Lopez’s phrase is carefully chosen: “conformity between”—nature and culture are neither identical nor unrelated.

Such neither-nor complexity is characteristic of the two systems we call nature and culture. Despite strong and readily available evidence of this complexity, however, oversimplified and polarized arguments have become widely accepted—that nature and culture are simply one, that they are utterly two. The no-separation litany runs something like this: humans are part of nature, culture is human, thus how can culture not be natural, and how can anything cultural be harmful to the environment? The complete-separation credo says that culture can only degrade nature; believers oppose any change that impacts nature—a stance that, oddly, is often ineffective at protecting valued places.

Calling these positions “sides” risks oversimplification, too. In applied land-use decision-making, however, oppositional attitudes are a fact of life unless someone has the insight to guide the discussion toward more complex understanding. Both “no separation” and “complete separation” serve as ways to get the last word in environmental debate. Both are widely heard as justifications for one landscape style over another, or for supporting or opposing practices such as ecological restoration. Neither “side,” unfortunately, knows what they are talking about—literally—when it comes to expressions such as nature and culture. This is in large part because these terms are inherently and linguistically “neither-nor.”

Why Bother?

As a teacher of landscape and environmental subjects, I often announce to first class meetings that the ability to define “natural” is a prerequisite for taking the course. This usually generates intense discussion, but is really a rather cheap trick. Someone in the class can always find a limitation on anyone else’s attempt at defining nature. Critics of this article will have an equally easy time; some may even be former students out for revenge.

Inevitably, one landscape student says “Why bother?” to any linguistic and philosophical discussion: “I’m a designer/ historian/ horticulturist. . . .” These are common excuses for not questioning the language used to discuss places. My response to these students is that they can avoid the discussion, but only if they agree, for the duration of my class, never to use any of those terms—nature, naturalism, culture, formal, informal. We who use these words so often owe it to ourselves and our profession to think thoroughly about their origins and implications. Careful thought on these topics requires stretching beyond the self-imposed limits of “landscape theory.”

“Nature” has so many usages that authors constantly make word-play with it. David E. Fisher titled a superb article “The Nature of Nature,” playing on the two usages that make Nature a thing (the environment) as well as a condition or character (“It’s a dog’s nature to bark”) (Fisher 1994).

Fisher’s article concisely states the case for thinking clearly about nature: “To my mind the most important mystery of nature is the mystery of the nature of nature,” he writes. He contrasts just two of the many views of nature: Tennyson’s “red in tooth and claw” concept; the dog-eat-dog basis of neo-Darwinism and Social Darwinism; and the opposing idea that nature is entirely benign and Edenic. Fisher attributes the latter viewpoint to “extreme environmentalists” whom he calls “Edeners.” While I think he exaggerates the naiveté of the benign-nature camp, Fisher is absolutely on target about the importance of defining nature:

“The question is not one of philosophical interest only, its answer will form the basis of our response to the most important danger facing us today: How do we respond to the changes in our environment which we ourselves have wrought?” (Fisher 1994, p. 134)

Fisher concludes that we must “tread softly,” respecting the limits of our understanding about the world around us, and about our place(s) in it. Part of treading lightly is learning to use terms such as nature and culture without absolutism or oversimplification.

Defining either nature or culture precisely is an impossible task. But precision is the wrong goal, and there are several reasons for landscape writers to undertake the impossible:

— When a landscape architect, planner, or architect uses concepts such as nature or culture, his/her definitions translate directly into physical manifesta-
tions that affect the world (both human and non-human) for decades, even centuries.

— Variations (and especially thoughtlessness) in definitions of nature affect millions of acres of the global environment, both politically and physically.

— The nature/culture controversy affects how (even whether) humans try to relate to the broader environment. As such, careless thinking is potentially self-destructive.

— While there is no final Truth in any definition, there are many small truths, and many clear untruths, which can be established about both nature and culture.

Nature/culture definitions directly affect the practice of landscape architecture and planning—including such bottom-line issues as how and whether we get work. Even more obviously, they affect scholarship and teaching about landscapes—not just how a landscape is studied, but whether certain places are acceptable for inclusion as landscapes, or are considered to be outside that definition. Examples abound. On the one hand, the legitimacy of many cultural landscapes is questioned because they are “not natural” (Foster 2000; Gobster 2000). On the other, J. B. Jackson, by dint of questionable linguistic research in “The World Itself,” convinced many people that wild places not shaped to meet human needs are not properly considered landscapes (Jackson 1984). Many avant-garde thinkers and designers, believing that creativity requires iconoclasm, see nature as a passeé iconoclastic influence to be rejected, a stance that confuses natural (geobiological) with natural (normal, ordinary). In writings on landscape architecture, which gets half its nature/culture definitions from the arts and half from the sciences, these conflicting usages become especially confusing.

I am regularly asked to review landscape-related manuscripts, published books, and conferences. A common thread runs through these widely varied expressions of landscape thought. Many authors are obviously perplexed by a cluster of concepts related to the idea of nature, and by that term’s partner in crime, culture. A few examples, names changed to protect the guilty:

— A designer describes the materials of a project as “natural” although they include Corten steel and recycled-plastic lumber. Further conversation reveals that what is meant by natural (which transmutes into “native” midway) is environmentally responsible, local, and recycled.

— A widely published author describes part of a park as being “naturalistic”; the accompanying graphics show an area with less hardest than the rest of the park, but resembling an orchard in its tidy, and arguably formal, layout.

— A writer about Asian gardens cannot decide if the Zen garden Ryoanji is naturalistic or formal, and is far from alone in this quandary.

— Another author is tied in knots trying to describe any French-influenced garden as formal (and thus not natural) solely on the basis of straight-line geometry.

In order to read between the lines of such confusing description, communication about landscapes virtually requires the reader to know the place already. Some authors, furthermore, try to capitalize on perplexity among their readers, stretching nature/culture definitions to fit their particular and often very personal assumptions.

Besides confusion, the term nature has one other characteristic: It is almost unavoidable, at least when writing about landscapes. Nature, natural, and naturalistic are terms that even the most anti-Olmsted theorists and designers have to use. (See for example Cooper-Marcus, et al. 1998). Culture, too, has lately become an essential word in landscape discussions—which probably should have happened centuries ago.

This unavoidability is perhaps the strongest of all reasons for attempting to deepen professional awareness of the definitions of nature and culture. A number of writers have tried to argue that the concept of nature is dead, irrelevant in the post-modern era; others have opined that the term is fatally flawed and can no longer be used meaningfully. That nature is an awkward concept there can be no doubt, but rejecting the term is an absolutist stance, and an excuse to privilege culture over nature. Moreover, the unavoidability factor is a strong countervailing force. Even if we “should not” use the word nature at all, people are using it, and arguably must use it (or some substitute) to demarcate, in Fisher’s terms, the environment on which we ourselves wreak changes.

