

Panda Gardens and Public Sex at the National Zoological Park

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In November 1973, on the eve of introducing Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing into their new outdoor exhibit, the mood among staff at the National Zoological Park in Washington D.C. was expectant. "They miss each other," said one curator to the *Washington Post*, commenting on the fact that the giant pandas had been kept inside their sex-segregated "apartment" for months (quoted in Booth Conroy 1973). In the Panda Gardens, as the area was formally labelled for visitors, things would be slightly different. Designed as part of the total panda house scheme, the outdoor enclosure featured two separate green spaces that were visible to zoo goers across a railing and moat. The extra room allowed the pandas to move across grassy slopes, sit under trees, and play in shallow pools. It also allowed them to sense each other through an opening in a fence positioned between them, foreshadowing their first breeding season when full contact would commence. Invoking the primary Judeo-Christian metaphor of original innocence, one keeper speculated that once the creatures were released into their new area, "They'll think it's the Garden of Eden" (quoted in Booth Conroy 1973). An internal Zoo memo made predictions in more instrumental terms: "It is hoped that these ideal conditions will... create a habitat for the animals that will produce the first successful mating of Giant Pandas outside of China."¹ When the pandas had reached breeding age in 1977, the *Post's* Judith Martin (a.k.a. Miss Manners) upheld the Gardens' promise with playful frustration: "You know how those rumors start. Everybody says he and she would be just great for each other; their names are linked before they've hardly done more than say hello: and then one day they're spotted together in the park in the springtime. And right away, everybody's saying she must be pregnant. Well, she's not" (Martin 1977).

This essay ponders the verdant and public stage on which these reproductive hopes were cultivated, expressed, thwarted, and reassembled. The Panda Gardens predated the giant panda's fetishization in the post cold war United States, which is only partially indexed by costly U.S.-Chinese rental agreements, the World Wildlife Fund logo, routine media appearances, panda cams, mass merchandising, and extravagant living complexes for panda pairs in San Diego.

Atlanta, Memphis, and Washington D.C.² I want to argue that the National Zoo's first outdoor panda exhibit was ground zero for some of this panda love, specifically through attempts therein to breed naturalistic forms of American heterosexuality alongside members of a critically endangered species. In the Panda Gardens, these two breeding programs were thoroughly entangled, reminding us that power exercised at the level of life knows no species barrier (Shukin 2009), nor is it quarantined from the enthusiasm for its details, such as intercourse, conception, and birth. My interpretation of these entanglements understands captive pandas as nonhuman animals living in exteriors planned for the well-being and biological continuity of nonhuman animals, but it also considers the cultural work that the exhibit did to frame U.S. public life as naturally heterosexual. Like other natural habitat displays that began to take shape in American zoos in the 1970s, the Panda Gardens simultaneously addressed the needs of animals, attendants, and visitors through a material-discursive configuration of garden space as procreative space. I want to examine the sexual registers of this configuration and probe its fissures.

My approach follows a now staple thesis in cultural criticism that normative constructions of being and belonging are at once compulsory and open-ended, ideological and transcendent. Frederic Jameson's (1979) formulation remains instructive, if too pessimistic, arguing that works of mass culture "even if their function lies in the legitimation of the existing order—or some worse one—cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter's service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice" (144). Mass culture, in other words, articulates both the repressive dimensions of social power and its utopic content, however faint, disorganized or ineffectual. In the context of zoos, historians such as Harriet Ritvo (1987) and Elizabeth Hanson (2002) have emphasized public animal exhibition as a coercive practice oriented towards official expressions of nationhood, colonial relations, and urban and environmental citizenship (see also Horowitz 1981, Wirtz 1997). Other scholars, however, have stressed the indeterminacy of exhibition, pointing to the different routes through which a given education at the zoo can turn into something unexpected, for better or worse. These routes include visitors' varied viewing practices (Jones 1997), a physical presence of animality that defies symbolization (Burt 2002), and the failure of animals to return meaningful gazes (Berger 1980). Collectively, these studies suggest that any historical analysis of the Panda Gardens ought to attend to how zoo exhibits, like other cultural texts and sites, can define and at least partially trouble what counts as natural, normal, and worth saving—in this case, heterosexuality.

