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Living with plants and the exploration of the organic within human geographic research practice

Explorations of the boundaries between human culture and non-human nature have clear ethical dimensions. Developing from both philosophical argument about the value of such boundaries and more recent empirical work exploring the traffic across them, we seek to complement these discussions through a consideration of how these boundaries can be enacted by ourselves as researchers through the methods we employ. As part of an agenda seeking to reconsider organic agency within geographical narrative, we have been exploring different techniques for documenting the ways in which such agencies are encountered by people. Specifically, we are interested in plants and the ways in which they might be researched in new ways. Based on two particular pieces of research into the dealings that humans and plants can have, our aim is one of recognising their lively presence as part of a performative environmental ethics enacted, in part, through the very practice of the research encounter.

Introduction: on ethics and entities

'We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in.'

Leopold, A (1949)

At a broad level questions of environmental ethics tend to 'produce moral theories on a grand scale' (Paden, 1994: 61). That is to say that, traditionally at least, the role of environmental ethics has been one of providing a set of fairly rarefied arguments for determining our obligations to the natural world. Different philosophical positions, variously labelled 'ecocentric', 'biopihilic', and 'non-anthropocentric', have sought to defend, through a particular broad style of analytical reasoning, the claims to moral consideration of the world's non-human entities. Environmental ethics, then, has been largely explored within a more philosophical mode, as though it is through protracted and distanced academic reflection that we may find the correct argument for living ethically with the myriad of other entities with which we share the world. The heroes of the day here are the deep thinking philosophers. Wider societies seem, to an extent, to wait unproblematically in the wings, watching for the outcomes of the cut and thrust of logical argument, ready to adopt corresponding actions once the argument has been won (see Fjellstrom, 2003).

Whilst there is clearly an argument for a trickle down of thoroughly considered environmental positions (Callicott, 2002), there is equally a case to be made for approaching environmental ethics from alternative points. Rather than waiting patiently for the outcome of rarefied debate, we might also want to begin dealing with the complexity of ethical negotiations with the non-human within lived encounter. We might want to produce smaller levels of theory (Paden, 1994: 61) that deal with the practical problems of daily life and which recognise that ethical judgement is perhaps elicited as much from 'the contexts of social practices' as it is 'from privileged set of

metaphysical principles' (Robinson, 2002: 279). It is within this context that a more thoroughly empirical agenda, such as that of geography, might help explore the traffic between the human and organic. We might here consider a space for ethics within the messiness of practice by providing research which explores the routine constitution of such messiness.

Work following this agenda is now gradually emerging. Michel Callon (1986) first suggested a way of allowing us to document the coming together of human and non-human forces within science, where the resolution of a technical aquaculture dispute in France could be as much about the wilful activity of shellfish as about the organising power of scientific knowledge. Within this particular science and technology studies approach, the world was now conceived of as a set of actors of various persuasions – natural, social, or technical - all jostling together, forming relationships and testing each others mettle, as the world got churned up everyday. Influenced by such an agnostic, and less anthropocentric, approach to agency, geographers began to develop an environmental ethics within their ontology, at least, as a range of capacities and behaviours within the greater than human collective were admitted within a more humble, less human-centred, narrative of how the world goes on (Murdoch, 1997, Whatmore, 2002).

Taking a cue from Callon's contrary shellfish, one particular category of thing that has become a concern within geographic research is that of the animal. Here, as Howell argues in this journal, the 'place of animals' within lived practices 'is an eminently ethical question' (Howell, 2002) and the 'new animal geographies' (Wolch and Emel, 1995) have done much to make the truth of such statements apparent. Such studies have begun to show that the ways in which we live with animals shapes our understandings of and ethical commitments to them, as much as might more rarefied academic discussions about the philosophical robustness of the distinction between us. This project seeks to demystify the 'representational and spatial practices of anthropocentrism' (Lynn, 1998: 234) as our dealings with animals are exposed in all manner of places including zoos (Anderson, 1995), farms (Yarwood and Evans, 2000), film units (Davies, 2000), parks (Laurier et al. 2003) and graveyards (Howell, 2002).