What can landscape authors do about these flawed but inevitable terms?

Working Definitions

Faced with the conundrum of flawed language, non-European cultures (and writers influenced by them) offer several useful and sophisticated approaches. These thinkers do not regard meaning as a fixed property of words, subject to obsessive hair-splitting. Rather, they consider ALL terms, words, phrases, even ideas, as working approximations of meaning that hint at but never fully encompass reality. Although words can point toward reality, they are all fatally flawed—and yet, we must speak.

Buddhist scholars developed such a theory of language over a millennium ago (Dumoulin 1989; Dumoulin and O’Leary 1993). Zen masters talk (some of them voluminously) despite their own saying, “He who speaks does not know.” To Carlos Castaneda’s Yaqui masters, speaking (and especially speaking to teach) is a kind of “controlled folly” in which deception often reveals more than truth (Castaneda 1985). Kurt Vonnegut called words “foma,” defined as “useful nonsense” or even “useful lies” (Vonnegut 1974). For these thinkers and many others,
words are too useful to renounce, but too tricky to trust blindly.

Although these concepts may seem foreign from a European/
American perspective,10 in practice we routinely use a similar concept:
"operational definitions,” intellectually imperfect but suited to a par-
icular applied task. Operational definitions are widespread in the hardest
sciences, despite the layperson’s image of science as absolutely precise;
“atom,” “gene,” and “species” are all operationally defined (Bowker 2000;
Heywood 1995). In the experimental method, unknown or partially un-
understood forces and factors usually have to be defined operationally while re-
search proceeds. These definitions are also called “working definitions.”
They are inexact at some level, but essential for working in the real
world and avoiding absolutism.

For words such as nature or culture that we cannot nail down,
yet cannot avoid, it is clearly work-

Table 1 lists major definitions of nature, paraphrased from two
contemporary dictionaries11 and grouped by conceptual similarities.

From these definitions, the
roots of conflict over the naturalness
of landscapes can be seen quite readily. These conflicts can be summa-
rized in three questions:

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<tr>
<td>How can nature include all living things (definition 1) yet exclude human control or influence (2, 3, 8)?</td>
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<td>How can the same word describe universal order or pattern (12-14) and also the widely varied inherent traits of individuals (7)?</td>
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<td>How much of a person, place or thing comes from intrinsic character (5) without influence from civilization (8, 9) or artificiality (4, 10, 11)?</td>
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Definitions 15 and 16 are not obviously linked to issues of landscape, but one thing about them is worth noting: Both view nature as inferior
and/or unmentionable, in contrast to abstract ideals. This contrasting of
nature against an intellectualized norm is an important undercurrent in “European” thought about nature.

Nature is the most worldly of all things, standing in stark contrast to
otherworldly Judeo-Christian spirituality. This view inspires negative re-
cactions against nature itself (as when environmentalists are tagged “nature
worshippers”). It also “locates” nature in opposition to the intellectual
purity of abstract concepts, fueling the belief that it is futile to attempt to
define nature at all. To further complicate matters, opposing nature
against conceptual thought contradicts the idea that nature is a norm
(definitions 12-14).

Also important in this discussion is the fact that Nature is widely
personified11 as female, as Mother Nature. In many myths, a healthy yin-
yang balance is implied, a polarity of Mother Earth and Father Sky. In
modern usage, however, Mother Na-
ture is not just set against an equal
Sky-god. She is contrasted against all
that is rational and scientific, often

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<tr>
<td>The physical world, usually the outdoors, including all living things and phenomena</td>
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<td>Forces or processes of the physical world, independent of human will or control</td>
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<td>3. Countryside or habitat relatively uninfluenced by human activity</td>
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<td>4. Scenery which is not artificial</td>
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<td>5. Intrinsic characteristics or qualities</td>
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<td>6. Type or kind (“something of that nature”)</td>
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<td>7. The aggregate of a person’s preferences; disposition, temperament, or character</td>
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<td>8. A state of existence not influenced by civilization or artificiality</td>
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<td>9. Influences on an organism which are not learned (“nature vs. nurture”)</td>
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<td>10. Reality, as distinguished from fantasy</td>
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<td>11. Appearance considered to reflect reality (a portrait “faithful to nature”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The order, essence, or pattern of all living things</td>
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<td>13. Standards of human behavior considered to be universal</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Normal instinct or affections (primarily archaic; used today primarily in the negative, “against nature” or “contrary to nature”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Processes and functions of the body, as in the euphemism “call of nature”</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. (Theology) The state of existence prior to receiving divine grace</td>
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comically. The Mother stereotype also masks other threatening female archetypes (such as Virgin/Whore and Wisewoman/Witch) which have equal poetic links to nature (see such classics as Campbell 1991).

Gender associations to nature are extremely difficult to avoid entirely. The derivation of the word from the idea of birth ensures this. Even Lopez’s elegant comparison of nature to the bed of a river makes it the vessel or matrix—the latter word derived from “mater,” mother. Since females are uniquely capable of acting as a temporary “environment” for new life, this mother/environment linkage would almost certainly be reinvented poetically as soon as it was eradicated from official speech. Nonetheless, there are many reasons to be cautious about taking these gender-loaded implications literally (Meyer 1997).

Several other words derive from the word nature, or share its roots. The most important for this discussion are “natural” and “native.” Natural’s main definitions are shown in Table 2, again grouped by conceptual similarities.14

In these definitions, the same conflicts seen with “nature” resurface: including or excluding humans, and inherent versus learned characteristics. The inferior status of nature, noted above, resurfaces in the use of natural as a veiled insult in definition 7.

An even more insulting word is “unnatural”:15

— Violating natural law
— Deviating from behavioral norms
— Flagrantly violating feelings assumed to be natural; inhuman (!)

Unnatural is loaded to the point of being almost impossible to use without contention, but this is not due to its derivation from natural, nor to the difficulty of defining nature. The same problem occurs with many words when they pass from noun to adjective, and especially when the adjective is negated [for example, ethnic, unethical; or human (noun), human (adjective), and inhuman].16

Nature can also become an adjective as “natured,” referring to essential character. Unlike the parallel word, “cultured” (discussed below), natured is not a stand-alone term, but always qualified (good-natured, wild-natured). It is usually less judgmental than “cultured.” “Denatured” can (with effort) be used as an insult, as “tame” sometimes is; it is a special favorite of Deconstructivists.

From the same root as nature comes “native,” used (often contentiously) in discussing how plants and animals fit into development or conservation of land (among others, see Gould 1997; Sorvig 1994). Native is most often specific to place; it is almost the nature of a region. As such, it is of special importance in landscape discussions, where native means originating in a region, not transported there by people. Within a region, native plants and animals are co-evolved, and are self-sustaining under the normal regional climate and conditions; only a few imported non-natives can “naturalize” and become self-sustaining, often turning into invasive weeds.17 The idea is complicated by the fact that prehistoric peoples selectively managed plant and animal communities long before agriculture (Colinvaux 1979). What evidence is available suggests that this management changed the balance among regional species far more often than it imported new species from great distances (Nabhan 1995).