Here I specifically recognize, as queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) do, that heterosexuality is a national (and nationally specific) culture with only a provisional unity. It emerges from multiple formal and informal procedures that secure the ubiquity, moral authority, and material entitlements of reproductive male-female sexual relations and identities. In the United States, this culture roots itself in privatized sex acts and works outwards, rendering a whole field of disparate social activities and affects operable as forms of heterosexuality: paying taxes, being disgusted, celebrating a holiday, and—my addition here—caring for and about giant pandas, perhaps even being one. "We are describing," write Berlant and Warner, "a constellation of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership" (555). To what extent did the construction of the Panda Gardens constitute one of those practices? How did the exhibit's built environment and media representations naturalize the look and feel of normative American heterosexuality? How was this process reinforced

or complicated by the peculiarities of giant pandas as a species, and Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling in particular? What did the infamous *absence* of sex in the Panda Gardens suggest for other hopes and forms of life? My own hope is that a reading of the inaugural site of contemporary panda pronatalism can more broadly fertilize some other possibilities for public gardens and the different creatures that make use of them.

The Delicate Flavour of Wildness

While giant pandas were a new species for the National Zoo in the early 1970s, their outdoor enclosure was part of a longer history of heterosexualizing American public culture through its designated nature spaces. Established in the late nineteenth century, the nation's first zoos were administratively, physically, and ideologically located in the burgeoning public parks system (Hanson 2002). This system took its stylistic cues from aristocratic English and continental European gardens of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which cultivated spaces of nature as a form of art. A beautiful garden, according to these traditions, was differentiated from the garden's surroundings. It mirrored the natural world, but heightened its image into something still more natural and expressive of reason (Cranz 1982, 24). U.S. landscape architects, chief among them Frederick Law Olmsted, translated these principles to the new urban setting of the public park and placed them into conversation with distinctly American desires for untrammelled wilderness. In an effort to render the area's topology more dramatically natural, and to radically diverge from the artificiality of nearby street grids and row houses, Olmsted and his colleagues crafted unified landscapes of rambling pathways that followed and accentuated the contours of the existing site. They separated vehicular traffic from pedestrian traffic in a system of curved roads and walks. They emphasized a succession of lookout points that offered leafy complex tableaux in the artistic tradition of the "picturesque" (Cranz 1982, 32-36). They placed trees and shrubs in asymmetrical formations that would "plant out" the city, and others that would lead the eye from a darkened foreground to an undefined distant view (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 130-131). These techniques recreated some of the informal and bucolic appearance of the English garden especially, producing, in the words of an early Central Park guidebook, the "delicate flavor of wildness, so hard to seize and imprison when civilization has once put it to flight" (quoted in Boyer 1978, 239).

Palates for the delicate flavour of wildness were neither universal nor innocent. Rolling vistas, gentle creeks, and rounded walkways fed into a wider program of social reform that reflected and catered to the Arcadian longings of an urban professional class with Anglo-European ties (Schmitt 1969, Boyer 1978). These reformers looked to what Olmsted protégé Charles Eliot called the "more natural and agreeable" space of the park to allay the city's "confusion and excitement" and produce more "desirable types of humanity" (quoted in Boyer 1978, 239). Through print, plan, and built form, public park enthusiasts exalted the recuperative power of open space and promoted said recuperation to urbanizing populations whose tastes and morals were considered vulgar by comparison. Particularly disquieting was the post-civil war arrival of African Americans and immigrants who, in Carolyn Merchant's (2003) analysis, inspired depictions of a more menacing kind of nature:

The city had become a dark, negatively charged wilderness filled with blacks and southern European immigrants, while mountains, forests, waterfalls, and canyons were viewed as sublime places of white light. . . Sublime nature was white and benign, available to white tourists; cities were portrayed as black and malign, the home of the unclean and the undesirable (382).

Parks in the city offered cosmopolitan versions of the whiter wilderness, sanitized and reserved for respectable leisure pursuits like organized sports, boating, and the all-important promenade (Cranz, 1982, 8-10). The effect was to preserve urban sophisticates' social and physical place in the city while attempting to assimilate other racial and ethnic communities in the process.³