We suggest now that these explorations might also be of relevance to organic entities. The animal has increasingly found a voice in these developing accounts, but other agencies could also be explored as part of this ethical commitment. Animals, we would contend, might have been a very good first point of departure; they are in an ambivalent societal position as both pets and foodstuffs but, more significantly for our argument, they are also fairly lively. If this project is one of exploring the creative presence of non human others in the constitution of the world, then they might be fairly creative. Animals can evidently do all sorts of things, lead all sorts of lives. They run and jump around and quite easily transgress some of the boundaries we try and surround them with (Philo and Wilbert, 2000). As apparently sentient beings they might also more easily be ethically admitted into a 'geographical circle of concern' and care (Murdoch, 2003). Our own concern, however, is with plants which can also lead all sorts of lives, travel and make themselves at home in all sorts of places, (Ridley, 1930) effect us and organise humans in any manner of ways. Yet, they do so in more subtle ways, and here, excepting the work by Jones and Cloke on the trees of

Bristol (Jones and Cloke, 2002), research drawing on these themes has yet to approach how we practically consider the agency of such particular organic entities.

Ellen (1998: 71) suggests that 'unlike animals, which are visually autonomous and can wander around as individuals, trees and plants are, like rocks and hills, not simply in the landscape, but of it as well.' There is something therefore about the biological properties of plants that makes for an uneasy mixture of collective landscape and independently struggling organism when they present themselves to us. A commitment to non-anthropocentric ethical consideration would draw us to the latter element of this cognitive framework. Yet what has largely been the case within human geographic work on plants is that they have orientated around the former. That is to say that such organic biota have been grouped within a broader notion of 'landscape' and this landscape has been commonly framed as a 'way of seeing' (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988), a means of finding, through a set of largely historical studies, a sense of broader cultural processes. This landscape approach was then further compounded by a post-structural concern for language which led us further away from any potential encounter with specific plant biology and closer towards an intertexutal concern for landscape representation (see Duncan, 2000). In this context, we might want to redress this particular balance and look for particular plants relations within this landscape, rather than considering them as mere components to a more aggregate visual experience.

Our aim therefore is to shed light on performative ethical relations by highlighting how we could learn about human/plant relations within research practice. Animal agency might be more easily recovered since animals more immediately display their life to us. Plant agencies, however, are performed in some different, often indirect, ways and we might contend that it is this subtlety that has helped them elide our academic notice. It has been in thinking through such concerns that we find that we are not only seeking to extend a developing empirical concern for performative environmental ethics in practice (see, for example, Hoffmaster, 2002), but also to confront the implications of methodological strategy within such performances. In previous work on the non-human, we now find methodological consideration to be relatively thin on the ground. What also becomes clear is the crucial importance of considering such elements of our research work, since the reanimation of geographical narrative to explore commitments to the nonhuman begins much earlier than in analytic reconstruction.

Agencies and methodologies

Recent geographical concern for the non human agencies at work in the world has in large measure been informed by the science and technology studies developments alluded to earlier and what could be called the actor-network school (Law 1994, Latour 1993). Actor network theory has excited much interest and inspired an increasingly large corpus of work. However, in exploring the resources available to us for our own concern with plants, we have found here that an explicit discussion of methodological technique to be rare. This may be for a number of reasons.

One may be associated with the school's ambitions, since its aim, for Annemarie Mol (1993) at least, was to produce and 'empirical philosophy' where the researcher was to shuttle between micro scale events in particular research contexts and much

grander philosophical and theoretical questions to show how they productively illuminate each other. Through a skilful analysis, small negotiations in the laboratory or the hospital could therefore be rewritten as much bigger struggles over the nature of reality (eg. Law and Singleton, 2000), modernity (eg. Latour, 1993), or subjectivity (e.g. Cussins, 1998). These are big leaps and one thing that seems to us to have been leapt over are the more mundane concerns for the practical method employed to find out about this scientific work. Latour for instance suggests that we should simply try and write engaging tales (1988). Methodological consideration in this context seems to have been, to a degree, an annoyance, distracting writers from the theoretical points they could be developing. Doubly so in a climate of increasingly rapid theoretical development.