Native is also applied to human ethnicity or origin, much complicated by the relative rapidity of human migration and by the involvement of technology in altering places to suit human survival—so that we can become native where we are not native, in effect. The first generation of people born in a place are arguably native, but few cultures treat even second- or third-generation immigrants as natives. At least one synonym for native, aborigine, has gone in and out of polite acceptability, and is considered an ethnic slur in some countries.18

In all these characteristics, native has strong similarities with natural. The main difference is that it is less conflict-ridden when applied to people’s creations, such as “native (vernacular) architecture.” However, “I’m a Native” on a bumper-sticker likely means two entirely different things to, say, a fifth-generation Scots-American rancher and his closest neighbor, a reservation Indian.

**Defining Culture**

Linguistically speaking, culture is less multi-dimensional than nature, having only about eleven definitions in ordinary dictionaries (see endnote 12). These, paraphrased and organized by conceptual similarities, are shown in Table 3.

Culture derives from the Latin word for tilling or plowing, *colere*, whose past participle, *cultus* (plowed), is the direct ancestor of the modern term. It means to raise, nurture, or develop. In this sense, at least, culture literally cannot exist without nature, since tilling requires land.19 Cultus also had strong overtones of worship, and of inhabiting

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**Table 2. Definitions of “Natural”**

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<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Produced by or present in nature, not artificial or man-made</td>
<td>“natural wool cloth” is not a nature product, but is of unaltered color</td>
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<td>2. Unaltered (“natural wool cloth” is not a nature product, but is of unaltered color)</td>
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<td>3. Resulting from the expected order of things (“natural causes”)</td>
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<td>4. Inherent or inborn, not taught or acquired (“it is natural to love food; “a natural-born singer”)</td>
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<td>5. Expected, accepted, morally certain (“natural rights,” “natural conclusion”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Primitive, uncivilized, or unregenerate</td>
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<td>7. Of illegitimate birth (“his natural daughter”)</td>
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*Sorvig* 5
or occupying a place as a type of worshipful activity.

In general, cultus is clearly the artificial, learned, and to some degree arbitrary aspect of human existence, as opposed to those aspects that we are born with or to (natus). This makes it the opposite of nature not only in the nature/culture debate, but in the old nature/nurture dichotomy as well. However, it is equally clear that culture, like nature, harbors paradox. Those who would reject nature as an unclear concept but still accept culture as a given need to look more carefully at both.

As with nature, culture's standard definitions reveal conflicts about inclusion and exclusion. Taken simply as learned behavior, culture is extremely inclusive, and implies the concept of "cultural relativism" (that each culture must be valued and analyzed on its own terms). In stark contrast, culture meaning the arts and sophistication is primarily an elitist term, exclusive to one group. It is usually defined around a society's own upper class—e.g., Mandarins and Brahmins—but colonialism has largely redefined culture globally, based on European ideals. Thus, some definitions of culture include everything humans do; other definitions exclude the activities and beliefs of vast numbers of people.

Like nature, culture the noun can become an adjective. "Cultural" is not significantly more complex than "culture"; it means pertaining to culture, in one of its three main senses: crop raising ("cultural conditions" for landscape plants); learned behavior ("cultural anthropology"); or the arts ("cultural events").

Culture also becomes the adjective cultured (or even, "a cultivated person"), meaning sophisticated, usually by upper-class standards. Similar to natural and unnatural, the negative form uncultured is clearly politicized. DISMISsING someone as uncultured denies the value of participation in middle- or lower-class culture, or in cultures other than the mainstream, such as ethnic minorities.

Culture is closely related to the word "cult," which is in essence a culture (set of learned beliefs) that someone dislikes or considers extreme. The link between worship and cultivation also suggests that at one time working the land involved making offerings to the spirits or deities of the land (often called nature spirits), not merely a mechanical process of growing things.

Culture's main synonym is "civilization." Almost identical to culture, this word is used neutrally to mean a group with internally consistent learned beliefs—"the Mohenjo-Daro civilization" for example. However, it is also used judgmentally, as in civilized versus uncivilized. In this sense it is much more extreme than cultured/uncultured; calling someone uncivilized has overtones of calling them sub-human.

**Complexity and Contradiction, Squared**

Nature and culture are circular in definition: Nature is defined as uncultivated or not influenced by culture, and culture is defined as changing the natural conditions of something. As a result, it is not surprising that the words often run parallel as well as in opposition.

What is clear from these definition clusters is that culture contains the seeds of self-contradiction, just as nature does (and as all words do, if one follows the Buddhist theory). If nature is dead, irrelevant, or undefinable, so is culture. Nature wavers between being inclusive of humans and excluding them. Culture flips-flops between including all humans and excluding the non-elite. Pairing two such terms, as in "Nature/Culture," multiplies the self-contradictory problems of either term taken singly.

Many critics of modern concepts of "nature" are, at heart, trying to avoid an ethnocentric, culture-bound definition of that word. They recognize that other cultures, especially nomadic or hunting-gathering peoples, do not share the sharp European division between humans and the rest of the universe. The irony is that among those who describe "high civilization" as nature's adversary, tribal societies are often either ignored as non-cultures or given special exemption as "natural/native societies." Not only is this unfair to the achievements of non-European or low-tech cultures, it also obscures the damage that such societies can do and have done to their own environments. Contrasting "high" culture against nature bolsters the myth of perfect harmony between nature and "primitive" culture, as well as dubious comparisons among cultures.

The idea of living in a place, in relation to it, is implicit in terms derived from both natus and cultus. Native (life-long resident) comes from natus; indigene, also meaning a long-
term resident of a place, comes from a closely-related Latin root. From *colere/cultus* comes *agricola*, Latin for farmer, field-dweller; the suffix -ole, meaning to live or on prefer, is common in horticultural terms. Both nature and culture imply life in an environment, yet there is a continual tension between dwelling-by-birth (nature) and inhabiting-by-labor (culture). These overlaps and oppositions of nature and culture appear to stretch back even into Proto-Indo-European, the 5000-year-old reconstructed ancestor of most languages of Europe and India.  

**Close Relatives**

Six other words related to nature and culture are widely used, often carelessly, in describing landscapes. These are formal, informal, wild, tame, artificial, and naturalistic. Each, in different ways, overlaps the human/non-human and exclusive/inclusive complexities of nature and culture. The discussion of these related terms (Tables 4–7) includes both general definitions and those specific to art and design.