How the studied naturalism of these landscapes also privileged certain sexual practices while discouraging others is an overlooked theme in park design history, with some valuable exceptions. Gordon Brett Ingram (1997) observes that the "open" space of city parks—designated ostensibly for common access and appreciation—is often not so open insofar as it has historically encouraged a park experience geared towards the conspicuous display of androcentric heterosexual desire, courtship, and conquest (95, 102). Ingram's evidence is a counter-history of twentieth-century queer art and community activism that has re-appropriated outdoor urban space for pleasures that "have been pointedly denied or heavily constrained to sexual minorities" (102). These denials and constraints include an early design emphasis on the public promenade, sightlines that encouraged the male gaze, and the absence of areas conducive to overt sexual conduct (102). Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2005) points to the strategic placement of pair-appropriate benches and open-walled gazebos, which punctuated the romantic strolls proscribed by the sylvan setting and facilitated the pairing up of men and women. In the process, these design elements "deterred expressions of sexuality other than those formally sanctioned in the public eye," such as cruising, same sex touching or group sex (9). Wholesomeness was, in this sense, programmed into the environment, limiting the conditions of erotic possibility against which lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals continue to struggle.

The first American zoos bore the stamp of public park naturalism and its anxieties. Olmsted, for one, believed that adding zoos to parks introduced an element of risk to these modified English gardens by threatening to reduce their settings to the level of a popular animal show (Hyson 2000, 27; see also Hanson 2002, 22). His zoo designs proposed animal watching as an elaboration of the respectable encounter with rustic nature, in part to mitigate these concerns. For example, the centerpiece of a largely unrealized plan for the future National Zoo in Washington's Rock Creek Park was, in Olmsted's words, a "pleasure drive" that ran east-west through the grounds with animal exhibits clustered together in the centre of the property. This design created "a parklike place" that was "distinguished less by the obvious qualities of the objects to be seen in it than by the manner in which they so combine, merge and blend in groups as to become contributive effects of the scenery."⁴ Animals here would not be the focus of any show, but an integrated and enriching part of a total pastoral scene. Moreover, exhibits would cater to both the animals' living requirements and visitors' desires for restorative views. Areas of animal display were viewable by foot, not from carriages, giving both animals and humans some peace and quiet. For areas beyond the displays and closer to the creek, Olmsted envisioned open sloping greensward and scattered trees. These were some of the ways that zoos adapted to the public park form, molding to its geography and subjecting humans and animals alike to the gentle discipline of its delicate wildness.

An Intimate Elsewhere

Designers of the Panda Gardens situated the enclosure within a larger homage to Olmsted's original plans for the National Zoo, which culminated in the promenade-friendly Olmsted Walk in the 1980s. As a preliminary step in the Zoo's 1971 master plan, the panda exhibit modernized and internationalized the architect's style for mid-twentieth-century Americans. What made Hsing-Hsing

Figure 2. Giant Pandas at Smithsonian's National Zoo. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian's National Zoo. Image 6075-87.



and Ling-Ling's outdoor area appear both up-to-date and vaguely Oriental was its minimalism. Published in the *International Zoo Yearbook*, an illustrated plan of the site showed zoo professionals a subdued naturalism more streamlined than the rustic log cabins and irregular stone structures of the first National Zoo (Ewing, 1996). Between the two garden spaces—a sloping quarter acre each—stood five apparently scattered weeping willow trees, fenced for their protection, two small pools, and a curved doubled fence that sandwiched a hedge of naked bamboo (*Phyllostachys nuda*). Interrupting the linearity of the bamboo-filled fence was a circular window six feet in diameter that staff architect Norman Melun described as a “moon gate”—an ornamental but still simple element in the built landscape (Melun 1975, 265). Materials for the site were also plain: a Kentucky bluegrass mixture for the sloping turf, black Virginia stone with slight white marbelization for the pools, and cedar boards for the fence, stained to give a weathered look (Melun 1975; 1973). Indeed, the most extravagant feature of the Panda Gardens was its 350 linear feet of peripheral viewing space for the seven million visitors projected to take in the pandas every year (Brooks 1973). In developing the exhibit, Melun praised the “simplicity of the design” to the Zoo’s master planning team, which would keep the project affordable amidst the escalating costs of the federal city’s building market, as well as Zoo management’s new commitment to keep architectural egos under control (Melun 1972).⁵

There were other reasons to value the understatement of the exhibit. Its lack of embellishment created the proper setting for the intimate sexual activities envisioned therein and the reassurances they were asked to give. Berlant and Warner argue that modern sexuality in the United States commonly registers as an expression of intimacy: a pleasurable closeness between two persons that constitutes their authentic selves and moral centres. Intimacy of this sort is located in the affective space of "personal life" through which a nationalized, middle-class, heterosexual culture is built, and to which it constantly refers. This space functions as "a home base of pre-political humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict. Intimate life is the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse..." (1998 553).