The actor network school can also tend towards a narrative style of reconstruction. This draws attention to the ways in which any form of writing is an artful and creative process. Here we have been presented with a set of stories that implicitly remind us how a story is something less than fully objective and authoritative. Yet they are also stories of what simply seems to take place before the researcher – as gradually unfolding networks and not as actively uncovered field data. The actors here, then, rarely also include the academic researcher. As other entities, like the animal, are brought out from a 'shadowy domain' (Laurier and Philo, 1999) within past reconstructions, the active researcher now seems to take their place in a dingy world of footnotes. New entities are brought into the spotlight of our consideration, but in relinquishing the spotlight, the researcher becomes, to a degree, an unproblematically passive audience.

This may then be further compounded within geography, where concern for non-human agencies has more recently been approached relationality such that all agencies are seen to unfold together. Here no single entity is allowed to own the agency which is rather a property of the network and the coming together of attributes it constitutes. Any explicit concern for developing methods to shed light on a specific type of agency that might more fully belong to one actor and not another is therefore downplayed as they are all to be performed together. Nevertheless, as Jones and Cloke (2002: 66) argue, 'until non-human agency is more directly championed, accounts of relational agency which claim to transcend human-non human divides will always be magnetically attracted to the human core.' If we are to try and work against this magnetism and attempt to encounter the non-human more fully, it seemed to us that the most obvious way was through a consideration of the methodological resources available for doing so.

Yet, where a method has been advocated it has tended to be ethnographic and, as is often the case with ethnography, the particulars of what takes place are seldom discussed. An ethnography can involve any number of different interactions and, so the argument goes, to recount the intricacies of all such interactions would make for excessively lengthy accounts. Consequently, as Russell (1995: vii) puts it, 'the mystique is still there' even though within ethnography there may be any number of different particular strategies that could be used to explore the non-human. Whilst the work we are presented with here seems to deal in a more agnostic recounting, methods are never fully agnostic - they are always active and complicit in our particular enactments of the world (Law and Urry, 2002).

As we have suggested, traditionally within human geography plants and trees have been collected together, amassed and bundled into an anthropocentric notion of cultural landscape and this theoretical bundle was aided in no small part by the more distanced and textual research methods that have been used to draw them wholeheartedly into this category. Whilst this approach has, without doubt, produced much fascinating work, it is with these ideas in mind that we have in our own research explored different methods for practically exploring the ways in which plants and people encounter each other. In the context of a renewed interest in 'horticultural geographies',[1] we now explore some methods for trying to achieve this task. Our aim here, therefore, is twofold. Firstly, to illustrate and develop some means for exploring how relations to the non-human organic can be explored within actual research practice and, secondly, to add some flesh to the still rather drawn methodological bones sustaining the theoretical and empirical agenda of non-human, hybrid geographies (Whatmore, 2002).

Approaching the living landscape

If we are to take seriously the relationships between the human and non human, with regard to the overlooked plant kingdom, then, new sorts of research practices could usefully be developed to accommodate such a kingdom. With no clear framework to refer to, we independently developed our own methodologies within two particular pieces of research dealing with the human and the organic. Our particular concern was with the garden as a place inherently saturated with developing relationships between people and plants. While each of our projects looked at different types of gardens and different groups of people, this botanical space provided us with different ways and opportunities for considering our methods of researching them.