**Formal & Informal.** Formal is one of the most abused terms in landscape description, switch-hitting among definitions 3–6, 9, and 11 (Table 4) with gleeful abandon. When describing landscape styles, formal is often used as the opposite of natural or naturalistic. More often than not, formal simply indicates some degree of Euclidean geometry and symmetry, making little distinction between the complicated Euclidean forms of a knot-garden and the vast unadorned Euclidean planes of modernist buildings.

Said derogatorily of a person, formal is an insult: “She’s so stiff and formal.” It is sometimes used in this same sense to attack landscapes designed in specific geometric styles.

“Informal” can mean the negative of any definition of formal except 1: spontaneous, improvised, unofficial, implicit, irregular. In design terms, it usually means asymmetrical. It is often assumed to mean disordered or without order, although this is far from accurate. Like cultured/uncultured, the formal/informal dichotomy tends toward an elitist assumption that there is only one type of order. In design, the elite order is based on Euclidean geometry and symmetry. The discovery of myriad types of order in biology, as well as in fractal geometry (see below) has thus far done little to overcome this elitist assumption among designers.

**Wild.** Wild is very nearly synonymous with natural, in the sense of untouched by humans. Like natural, it implies a more-than-human pattern. The wild pattern can be threatening and difficult to comprehend (bewildering), where natural pattern is often seen as more benevolent (Table 5).

Wilderness is a wild place; absolutists deny that any such place exists that has not been in some way cultivated, influenced by human activity. (For a clear statement and critique of this argument, see Shepard 1995.) However, wilderness can also be defined as uninhabited, which widens its scope (Callicott and Nelson 1998; Snyder 1990).

Wild animals can become tame, while tame animals can “go wild” or feral. Landscapes, once tamed, are almost always seen as not-wild; for example, second-growth forest has essentially reverted to wilderness, but the term second-growth emphasizes its once-domesticated status.

There is a strong belief within European/American cultures that people have an innate “wild” spirit, restrained or broken by culture—“Wild Women Don’t Get the Blues” is a common slogan of this type. Making wilderness normative is part of many avant-garde philosophies. Oddly, wilderness in people is often legitimized by saying it is “natural,” just as civilized behavior is validated as “natural” in competing philosophies.

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<th>Table 4. Definitions of “Formal”</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Pertaining to surface form or shape, as opposed to (or excluding) material, structure, or function</td>
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<td>2. Ceremonious or impersonal (“a formal manner”)</td>
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<td>3. Done solely for the sake of appearances (“a formality”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Elegant, especially of clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Important or solemn (“a formal occasion”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Following accepted rules of procedure, language, or appearance; conventional; official (“a formal warning” or “formal attire”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Explicit (“a formal rule”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Learned in school (“formal training”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Ordered, regular, or symmetrical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Methodical or organized (“formal research” vs. less-planned observations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Symbolic, especially “formal logic” (abstract symbolic thought)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Definitions of “Wild”</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Natural in origin, growth, or mode of living</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Not cultivated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Uninhabited (i.e. by humans).</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Uncivilized.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Undisciplined, disorderly, reckless. Random or erratic.</td>
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</table>

**Tame.** Tame is clearly related to culture, through the idea of caring for or domesticking formerly-wild things. It is also used, negatively, by the avant-garde to dismiss mainstream beliefs and practices, implying that adaptation to one’s culture is surrender (Table 6).
This term sidesteps questions of origin: Tame can include animals born in captivity, domesticated from wild, or wild but behaving without fear. Tame does not deny that all animals and plants ultimately originate from "the wild"; cultural and culturally tend toward that denial.

Antoine de St-Exupery used "tame" in his famous fable, *The Little Prince*, to mean a relationship built up through trust and affection. As a relationship, the term suits most built landscapes: related to and tended by humans, but capable of reversion to wildness. For unknown reasons, tame is not used to refer to plants, and seldom for landscapes.

Table 6. Definitions of "Tame"

1. Submissive or tractable in behavior; dull.
3. Unafraid of humans, whether by training or inherently fearless.

**Artificial.** Artificial evokes the same dichotomy that excludes humans and human products from nature. Artificial materials are substances not (or rarely) found in nature. Literally, artificial means "art-made"; an artifact is an artificial object (Table 7).

As an old-fashioned, neutral usage, "artifice" simply means the work of an artisan. However, it also has connotations of deceptiveness, as when women's makeup is poetically described as seductive artifice. Similarly, "fabrication" can simply mean manufacturing or making things, but can also mean a deliberate falsehood.

Artificial carries a strong implication of inferiority, despite a general tendency to regard art as the highest human skill. Modernism, with its emphasis on "honest materials," would seem to reject artificiality, but in practice is highly artificial in its preference for manufactured and high-tech materials.

Artificial overlaps with formal—almost all the definitions of formal, with the possible exception of "following accepted rules," are near-synonyms for artificial. One of the definitions of cultured (def. 4) is artificial.

Table 7. Definitions of "Artificial"

2. Imitation; especially, made in imitation of natural things; simulated
3. Pretended, false, or counterfeit
4. Forced, stilted, stiff, or pompous; formal

**The Odd Case of "Naturalistic."** Although obviously based on the word nature, this term is remarkably complex. It stands precisely at the juncture of several self-contradictory fault-lines that run through nature and culture, both as individual terms and as a dichotomy.

When used about design, naturalistic has only one definition: reproducing or imitating the effects of nature. Since imitation is artificial and thus not natural, this becomes a fascinating word. From the absolutist perspective, naturalistic is an oxymoron, but for those interested in complexity it is a rich source of interest.

Naturalism, in philosophy, is the belief that all phenomena can be explained by reference to observable ("natural") laws, without spiritual or supernatural explanations. Likewise, a naturalist is someone who studies natural phenomena and species. In nineteenth-century European literature, Naturalism was a style that valued realism, even about unpleasant aspects of life. All these usages imply a scientific or objective approach, yet among designers, naturalism is frequently conflated with romanticism and other accusations of irrational and emotional behavior. If design usage were consistent with scientific/philosophical usage, "naturalistic design" would mean design based on a scientific understanding of nature; instead, this is usually termed "ecological design." Even under this name, it is routinely dismissed by some writers as romanti
cism and worse.

Standing as it does at the intersection of nature and culture, naturalistic design deserves serious thought, not just blind adherence or self-righteous denunciation. Unfortunately, this term divides more designers than it unites, and is among the most carelessly used of nature/culture terms. Since at least the time of Capability Brown, the relative merits of "formal" Euclidean design versus naturalism have been continuously contentious topics of landscape discussion—despite the fact that both terms have always been ill-defined.

**Does Culture Create Nature?**

Fisher, in his "Nature of Nature" article, argues that nature is a thing, or more precisely a system, worth knowing. His essay does not question whether there is such a thing, or whether it is legitimate to use the term. Many other writers, however, have taken that stance, and object to any use of the term "nature" at all. They do not, oddly, apply the same skepticism to "culture." In effect, they claim that culture is real, while nature is merely a figment of a cultural imagination.