The Panda Gardens nurtured this elsewhere—or, as it was headlined in the exhibit's press, the sense that "Home Is Where the Heart Is" (Booth Conroy 1973). While the range of possible meanings for the Gardens' intimate setting is as variable as any other cultural production, its debut at this historical moment generated some likely connotations. At a certain angle, spare lines and creature comforts marked out a domesticated nature space amidst the nation's cold war uncertainties. The Panda Gardens offered to ease worries over thawing East-West trade and cultural relations, extending what Cynthia Chris (2006) has chronicled as the diplomatic use of pandas since the 1940s. For Chris, the gift of two pandas from the People's Republic of China to the United States in 1972 was a major instalment in a geopolitical strategy of "panda diplomacy," which celebrated the animals as living symbols of friendly ties between Mao Zedong and the Nixon administration (163). As Melun phrased it to the *Post* in 1973, "These are very, very rare animals with diplomatic overtones and immense monetary value if one wants to be so crass as to consider that" (quoted in Saar 1973). With its gentle sweep of willow trees and weathered wood, and the serenity of a circular window between two harmoniously proportioned parts, Melun's style of outdoor panda display affirmed the dignity of the pandas' official role and can be read as part of the budding friendship between desired equals. A peaceful paired-down setting gave viewers nothing to fear about a largely unknown China, and in the Olmstedian tradition, much to quietly appreciate.

The exhibit's intimacy can also be understood in the context of the city's own civic strife. Grappling with inter-racial tension four years after a major riot, local zoo goers were given a sight for sore eyes and a sense of calm escape in the elsewhere-ness of two secluded pandas roaming through their backyard greens. Speculating on the renewed significance of urban American zoos in this period, R. Michael Schneider, a landscape architect and former secretary of the Minnesota Zoological Society, wrote in earnest in 1969: "The riots and struggles within our cities may be due... to a lack of understanding of the overall meaning of life. Truly, the only place that communion with life can occur is within a natural setting, such as the modern zoo" (95).

Most overtly, perhaps, was how the Gardens spoke to a widespread sense of cultural decay that Matthew Lassiter (2008) identifies in the endangered status of the nuclear family in the 1970s. Introduced through mainstream news media, popularized through mass culture, and intensified by the religious Right, the so-called "crisis of the American family" detailed the moral permissiveness and sexual depravity witnessed in, for example, unapologetic premarital sex and openly gay lifestyles (15). The Panda Gardens promised some relief. Its integrity of distilled forms and muted materials created a sanctuary from the nation's putative fall from grace. This was echoed in *Post* reporter Richard Cohen's 1981 sentiment that the panda couple dwelled as "our isle of romance in a sea of lust, some of it not even heterosexual" (Cohen 1981). Asserting that "some things are still sacred" at the

National Zoo, Cohen's commentary suggests that life in the exhibit appeared more decent; the irreducible meaning of it manifested in the figures of two pre-political mammalian mates, removed from the complexities of the wider world, and free to act naturally. Indeed, the low-key naturalism of the setting gave ballast to this very irreducibility. With hardly any ornament to distract them, the young Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling were encouraged to focus on the basic and hallowed business of getting closer to each other and to themselves, with spectators looking on in great anticipation.

The bifurcation of the exhibit design was central to the construction of the Gardens' normative intimacy. Explanations for dividing the space between "his" and "hers" drew on accounts that giant pandas in the mountains of central China are solitary animals that meet only in passing or to breed. Keeping pandas separated in captivity restaged these wilderness scenarios and channelled them towards mating. At eight feet high, the cedar fence was designed "to prevent too much socializing and a possible ensuing sibling relationship (which might inhibit breeding)" (Melun 1973). Crucially, it also encouraged visitors to identify maleness and femaleness in a species whose anatomy and behaviours have historically confounded such distinctions. What zoologists Desmond and Ramona Morris (1966) called the "panda-sexing game" is a record of scientific confusion. The case of London Zoo's Chi-Chi is illustrative. Arriving in 1958 as a female, Chi-Chi was then examined and determined to be male. The identification was later repealed when the animal was given another examination and re-determined as female. These and other studies reported neither a discernible scrotum nor a vulva that would easily present itself under scientific scrutiny (187-188). Sex specific body language was likewise bewildering. For every sign of sociability, gentleness, and stone rubbing that indicated femaleness, the panda was also observed as ill-tempered and would run around and bark—moods and activities associated with males of the species (192).⁶