The first research program was designed to investigate how young people learn about the environment – what it was they found interesting about green places and why? What processes were involved with the construction of these interests and understandings and why were certain aspects of the environment found more interesting than others? In order to answer these questions a botanical garden in Birmingham was explored together with over 150 seven to twelve year olds. The garden offered an ideal site for research with plenty of opportunity for the young people to learn about the environment. The fifteen acre site had water features, rockeries, ferneries, woodlands and exhibition beds. Three glasshouses also offered an exciting learning experience where plants from tropical, humid, Mediterranean and arid zones were on show. This research sought to challenge more abstract notions of risk with regard the acquisition of environmental knowledges and ground them within an account of everyday practical lived encounter. A variety of methods were used in order to shed a bright a light as possible on the ways in which young people went about dealing with and experiencing the botanical garden.

The second sought to explore the changing material agencies and entities that find their way into the domestic gardens of London. In a context where people have increasing amounts of money and decreasing amounts of leisure time (Jackson and Marks, 1999), this work sought to document how such pressures might or might not

[1] For instance the two day international conference on 'horicultural geographies' held at Nottingham University 17-18th November 2003.

play themselves out within these gardens. A number of different places were explored in order to achieve this aim. Four specific contexts of activity were selected for study - the London garden centre, the garden designer's studio, the designed garden and the experienced gardener's garden. Each place was dealt with in a number of different ways so as to best generate a sense of the current pressures upon the garden and the ways in which the particular things that were to make their homes there were managed and considered. A particular concern within this was for the timings of the garden and how human and non-human routines and activities can be organised together to perpetuate a network of allegiance that meets the needs of all the concerned parties, of whatever persuasion.

Within these studies we found that we had developed a number of similar methods for researching the ways in which people and plants come together. We want to now discuss three of these approaches, our thoughts on these, and something of what they helped us reveal about contemporary on going human relations with the organic.

1. Place, Pace and Patter

In our work, we both found that talking about plants is not always that easy. Asking Sarah, a 7 year old, about what she particularly liked about the botanical garden she answered; "I liked the plants in the tropical house." On request for more detail about why she made this particular choice, she baldly stated that "they were nice." With Geraldine, a thirtysomething Londoner with a designed garden, it was particularly hard for her to say how she wanted her garden to change. She knew that she wanted it to change, but she really wasn't sure how, 'it was all just a bit green really.'

Such simple statements were an initial frequent occurrence in our work and the work of others (e.g. Schneekloth, 1989) and could, of course, simply be indicative of a more general contemporary lack of interest in plants and in fostering relations with them. However, a premise of both our work and this article is that they could also be something to do with the forms through which this information was elicited. Was this then a larger problem researchers have to overcome when their work entangles the humans and non humans of the plant world? Cooper (2003) suggests that the everyday experience of a garden is hard to accommodate within the vocabulary of description. Talking about gardens is difficult, but experiencing them is easy. In practice we first found that a combination of talk and experience helped overcome this particular difficulty.

Lorimer (2003) discusses the act of walking as a commonplace component of the geographical fieldwork class. As geographers, we may be familiar with field classes held in places only accessible after a sweaty hike. We walk to get to a destination where we then engage with the surroundings. However, by slowing down the pace, he argues that field class students are able to concentrate on "seemingly (un)remarkable actions, emotions and feelings" (2003:296) within the act of walking. In this sense walking offers a more sensitive approach to thought and surroundings. If open to the experiences of the walk, feelings and emotions about the walk's environment may very well ensue. Not just of relevance to the field class, such insights were also of visible and audible advantage to us in our own tasks.

We both used the garden environment and the act of walking as a springboard for methodological investigation. Such activities did not, as Macnaughten and Urry claim of other outdoor experiences "drive the body to do extreme things" (2000:1). Movement around gardens was usually made at a stately pace, interspersed with bursts of running from younger visitors when parents and teachers allowed it. More generally though, a visit to the Garden was a pedestrian affair. This pace and place were harnessed as a key methodological resource since a direct encounter with the environment provided an array of unfolding prompts to discussion, whilst the superficial aim of simply 'having a walk' allowed for thoughtful silences and reflections that felt much more comfortable than they might have been.