There is a valid way to restate the idea that nature is a cultural product. Marc Treib, who has written widely on landscapes of all sorts, puts it concisely: "There can be no concept of nature without a concept of culture" (Treib 2000). His emphasis on concepts makes his formulation useful. In modern languages at least, the concepts of nature and culture are yin and yang: Neither concept can exist without the other.

This way of relating the two concepts of nature and culture is essentially Deconstructivist, and has great value in analyzing landscapes. It focuses attention on human concepts affecting human actions which in turn affect the more-than-human world. Many of the definational paradoxes discussed in this paper
agree in principle with the Decon approach.32

Even a partial review of the way Decon “situates” nature and culture in its “discourses” would require a separate paper. What is important here is to note a cliché that is extremely misleading of the statement that the concepts of nature and culture are inseparable. Unlike Treib’s careful phrasing, the cliché claims that “there is no nature without culture”—a very different proposition altogether.33 To those who fully embrace the cliché, “cultural constructs” (concepts and ideas) are the sum total of human reality, displacing all sensual experience.34 “Nature” in such schemes is just another construct, with no objective or external reality.35 Culture is in effect exempted from the same critique, since it is already conceptual.

This absolutist view of culture creating nature is at odds with cutting-edge neuropsychological research on perception and thought.36 Many of today’s researchers see perception as pre-conceptual, visceral, and at least partly hard-wired. Among the most primal perceptions are many aspects of place and of nature, including a number that appear to be cross-culturally universal (Abrams 1996). Cultural influence occurs at a much more abstracted level where linguistic and intellectual filtering and linking reshape (but do not literally create) basic perceptual input.37 Pre-conceptual awareness eventually subverts any concept or construct which is too inconsistent with basic perceptions.38 Thus, current theories of perception strongly imply that, like any other aggregate term or abstraction, the concept of nature (and the concept of culture) is produced by culture, but not arbitrarily. Rather than culture creating nature, or nature determining culture, each influences the other, and the elements of each have existence independent of the other.39

Sadly, the argument that “there can be no separation of nature from culture” (another cliché twist) is often construed to place culture over nature. At its most extreme, making nature “just a cultural construct” is a strategy toward human dominance over any place, any organism, and any dynamic system (see endnote 35). If this restatement seems farfetched, take a look at the political arguments of the self-styled “Wise Use” movement, which claims that nature is for people, period. Wise Use is at war with mainstream American culture’s long-standing intention to protect certain places from industrial exploitation (Deal 1993). As a weapon in that war, the more “simplified” followers of Wise Use routinely employ the claim that culture creates nature.40

Wise Use remains a fringe movement, even with staunch supporters in the White House and Department of Interior. Its dogma, however, throws the nature/culture debate into stark relief. The stakes are, at the very least, the survival of anything undomesticated on Earth. Impounding nature under culture may seem like a cultural victory, but if the two are truly inseparable, enslaving one destroys the other.

The Wrong Arguments?
The belief that nature and culture are utterly opposed or separate is unsupported, and when implemented, is dangerous to humans and to the rest of the world. The belief that nature is merely an extension of culture encourages cultural hegemony without further regard for anything non-human. The supposedly “opposite” assertion (that culture is identical with all other natural phenomena) can likewise result in appropriation of the non-human. Any of these narrow positions may obscure critical thought about how human activities differ from the rest of what goes on here on Earth, and about ethical distinctions among the many varieties of cultural activity (Jordan 2000; Kingsley 1995). Put bluntly, absolutist oversimplified positions about nature or culture are recipes for disaster.

In landscape architecture, however, absolutist nature/culture opinions are commonly used to justify specific design approaches and styles. Naturalistic garden styles are advanced by some as the only appropriate built environment, often based on the idea that nature is better than and separate from humans. Naturalistic landscapes have many good arguments in their favor (Thompson and Sorvig 2000), but the point here is that the separate status of nature is not the right argument.

At the other extreme, the idea that nature is merely an extension of or resource for culture has been misused to justify many landscape styles that are brutal to both human and biological environments. Examples range from the massive show of force explicit in Le Notre, through rigid machine-age geometries, to the deliberate dysfunctionality of Deconstructivist follies. There are times and places where each of these styles may be appropriate—but basing them on the argument that nature is inherently subservient to culture is, again, the wrong argument.

In essence, too much of today’s nature/culture debate is partisan argument about which is superior. Given that neither position can be completely supported, I suggest that landscape thinkers need to look at the effects of our definitions, and to accept the operational definitions that offer the most richness while leading to the fewest applied problems.

The concepts of nature and culture have real limits, which writers should keep firmly in mind while using them. This is how any tool must be used, knowing what it is for and using it accordingly. A hammer is very limited—it cannot saw wood or turn screws—but is still useful.41 Similarly, nature and culture are limited concepts. But there are times when it is critically important to think about the many differences between the human way of doing things, and almost all the other processes at work on this planet. For this, nature and culture are essential concepts, despite their limits—or, paradoxically, precisely because their limits focus on important sets of issues.

The greatest concern with “nature” is that it is so often defined as completely isolating humans from the rest of the world. A moment’s thought, however, shows the fallacy of this, not only in specific, but about concepts in general. There are few concepts indeed that completely
isolate their referents. Even such apparently dichotomous concepts as physical “male” and “female” are blurred in the embryo, which until a certain state of development is neither-and-both. Properly drawn, the yin-yang symbol has a spot of black in the white swirl, and a spot of white in the black. Oppositional concepts which do not recognize their own limits are a hindrance to clear thinking of any kind, not just in the nature-culture debate.

Thus, those of us who write and communicate about landscapes need to be as clear as possible about what nature means, and about what it generally does not mean. Similar clarity is needed when discussing culture. Most important of all, any contrasting of culture “versus” nature must be excruciatingly clear about the limits and paradoxes of such a contrast. Otherwise, persuasion based on that contrast risks becoming actively destructive to both.

Using Nature & Culture Well

The need to be thoughtful about these difficult terms is no longer the responsibility of scholars alone. Practitioners of design and planning can and should exercise public leadership by using similar care in presenting site analyses or project concepts. The following are a few suggestions (Table 8).

There is no “last word” on this subject, and I have little expectation of consensus. I realize, too, that it is unfashionable today to give anything but the vaguest suggestions about how people “should” construe their worlds. However, if the landscape professions (and others, ranging from developers to conservationists) do not adopt a clearer vocabulary about nature and culture, all of the differing interpretations of landscape will continue to suffer because we are constantly (and perhaps deliberately) miscommunicating.