Seven years later at the National Zoo, Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling's built environment differentiated the animals with more reliability than their bodies and behaviours ever could. Like Chi-Chi, female Ling-Ling was known to be aggressive from time to time, while male Hsing-Hsing, also like Chi-Chi, was described by curators as "altogether less threatening" (Collins and Page 1973, 22). Rumours circulated that the Chinese had perhaps mixed them up in transit (25). Press reports shared further misidentifications on the World Wildlife Fund's master list of pandas in Western countries. "Possibilities for confusion might be less," wrote one *Post* reporter, "if sensible names like Philip or Penelope or even Philip-Philip and Penelope-Penelope were given. And yet one would not be rude, of course, since it is generous of the Chinese to let any pandas out of the country at all" (quoted in Mitchell 1981a). The Panda Gardens helped straighten things out without insult, keeping Ling-Ling to one side of the exhibit and Hsing-Hsing to the other. The division demystified the interchangeability of their gender identities, which, as the *Post* intimated, was not disconnected from a perceived interchangeability of Chinese people that was likewise disconcerting.⁷

At the same time, the enclosure invested the couple with another kind of mystery that was well-suited for heterosexual preludes to reproduction. The moon gate was a key prop for panda courtship, converting a delicate flavour of wildness into what exhibit architect Avery Faulkner called "Chinese flavour" (quoted in Booth Conroy 1973). Not unlike the bench or gazebo of early public parks, the panda's gate punctuated the divided greens with a small romantic flourish organized by vision and regulated touch. Its ample opening covered with black wire mesh gave the pandas a chance to get acquainted through the exchange of looks and nuzzling while simultaneously keeping a "coy distance," as *The New York Times* described it in 1973. The gate also introduced pandas and panda lovers to the charm of traditional Chinese gardens, where windows placed within dividing

walls prompt delight in the accidental and unforeseen (Pirazolli-t'Serstevens 1971, 179; Su 1964, 205). Reinforcing this feeling of spontaneity, National Zoo photographs depicted the pandas around the moon gate in vignettes of impromptu encounter. Users of the Zoo's 1982 guidebook, for example, could see a tightly framed image of the animals sitting on opposite ends of the opening, with Ling-Ling on full display and Hsing-Hsing appearing behind her (fig. 3). Sunshine hit both figures at flattering angles, while Ling-Ling's bamboo stalk reached across to the centre of the gate in a casually enticing gesture towards her assigned suitor. Pictured between the gate's mesh and a timber platform structure that was added to the exhibit later, Hsing-Hsing's body was more contained, though with a gaze that appeared directed towards his "intended."

An extensive collection of moon gate images that did not publicly circulate elaborated on the romance. In one image, staff photographer Jessie Cohen documented Hsing-Hsing sitting on the grass surrounded by cut bamboo and gazing once again at his prospective mate through the circle (fig. 1). Centred in the circle, Ling-Ling was pictured at a sizeable remove from the gate but in full body profile. The position rendered Hsing-Hsing's spectatorship as a form of voyeurism—a stolen and intimate look at an oblivious object of erotic curiosity. Other photographs in the archive were more explicitly sexual. Taken when the animals had reached sexual maturity and were allowed full contact, one image depicted intimacy in ways alternately appropriate for the discourses of reproductive biology and soft-core pornography (fig. 2). Here the photographer stripped garden trysting of its pretensions, underscored by the nakedness of the composition: pure geometries, the quiet monumentality of a big "O," and two animals in gendered postures of sexual dominance and open-mouthed submission. For the institutional observer, the image made visible something of great import and confidentiality: an orgasmic moment of physical, spiritual and psychic closeness that linked "the truth of sex," in Michel Foucault's (1980) vocabulary, with the older and equally secretive truth of nature. Through the in-house camera lens, the Panda Gardens yielded both kinds of knowledge; a space of enclosure became one of disclosure.⁸