We found that walking round the various gardens we worked in, with both young and older people, offered us an opportunity to gather research material that engaged closely with both the people and the place. In trying to discover people's attachment to plants and their knowledge of the environment we both found that walking in place, triggered conversations and insights which a sterile interview room may well have neglected. Anderson (2003) recently suggested that 'talking whilst walking' was invaluable to his research within sites of environmental direct action where he used the act of walking to explore the potential of the environment for holding knowledge and triggering memory. Discussion about where research should be undertaken has been a hot bed of debate over recent years (see for example Amit 2000, Stoller 1997, Marcus 1995), with many feminists urging us to consider the power relations that place can enact. Our work now takes these concerns forward towards our particular concerns, as interview context offered an opportunity to allow plants more power to visibly contest or prompt what was to be said about them.

Walking around a botanical garden with young people provided an opportunity for an in place, yet mobile, discussion. Moving around the site provided young people with an opportunity to explore the garden in their own way, following their own routes. They were able to discuss what they immediately saw and their feelings towards different aspects of exhibitions and displays. Because interviews were undertaken on the move, interactions with the garden were also able to trigger past experiences with the environment and provide further fodder for conversation. Whilst certain plants were not necessarily in flower at the time of our walk, young people would reminisce about certain species – the roses in bloom in the summer, the scent of 'the sweet box' in the spring, the shadow of witch hazel branches in the autumn sunlight. Walking round the garden also allowed memories of activities enjoyed on previous visits to be vocalised at certain points on the route. Many young people reminisced about rolling down the undulating lawn, climbing the 'climbing tree' and playing 'hide and seek' in the fernery when they were 'little'. The mobile nature of the walk provided an opportunity for discussion of both the present and past, eliciting a knowledge of young people's experiences of the garden that a sterile space, unrelated to the young person, may not have provided. Being in the garden, in contact with plants, prompted a wealth of conversation and interaction that could be noted and observed, thus allowing insights into how young people actually acquire knowledge about green places. The plants themselves were integral to the method, they prompted actions and conversations, and triggered a connection of enjoyment and memory with the individual. This was research about plants with plants.

In the domestic London garden, interviews were conducted both within and outside the house and a tour of the garden space often elicited quite different sets of attitudes than that were evident within the containment of the living room. Inside it seemed that more experienced gardeners had a certain set of expectations of what might be asked of them in a social research interview about the garden. This was to be quite an event for these respondents and they were also kind, helpful people that wanted to give the right sort of answer and offer the most interesting information (on this see May, 1997). In practice this meant they seemed to think that the researcher wanted deeper social meanings, not mundane plant interactions. They seemed to be the last thing that a social researcher might be interested in and, in the house at least, it was difficult to steer conversations toward them. In the garden, however, a different relationship emerged and the nature of their relationship with plants was more clearly enacted. Interestingly, within the house, keen gardeners seemed eager to emphasise that ultimately the plants really had to 'just get on with it' in the garden. With just a distance of metres between the living room and the garden, they achieved a symbolic distance that stood them apart from the garden as they reflected how, ultimately, they were having little impact on the plants struggle for survival there. However, once in the garden space, a different ethic more clearly emerged, as the interventions they had made and the activities taking place there were determinedly present. People would be confronted by plant needs and the past residue of their responses to them. They would instinctively go about doing things, to help them along, just as we talked. It was there that their effective commitments to individual plants and their degree of care and affection would come to the fore, even though, with just a little spatial distance they could also achieve a more detached emotional distance.

What was clear here, then, was the extent to which a localised, walking interview, and a particular form of 'mobile methodology' (Urry, 1999) could take us closer to the ways in which people encountered plants and dealt with them within practice. This could be difficult at times and would often require the skilful positioning of Dictaphones. However, more generally, this was also of particular use in the context of a verbal reticence and a sense in which talk of caring for plants and managing them in certain routines seemed to be felt too trivial for a university research project.