Table 8. Using Nature and Culture Well

- When using the words “nature,” “natural,” or “wild,” always include an explanatory phrase to tell the reader which sense of the term is implied. For example, “This is a natural landscape, in the sense that human engineering has played little role in shaping its hills and rivers.” Or “Uninfluenced by human intervention except for the effects of mild air pollution, this forest may be called a wild one.”

- Use similar care with “culture.” Regional field-patterns and propagandistic war memorials are both “cultural landscapes,” but at different scales and with very different intentions and limits. Be specific what aspect of culture is meant; for example, environmental problems are more accurately blamed on industrialization or consumerism than on “culture” in general. Avoid using “culture” as a code word for Utopia or咪. Them.

- Be as explicit as possible about whether you are referring to nature-the-concept or nature-the-phenomenon; likewise for culture. Treib’s example (above) is a good model. Although concept and phenomenon cannot ever be totally separated or totally unified, the distinction is critical, even when discussing areas of overlap and circular influence.

- Another useful question is whether you are describing form or process (or their overlap). Many gardens whose forms are naturalistic are too limited or too much a hodge-podge of species to approximate natural processes. Forms influence processes, but process changes all forms (usually toward “natural” shapes, given time). Form and process are never completely distinct, but a clear focus aids communication.

- The term “fractal” is frequently the most accurate substitute for “natural” when describing forms or spatial relationships. Fractal forms mean those that develop iteratively (through repetition of a process), and whose parts are fractions or fragments of the whole. The meaning of “fractal” is mathematically well-defined. Fractal geometry fits forms that grow and/or decay (from plants to eroding landforms). The term has a clear opposite: “Euclidean form” (i.e. a geometry of regular lines, polygons, and solids). By contrast, the phrase “natural form” is very fuzzy and vulnerable to mistaken usage (well-pruned trees can appear “natural” in form). Writers who have not familiarized themselves with fractals lack one of the most valuable concepts available for discussing landscapes. (For starters, see the writings of B. Mandelbrot, including those in the reference list of this paper.)

- Use the word “naturalistic” to refer to places and objects that recreate the appearance or form of nature. This is a scale-dependent term (see below): A whole landscape is not naturalistic simply because it has a few untrimmed bushes.

- If a naturalistic form actually approximates or aids ecosystem functions, make that fact explicit. For example, a restored or artificial stream’s channel may be designed to meander for naturalistic aesthetics, or because meanders have functional effects on erosion and sedimentation, flooding, and habitat. Back eco-functional claims with hard research. This is not easy, since there is uncertainty in many aspects of ecological science. On this score many landscape writers are painfully careless, assuming that naturalistic form always equates with ecological function. A few perversely assume that the two never equate.

- Do not use “natural” or “naturalistic” to mean simply planted or green. Planting can be highly artificial—in form, in species composition, and in functional effect on ecosystems. Use “naturalistic” primarily where landforms, plant growth forms, and plant distribution patterns are designed to represent the forms of their wild equivalents. For a whole place or landscape to be called naturalistic, all elements of its form(s) should be so.

- After a certain amount of time without human maintenance, it may be legitimate to describe abandoned plantings as natural, but it is better to be specific about this complex situation. The term “naturalized” is often used for this transition to self-maintenance, but is not necessarily the best description. An abandoned orchard, for example, may have wild-shaped trees and survive without human care, but retains the Euclidean grid on which it was planted.

Toward Inter-Natural Relations

The relationships, both linguistic and applied, between culture and nature are complex. While some types of complexity can be “solved” or simplified, the nature-culture relationship is irreducibly complex. Those of us who write, teach, and
— Use the word “agrarian” to describe landscapes whose form is based on crop and field patterns—loosely Euclidean in layout, but with an emphasis on plantings rather than on hardscape. Barbara Solomon makes a good case for this usage (Solomon 1988).

— When describing construction materials, use “natural” judiciously, to avoid sounding like an advertiser touting 100% Natural products. Descriptive terms such as “rough-cut lumber,” “untreated canvas,” or “river-rounded stones” are usually more accurate and evocative. Local or “regional” describe materials more clearly than does “native.”

— Use the word “artificial” sparingly about landscapes. While the meaning of “artificial flower” is clear—soil or plastic—the meaning of “artificial landscape” generally needs further explanation. Both naturalistic and agrarian gardens, for instance, can be termed artificial, but the term is often leveled at “formal” gardens.

Many landscape scholars are too quick to equate all construction and cultivation as uniformly “artificial.” It seems better, in general, to use more specific and descriptive terms. The near-synonym “fake” is extremely judgmental, and should be used even more sparingly. Another abused synonym is “Disney” or “Disneyfied.” as a dismissive attack on work someone dislikes.

Given that nearly all built and planted landscapes are artificial in some sense, a bit more respectful thought about roles and reasons for “fake” places seems in order.

— Avoid the word “formal” except in its most literal sense: pertaining to form rather than to function, structure, or materiality. Where this term is embedded in historical source documents, explain what it implied in context for historical authors (see below).

— Avoid “informal.” “Casual” or “unceremonious” are far clearer when referring to the designer’s intent, while “naturalistic” or “asymmetrical” communicate much more about the actual shape of the place. Where appropriate, “fractal” is even more specific.

— “Random” is best reserved for cases where form-making processes truly lack any dominant controlling or determining force (human or environmental). Most forms described as “random” by landscape writers are fractal or deliberately naturalistic. Some apparently random forms result from careless or unconscious human action. They might be described as “unintentional”; most reveal important non-random patterns when carefully observed.

— Replace or qualify the many non-literal uses of “formal” with “Euclidean.” “Geometrical” is not as good a substitute, since mathematicians have recognized non-Euclidean and fractal geometries for decades. When describing geometry, be more specific—a circular, orthogonal, or triangular layout, for example. “Symmetrical” is another appropriate and specific substitute in describing some kinds of “formal landscapes.” “Urban” may be another useful term. So can “ceremonial,” since much of what is implied by “formal garden” is about purposeful ritual.

These terms are also scale-dependent (see below): Two straight lines do not a formal garden make.

— Naturalistic, formal, and many other design terms are scale-dependent. That is, calling something naturalistic is not really meaningful unless the scale of the object is also considered. For instance, a specimen tree can be pruned (or left unpruned) so that its form is naturalistic. Placing that same tree in a pot on a severely Euclidean terrace can be excellent design, but does not make the whole landscape naturalistic. Japanese garden paths made of “naturally shaped” stones often include a few cut rectangles for contrast, but clearly the whole path is not Euclidean (see photos in Yoshikawa 1990, pp. 59–60). Conversely, irregular “crazy-paving” shapes can fill a precise rectangle. Landscape description must specify scale(s) of reference: “Individually, the plantings and boulders are naturalistic in form and placement, contrasting with the site’s agrarian geometry.”