Queer Gardens

When Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling were old enough to reproduce, at the ages of six and seven respectively, the National Zoo welcomed area residents and tourists to come and observe how the pandas' "natural efforts" would unfold in the Gardens (McLellan 1980). For those who could not make it, local and national media were happy to communicate the sexual activity that the exhibit proposed in its form and occasional content, flirting with the boundaries of decorum to do so. Stimulating readers' appetites for juicy details in the breeding season of 1978, for example, freelance environmental reporter David Hoffman wrote, "... Technicolor cameras, tape recorders, sketch pads and 500-mm lenses inside Panda Gardens have confirmed that Ling-Ling lusts for Hsing-Hsing in the worst possible way" (23). Hoffman's subsequent play-by-play account of a 6 a.m. meeting confessed that "it is difficult to be delicate in describing the copulatory behavior of two roly-poly beasts whose dense fur coats conceal that which observers would describe" (23). Titillations aside, more challenging work lay in articulating how the pandas were not actually mating, that beneath their coats and within the Gardens there was nothing much to describe by way of male-female penetrative sex. After setting a provocative stage with Ling-Ling's apparent lust, the reporter finished the scene with a thud: "... Hsing-Hsing's bizarre positions made procreation impossible. Ling-Ling, meanwhile, stood on her head. But the acrobatic overture went for naught. After two hours of fruitless foreplay, the pandas began biting each other. Hsing-Hsing was taken

to his cage" (23). Additional press coverage heavily anthropomorphized the pandas' inability to have unassisted intercourse. The animals' illegible relationship was a "troubled romance," (Pinkney 1980) a "case of fruitless love," (Bruske 1980) and "one of the least inspiring love stories in history" (Martin 1977). This was "the couple, in fact, that can't couple" (Cohen 1981). Between 1977 and 1981, much of the blame fell on Hsing-Hsing, who was noticed not only for a failure to impregnate Ling-Ling, but also for his lack of visible interest in "a little hanky-panky among the bamboo shoots" (Kamen 1981). When the Zoo turned to electroejaculation and artificial insemination to accomplish what Hsing-Hsing did not on his own, officials kept up with the rhetoric of conjugal relations and the bourgeois couple form in the face of disjuncture. Said Zoo director Dr. Theodore Reed at a press conference in the wake of one procedure, "I feel a little embarrassed about this whole thing. This is a private and intimate thing between the two pandas" (quoted in McLellan 1980).

The normative intimacy of the Panda Gardens lost more credibility in the Spring of 1981 with the arrival of Ling-Ling's new sexual partner, Chia-Chia, on temporary loan from London Zoo. Panda lovers were told that the younger and well-endowed Chia-Chia was a superior mate compared to the now emasculated Hsing-Hsing—an assurance that already went some way to loosen the reproductive dyad between what Reed once called "the honeymooners" (quoted in McLellan 1980). But, in a stranger still development, panda lovers were also told that Hsing-Hsing would be encouraged to participate in any sexual activity that might ensue, and that inquisitive citizens would be kept in the know. What emerged was a mixed portrait of erotic life in the exhibit that reveals some hairline fractures in heterosexual identity forms and their civic green spaces.

In the first of several "Panda Watches" from the outdoor viewing area, *Post* reporter Henry Mitchell wrote with a unique passion for endangered species reproduction, reminding readers that "Panda breeding in zoos is not, after all, a good occupation for those hot for certainties" (1981b). Mitchell's daily reportage addressed a public turned on by something more ambiguous: part polyamory, part animal show, part zoophilia. Readers learned on April 15, for example, that excitement at the Zoo's "Menagerie à Trois" had "begun to rise higher among the humans than, possibly, the pandas," as if the exhibit was becoming not only a site of a panda threesome but also of inter-species sex (1981c). One day earlier, thrills included sightings of "the lady panda" walking backwards (possibly indicating estrus), of Hsing-Hsing attempting to mount her, and of Chia-Chia "spying" on Ling-Ling through the moon gate (1981c).⁹ When the latter two went outdoors together for the first time, Mitchell observed a romantic rendezvous with shades of masochism: "Chia-Chia followed Ling-Ling down towards the moat—it was a lovely soft night, a bit misty—and there, as his first gesture of love, 'hit her really hard'" (1981d). Mitchell normalized the male panda's aggressive behaviour and the female's numerous abrasions and bites with assertions that "courtship techniques vary" that "Chia-Chia was establishing dominance" and that "[a]s in so many other cases, the female rejected the male" (1981d and 1981f; see also 1981e). That the pandas did not meet again in the Gardens points to the limits of such suturing commentary and the capacity for the space itself to convincingly choreograph genteel hetero intimacy in nonhuman animals. On April 16, 1981, the entire panda house was closed to visitors, and the following day Zoo officials announced that the breeding season was over.