2. Picturing plants

The photographic image dominates literature on visual ethnography. Pink suggests that "a camera has been an almost mandatory element of the 'tool kit' for research for several generations of ethnographers' (2001:49) where there have been three main ways of incorporating photography. Firstly, it has been used as a recording device for potential photographic surveys. Collier and Collier (1986) provide a good example of such work in their systematic photographic survey of visual aspects of the material content and organisation of a home. Such work provides a way of visually comparing specific material aspects of different cultures, but does not indicate how these objects are made meaningful by those individuals in whose lives they figure (Pink 2001:57). Secondly, she discusses photography as a participatory and collaborative tools where informants are asked for photos of themselves. This usually has the effect of producing images the informants are pleased with, but can, nevertheless, offer indirect means of documenting how individuals might want others to perceive them. Finally, she considers researchers using informants' personal photographic collections. As she notes, often during more informal research interactions with people in the home, the

researcher is faced with family photos. As a researcher these are often useful to explore as such images contextualise moments in time, offer springboards for further discussion, and can add a real dimension to often abstract conversations. Other commentators on the use of photographs in research work, we have found, follow similar methodological tracks to these (see for example Wagner 1979, Emission and Smith 2000, Banks 2001, Rose 2001, Plummer, 2001).

Of course, despite such neat categorisations, the visual image could be used in any number of ways, as the photograph can follow all sorts of paths through the hybrid societies we have been seeking to document. One aim within our work was to explore what the photograph might reveal about a particular relationship between human and non-human and, as a result, the ways we both used photography differed slightly from those that feature in such popular reviews of visual methods. Pink (2001), for instance, tellingly frames her overview within the context of a notion of visual ethnography and, as more generally is the case with the ethnographic method, a fundamental concern is in using the visual to uncover a sense of human cultural reproduction. More generally, within traditional methodological handbooks, such as those of Pink (2001), Rose (2001), and Plummer (2001), attention is focussed on how the visual might serve to generate meaning about more traditional sociological concerns, not an attempt to expand these out towards the natural world. Plummer (2001), for instance, discusses the photograph as a visual 'document of life' and clearly these are traces of a specifically human type of life, for him. Rather than using them as means to explore traditional sociological concerns, our attempt was to bring them to bear, here, on how people relate to the more than human world and the ways in which visual technologies might both bring us closer together, but also sometimes reinforce boundaries between us (on this see Mitman, 1997; Davies, 2000).

In the London garden context, methodologically attention was, firstly, drawn to how and when the photographic image is marshalled in relations between different involved parties. As the raft of gardening books and magazines continues to expand, work here sought to get closer to the visual image in practice and trace the degree to which it figured in discussion of the garden by those involved with assigning the roles of things within them. In particular the place of the photograph was of significance to the garden designer that is increasingly involved in organising the garden spaces of London. This is unsurprising, given the perceived importance placed on the later reproduction of their designs in magazines and journals by this group, and the visual image here, at least, was central to conceptualisations of the particular gardening relations they were seeking to foster. Through attending closely to how specific images were marshalled in client meetings, for example, it was possible to see how this technology was complicit in fostering a certain approach to the material of the garden. Garden scenes were discussed with some ease in meetings, garden ornament and furniture were yet more easily discussed as clients and designers flicked happily through sequences of images as though looking through catalogues. However, when plant choices were to be considered, this was more difficult, even though visual images provided some prompt. Plant relations were harder to evoke through the standard prop of the image and clients were sometimes left with confusion about how they could best go about developing clear personal styles and thoughts on what might have seemed previously as 'a mass of green.' Sheets of plant images were offered up to elicit views - categorised according to their visual form (spiky, architectural, flowing, abundant etc) in such a way as to structure a primarily visual opinion. Here

photographs were clearly a help with people that found plants difficult and the ways in which they were used also suggested something of why they found this difficult and how this is increasingly dealt with. Notably plants were not categorised here according to their specific behaviours and ways of living since this liveness seemed harder to discuss. Plants can be as much a process as a product but yet here they were marshalled into a format where they could be discussed as a fixed visual product experience and chosen according to a visual 'style.'