— Time, like scale, strongly affects the concepts of nature and culture as applied to design. Most cultural landscapes, if not maintained by people, will change over time into places almost unrecognizably different than their cultivated state. Natural and naturalistic landscapes also change over time. However, when viewed at appropriate scales, the initial and changing states of natural landscapes usually bear a strong family resemblance to one another, despite great changes in individual elements. This quality is in part due to a mathematical property of fractal forms, which are always “self-similar” (see Mandelbrot 1983). The degree and kind of change over time is a valuable litmus test for distinguishing more and less cultural aspects of the landscape.

— Don’t be afraid of hybrid phrases such as “artificial naturalism” or “formal qualities of natural places,” or “built ecosystems,” but think them through very carefully for each use.

— Reserve the idea of “constructs” primarily for the analysis of mental and cultural influences. Make explicit the many ways in which these thought-forms link to and influence the dynamic world beyond the human sphere, but don’t fully equate constructs and physical reality. In particular, don’t make the solipsistic mistake of equating concept-making with the creation of the more-than-human world.

— Make a determined effort not to intermingle nature-as-norm with nature-as-environment, even though the two cannot be completely separated. This is possibly the most difficult challenge in trying to write honestly and clearly about landscapes, and there is no perfect solution. At least strive to think and write clearly: If “natural” implies normality in a specific discussion, awareness of that implication and its potential pitfalls is essential to clarity. Likewise, be alert for the tendency to make culture an absolute norm. Respect the variety of human culture without lapsing into uncritical acceptance; just because something has always been done or believed does not make it a desirable normative ideal.

Source
work with landscapes must, I am convinced, learn to live with this complexity. We must let go of the understandable but misguided desire to oversimplify this important relationship.

In any good relationship, both parties must be accorded equal weight and allowed both influence and independence. Like respectful friends, nature and culture have many ways to interact, to tolerate one another’s foibles and jokes, even to accord one another occasional privacy. Writing about landscapes should hint at this richness of relationship, intimating Barry Lopez’s vision of “conformity between the river and its bed.”

Notes

1. Clarence Glacken’s *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967) is a useful source for “classical” thought on the subject.

2. A review would be welcome and useful, probably demanding at least a book-length anthology to do justice to the diversity of views. Some important names—for example, from a comprehensive list—would be Joan Nossal, Robert Thayer, Anne Sparn, Simon Swoffield, Ian McHarg, Lawrence Halprin, Robert Riley, Brenda Brown, J.B. Jackson, Louise Morin and others whose focus is landscape architecture as such; and a much broader range of generalist writers such as Simon Schama, Raymond Williams, Michael Pollan, Gary Snyder, Carolyn Merchant, William Cronon, Edward Abbey, and so on.

3. Lopez has been criticized for his usage of “men” to mean humans or culture in general, although the body of his work does not appear unusually sexist. The issue of ascribing masculinity to culture and femininity to nature has been widely studied, and is discussed along with many other topics in this paper.

4. This essay, one of Jackson’s most widely quoted, claims that linguistic evidence proves that “a landscape is not a natural feature of the environment, but a synthetic space, a mass-made system of spaces imposed on the face of the land, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community” (p. 8, italics original).

5. Jackson bases his exclusionary claim on the fact that in Dutch, the word *landschap* once meant an area of jurisdiction, akin to a township. Jackson’s etymologies are correct as far as they go, but tell less than half the story.

6. The Germanic suffixeship (also ~ship, -schaf, or ~ship, Old English ~scipe) is complex in usage: in modern English, -ship has a six-part dictionary definition; see note 12: (American Heritage 1969; Encarta 1999).

7. status, title, rank, or office (professorship).

8. person holding an office (Your Ladyship—note that the title itself is “Lady”);

9. skill, ability, art, or function (craftsmanship, leadership).

10. a group of like people or things (the membership of an organization; the Fellowship of the Ring).

11. place or thing showing a particular quality or condition (township).

Jackson acknowledged only the most artificial of these meanings, those concerning official designation or rank, and (conveniently for his conclusions) ignored the rest.

12. Landscape is more properly derived from landschap, a Dutch variant, “literally, ‘condition of being land’” (Encarta, p. 1015). This parallels “township,” a place having town conditions, later reified as the official title for such a place and its boundaries (see note 11). The near-synonymous suffix—hood (e.g., sister-hood) is similarly used in place-designations such as neighborhood and its current Black English equivalent, The Hood.

13. Landscape architect Diana Balmori made witty use of the crime analogy for nature’s “death” in a parody of the hard-boiled detective story (Balmori 1996). Hilarious though it is, the essay is too clever to shed much light: its ending veers toward the belief that culture literally creates nature.


15. If Castaneda’s book is fiction, as some have suggested, he is merely following in this teaching tradition, revealing fact through “falschood.”

16. Vonnegut may have paraphrased the Buddhist concept of “skillful means”: teachings that, taken literally, are false, yet reveal critical truths. The classic example: Parents escape from a burning house, only to realize their toddler is still inside. Through a window, the parents shout, “Come out, we have some candy for you.” The child, too young to understand the truth of the lies, and too easily panicked by such knowledge, comes out and is rescued. The lie about the candy is “skillful means.” All Buddhist texts are considered to function in this way, and students are cautioned not to “eat the menu.”

17. Our heritage, as “Peoples of the Book” (Jews, Christians, and Muslims), is to demand absolute and fixed meanings from words, something that in practice we seldom achieve and regularly abuse.

18. Nature is another concept that is exceptionally easy to nit-pick, yet immensely important as a working definition in dealing with massive and often unintentional changes wrought by carelessly imported species. Clearly, “normal climate” varies, and over time may cause the extinction of some “native” species. However, the effect of industrial human activity has been to accelerate the rates of such change—in climate, in species migration, in soil erosion, and in species extinction—to levels comparable only to those occurring in great catastrophes such as the meteoric extinction of dinosaurs.

19. Besides ethnicity, native describing human traits is a synonym for “natural”—native, native ability, native culture, etc.

20. While culture’s baseline meaning is “learned rather than inborn” is quite clear, recent work on genetic and neurological aspects
of human behavior are rapidly changing ideas about what humans are born with. A good deal of this research suggests that more human behavior is hard-wired than previously suspected, thus diminishing culture’s scope and power. The hard sciences, of course, are biased toward exactly such findings. Whether real clarity on this issue will come from these sciences remains questionable. In the meantime, neither credulity nor absolutism are warranted about what is “inherent” or what is “arbitrarily constructed.”

21 In many cases, modern environmental damage in Third World situations is arguably due to unfair development and trade practices originating from industrialized countries. However, there is significant evidence that prehistoric settlements such as Mesa Verde exceeded the carrying capacity of their own lands, and that prehistoric humans hunted a long list of large mammals to extinction long before the invention of agriculture (Colinvaux 1979). Native cultures were not uniform, as Gary Nabhan points out (Nabhan, 1995). While many native cultures practiced excellent environmental stewardship, ascribing such enlightened practices universally to all native cultures is essentially myth-making. 