In a review essay on current intersections of queer and animal theories, Susan McHugh (2008) applauds treatments of nonhuman sexuality that can "lay foundations for new biopolitical (as opposed to disciplinary) knowledges, shutting down the usual snickering, blushing, or moralizing responses and instead opening up speculation about what happens to all of us when animals do it

unlike they do on the Discovery Channel" (156). For all its snickering and blushing, indeed because of it, the National Zoo's first outdoor panda exhibit is one place to begin such speculation. The excessive material and figurative construction of heteronormativity therein hints at the lively presence of something more productively dissonant to American sensibilities than a sunk romance, group sex, rough sex, or even—as panda watchers seemed to stop just short of saying about Hsing-Hsing—a gay panda. It also makes clear that regardless of the pandas' own sexual desires, whatever those might have been, the Panda Gardens was a profoundly queer nature in design, promotion, and use. Through its very excess—of delicate wildness, of separate spheres, of unrequited longings—the exhibit manifest the artifactuality and performativity of being "naturally" heterosexual. Moreover, it demonstrated the absurdity of enclosing two loosely dimorphic animals of the same species in a naturalistic landscape and waiting for babies. The queer object lesson here is that heterosexuality does not come to look natural, if it ever does, without elaborate effort, and that what we call "nature" is neither exclusively nor exhaustively straight.¹⁰ This bodes well for those of us who find inexplicable joy in public gardens and charismatic megafauna, and who want to contribute to their vitality beyond the discourses of preservation and conservation. The Panda Gardens tells us that all is not lost, and that urban nature, despite its prevailing cultural politics, can unsettle as much as verify the sexual order of things. My invitation is to more fully inhabit the nuances of this and other zoo exhibits as a means of engaging pleasures that are barely imaginable and considering the conditions in which they might flourish.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Significance of Pandas in the National Zoo. Smithsonian Institution Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation Building Files, c. 1850–2006, AC 06–225, Box 50, Smithsonian Institution Archives.
2. In the wake of Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling, giant pandas on exhibit in US zoos have been housed in more sophisticated outdoor spaces. For example, according to the 2001 PBS documentary *The Panda Baby*, the San Diego Zoo's Bai Yun and Shi Shi occupied two "Gardenroom Dens," a third garden space, a sunroom, and two exercise yards. The National Zoo's Tian Tian and Mei Xiang, as chronicled in Animal Planet's 2000 film *Meet the Pandas: Washington's New Power Couple*, made use of temperature-regulated grottos to approximate the cold conditions of their native habitat. Lun Lun and Yang Yang of Zoo Atlanta currently benefit from their Giant Panda Conservation Centre, which features large areas with extensive rockwork, topographical variation, and climbing timber, adjacent to a large and ornate Chinese-style pavilion.
3. For illustrations of how white, middle-class, civic interests have conceived of and commandeered public parks specifically against African-American traditions of ideal park space, see *Claiming Open Spaces* (dir. Austin Allen, 1995).
4. Olmsted quoted in Olmsted's Concept of the National Zoological Park. RU 365, Box 15, Folder 9, Smithsonian Institution Archives.
5. The early 1970s marked a period of architectural humility at the National Zoo more generally, evidenced by governing boards that rejected proposals with exceptionally modern designs and the very creation of Melun's position, which could be tightly managed by Zoo administrators to prevent any grand architectural gestures (Reed 1994, 6–10).
6. Chi-Chi's case was one of four other sexually ambiguous giant pandas out of the total 15 that made it to the West alive by 1966. Some of these animals were only assigned their "true gender" post mortem (Morris and Morris 1966, 187).
7. It is worth noting that not all people have found the confusion over gender identity in pandas disconcerting. As Garry Marvin and Bob Mullen (1999) observe, for young children especially, the giant panda "appears sexless and thus harmless" (26).

8. On the pivotal language of secrets in modern science, Evelyn Fox Keller (1980) writes: "To the new seekers of truth, the act of knowing became one of disclosure rather than enclosure" (57).
9. Estrus is a reproductive phase in female mammals, commonly referred to as being "in heat".
10. For theoretical discussions of this lesson, see Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2008) and Myra J. Hird (2006).

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