Within this project garden owners were also asked about what parts of their gardens they thought might best be photographed. This proved interesting methodologically as people initially seemed quite unsure about how to best do this. Despite the significant role of the visual in contemporary garden consumption for some, clearly, the garden had become a different sort of encounter and an explicitly visual framing seemed alien to the ways in which they personally approached it. For many experienced gardeners, conversations might linger around a specific plant in a loving way, yet, when the notion of photographing things in the garden was broached, such plant specifics were to be put to one side. A photo *in* the garden was often explicitly taken to mean a photo *of* the garden and an attempt to display the entirety of the arrangement of entities held within so as to meet some sort of aesthetic or artistic standard. In this instance, then, a visual method served to take work away from specific plant relations but also, interestingly, exposed how visual recording, once people had readied themselves for making such a recording, was to be associated with a certain format of aggregate garden display.

In investigating how young people come to understand plants, and the processes involved with this understanding, photography was used in a number of ways. It was used as a recording tool for both the researcher (certain snaps were taken as a reminder of what happened during visits to the botanic garden) and the young people themselves (they were encouraged to make their own photographic recordings of their experiences whilst on site). Each young person was provided with a disposable camera. Though this may seem an expensive luxury, the material that was gained from it was substantial, in both quantity and quality. On occasion larger groups of young people were worked with. In these circumstances photographs were taken in groups, deciding what they thought, as a group, was important and interesting. This method allowed participants the opportunity to think about their relationship with plants without having to talk about them at the time of observation. The breadth of images was surprising. One young person took pictures of all the plants she could find from South Africa, where her family came from. Others took pictures of medicinal plants that could help alleviate problems members of their family suffered from, whilst others took pictures of plants on more aesthetic grounds, because they thought they were 'nice'. There were many shots of 'unusual plants', ones they had seen on holiday, and ones they used in their own lives, for example the orange and banana plants, sugar cane and cocoa bean. Using the cameras to take the shots they wanted provided individuals with the chance of exploring their own relationships with plants, and decide on the categories they thought were important within these relations.

After the visit to the botanic gardens a second stage of research back in classrooms or homes used visual methods in a different way. Young people were encouraged to actively choose what images represented their interaction with plants and discuss them in some detail as the images were as a springboard for discussion. Their snap

shots of beautiful, ugly, useful, funny, familiar plants were endless and a clear sense of their personal enjoyment from encountering them was revealed. These were specific plants that they had enjoyed spending time with and that, we could speculate, they might be more inclined to want thriving. These images offered a resource through which young people's opinions about people and plant relations could be communicated. They were able to articulate more fluidly their likes dislikes and reasons for. This method went some way to unlocking the verbal difficulties experienced earlier when trying to talk about plants.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, a consideration of how the photograph can help within such a research focus as ours provided mixed results. The notion of garden as aesthetic landscape is one with currency in wider society as much within past geographical research concerns. As such, a visual framing of the things of the garden can often mean an implied degree of distance from a potentially more intimate coming together of attributes (although interestingly much moreso for the adult that from the child). Nonetheless, they can conversely also provide an invaluable crutch to discussions that bring conversation back down towards specific plant specimens. They did so in the botanic garden where sometimes distracted young people could be prompted once again about specific individuals and how they dealt with them. They also did so in the garden design consultation, where, otherwise fashion conscious, individuals could be pulled through the more gruelling task of developing a sense of which sort of particular plant type they found most visually pleasing. So visual photographic methods clearly do provide some interesting potential avenues for documenting the potential for hybrid relations on a number of levels. However, they should be carefully used, we would argue, as, depending on the specifics of the contexts and deployments through which they travel, they can take us both closer and away from a more immediate and concerned encounter with the living organic.

3. Bodily observations

> "A garden is something one is *in* and surrounded by … moreover, several senses - sight, hearing, smell, touch are typically simultaneously engaged." (Cooper 2003:105)

From the senses we come understand our environment (Rodaway 1994) and, therefore, as Macnaughten and Urry (1998) argue, learning about nature is intrinsically embodied. Through our research we found that people's relationships and feelings towards plants were linked to their embodied experiences of those plants. In section one we discussed how their bodily experience of walking around the gardens allowed us to instigate an interview practice that could benefit from a more mobile methodology. However, walking whilst talking is not the only way through which people-plant researchers might find a space for getting closer to such interactions and to explore, as Cooper puts it, how people can potentially go about being resolutely *in* the garden.