22 A Proto-Indo-European people are believed to have existed by or before 5000 B.C. The P.I.E. root of culture and cultivate is *kuan*, to dwell in or travel through (as well as other meanings). This is also the root of colony, and that word so often leveled dismissively at naturalistic landscapes, bucolic. Many words derive from kuan, including cultivate, and the completion of processes; “cycle” is one example. These relationships strongly suggest, though they do not prove, that culture comes laden with a sense of being time-bound, work-in-progress, temporary.

The P.I.E. root from which nature is derived, *gen*, was shortened in many cases to *gw*; it appears that the Latin root had two spellings, *gnas*/*gratus*, and the more familiar *nasti/natus*. The list of words from this root is very long, and includes many that are contentious today, besides nature and native: naive, nation, gender, nascent, pregnant, go-native, genotypic, genetical, and cognate (related by birth, used primarily about linguistically related words such as those in this list). For details, see the American Heritage Dictionary, Appendix of Proto-Indo-European roots.

23 In logic, informal and natural are near-synonyms. Although the phrase “informal logic” is used, the opposite of “formal logic” is often “natural logic.” Formal or symbolic logic judges validity solely on the form of the proposition, as in “A cannot equal not-A.” By contrast, “natural logic” is used to mean propositions whose validity is partly based on content (“He is a man. All men are tall. Therefore...”). Here again we have a correspondence in opposition to pure and abstract reason.

24 “Hard” geometries in design probably gain their elite status from the fact that they require exceptional resources to build and maintain, thus making a “formal” garden a type of conspicuous consumption. 


26 Even the Deconstructivist term “construct” links the act of construction with falseness, especially when used to dismiss beliefs as “merely cultural constructs.”

27 Perhaps the gender-stereotyping that makes nature female and thus irrational influenced designers and critics to conclude that naturalistic design is romantic and irrational.

28 For example, garden historian Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn has made a career of attacking ecological/naturalistic intentions in landscape architecture. He particularly decries attempts to use ecology to give special moral legitimacy to specific types of garden/landscape design. Wolschke-Bulmahn raises a valid and important question: whether any form of designed and constructed (i.e., artificial) landscape can claim to be perfectly ecological. He also documents that the moral weight of ecological design is being abused by (among others) the Nazis. However, Wolschke-Bulmahn so overstates his case that he essentially dismisses any ethical grounds for attempting to act, in the garden as elsewhere, in ways that favor the environment on which life depends. Such a stance is contrary to the conclusions of the best ethical minds of a dozen widely differing traditions, virtually all of whom treat some variety of ecological stewardship as among the highest ethical obligations. For a sampling of such thought, see Kingsley 1995.

29 The history of naturalistic design, which has had periods of great popularity and of complete rejection, is well beyond the scope of this essay. Discussions are available in Backer et al., 1998; Carr 1998; Gamper 1998; Jellicoe and Jellicoe 1982; Jung 2001; Moser and Teyssot 2000; Olin 2000; Pregill and Volkman 1999; Rogers 2001; Rybczynski 1999; Trotha 1999, and of course many others.

30 See note 7.

31 Not enough is known about prehistoric cultures (or contemporary tribal ones) to exclude the possibility that some people somewhere do or did have an overarching word for “natural,” a generalizing concept of culture, or sense versa. Many modern tribal languages seem to refer to their own group as The People, which is a view of culture as elitist as any other claim of Chosen status. Nevertheless, in modern languages and the cultures they reflect, Treib’s statement is broadly true.

32 How Deconstructivists state their ideas is another matter. The typical incomprehensibility of a leaf, Derrida or Tsuchimi makes it hard to credit them as experts on theories of meaning. 33 A case can be made that some of the cliché usage is “sound-bite syndrome.” For example, overstatements such as “Most ecology is human ecology” are frequently used as cover blurs for thoughtful books on nature, e.g., the blurs for Joan Næsser’s *Placing Nature* (1997). The fact that these clichés sell books is an indication of how attractive superficial and absolutist concepts can be.

34 The discipline called semiotics is infamous for claiming that everything is signs (words, symbols, etc.) and that what is signified (any external existence) is simply another sign (see Peirce 1979; Austin 1990). Treib (2000) points out how the professional preoccupation with the exclusively visible making and imaging of landscapes devalues primal sensory landscape experiences.

35 Hull and Robertson make a particularly disingenuous use of this idea, insisting that there are many “ways” to landscape design only by the degree of support they receive in “a tournament of competing conservation agendas” (p. 114). Multiple natures is a useful concept in comparing the environmental dynamics of different regions, or the environmental beliefs of different peoples. However, these authors logically extend “all forms of nature from parks to parking lots” (p. 301, in their conclusion to the cited book), rejecting virtually all ecological concepts as (sin of sins) “value-laden” (p. 108). Such solipsism confuses any ability to communicate about the critical, functional, and ethical distinctions between parks and parking—yet the authors claim their article is an attempt to “improve the quality of debate” (p. 115). These are social scientists privileging social science over all other values—a fact that should long since have undermined the credibility of this type of argument. (Hull and Robertson 2000)

36 Detailing this research is well beyond the scope of this essay, but deserves attention because many landscape theories are based on ideas of perception that are decades out of date. A good starting point for very current re-search in this area is the working papers of the Santa Fe Institute (www.santafe.edu), the premier research organization devoted to “complexity studies.”

37 In this sense “construct” is an appropriate term, since physical construction hardly ever creates its raw materials, merely reshaping and assembling “nature’s gifts.”

38 Thomas Kuhn documented the subversive effects of basic perceptions on conceptions and practice (Kuhn 1970). When modern neuropsychology was merely a twinkle in a behaviorist’s eye. Without direct (or at least, more-direct) perception to keep intellectualization in check, “social constructs” would be arbitrary and thus dangerously unreliable in any survival situation.

39 So far this discussion has been one of conjecture and argument, and very likely there is much more uncer-tainty about what is neurological and what is learned to warrant extreme positions such as “everything is cultural.” For clear discussion of this topic, see Holmes Rolston’s paper: “Nature for Real: Is Nature a Social Construct?” in T.D.J. Chappell, ed., *The Philosophy of the Environment*, University of Edinburgh Press, 1997, pp. 38–64.

40 I am not suggesting that Hull or Robertson are personal aficionados of Wise Use, but their arguments are virtually indistinguishable from those used by these pro-industry, anti-conservation front groups. See www.ewg.org/ pub/home/ clear/clear.html, a page posted by the Environmental Working Group, for information on the funding and agendas of Wise
Use and other anti-environmental groups. Contact EWG at info@ewg.org or 202-667-6982.

41. A hummer can also be abused to break windows or murder people, just as useful concepts of nature and ecology were abused by the Nazis (see Note 28).

References