Nast and Pile (1998a:406) note that “academic writing often deals with extremes – the most significant sites, the most exceptional bodies, the most important society relation of power”. Yet, as they elaborate, things that happen in more mundane settings can be of equal interest and there is an urgent need to look at the relation between bodies and place on a number of levels to provide a better understanding of how they interact and

are understood (Nast and Pile, 1998b). This is perhaps doubly so, we would argue, since more routine and mundane encounters are less likely to be things that participants might be able to discuss with ease. Respondents might be able to talk animatedly through how they and their bodies worked when they climbed a mountain, for example, but this might be less likely when they are asked about commonplace occurrences like watering the plants. That is to say that, everyday embodied encounters might be more elusive to the traditional social researcher since they are likely to have become sedimented down into an unthinking practical consciousness, rather than remaining buoyantly closer to hand within a more easily talked about discursive realm (Giddens, 1989). It has been these arguments that has led to current video ethnographic attempts to document different parts of routine life[2] - including some exploring the urban natural.[3] By considering the relationship between people and plant in a garden we were able to investigate the corporeal dimension of the people-plant relation through a more observational approach to what took place between humans and others. To explore the human with the natural we might, then, want to borrow something of the method of the naturalist who simply watches what takes place (on this see Laurier et al, 2003). In a garden people touch, smell and see plants. In our investigations we found that these combined sensuous experiences helped shape our understanding of people's relationship with plants.

With respect to the work with young people in the botanic garden at this point it is pertinent to note that the Alliance of Childhood argues that "scientists consider childhood the most critical period for cultivating an affinity, appreciation, awareness, knowledge, and concern for the natural world" (Cordes and Miller 2000: 49) and a particular educational marketing point at the botanical garden was explicitly embodied through its 'hands on' approach to developing these sorts of affinities. This physical emphasis to encountering plants was not only significant within staff encouragements for young people to really get close to the plants, but was also evident within the young people's own immediate reactions to being with plants. Observing the young peoples physical behaviour in the garden provided firstly a sense of their confidence and ease in approaching these organic entities. Encouraging young people to touch the plants, smell the plants etc, did go some way towards promoting such a set of feelings for the natural world as those which Cordes and Miller (2000) deem so important. Yet notwithstanding the embodied agenda of the educational team, on observing young people moving round the Garden their physical ease with the exhibits became obvious. Unlike their older parents or teachers, they were eager to feel, smell, pull, rip, scrape, taste hold, and stroke specimens. Such observations allowed a further set of insights into human- plant relationships and also seemed suggestive of how we might be socialised away from more dirty and intimate encounters with material plants in later life.

Young people's actual physical experiences in the botanic garden also allowed them to enact certain feelings more fully in later discussions. So keen were these experiences they were often recounted, thus emphasising their importance. One eight year old boy described his entangled bodily experience of the garden by saying "My favourite part was in the Tropical House where it got really *hot* and *sticky* and you

[2] For instance the current Durham University 'Kitchen Practices' project on routine behaviour in the domestic kitchen. http://www.dur.ac.uk/Sociology/dkp

[3] Here an example would be the Open University 'Habitable Cities' project which explores urban nature and the ways in which people can go about inhabiting 'natural' spaces within cities.

could *see* all the plants, the cotton plant, the sugar cane plant, the cocoa bean plant, and *smell* the flowers - some of them were like old sock!" Such embodied experiences provided a tool through which to communicate relationships with the non human and a way of knowing plants in a closer and more immediate physical manner.

In the London garden centre, one part of the research surrounding the domestic garden sought to explore something of formats through which people could go about being with plants. This was done through a more clearly observational approach, where participation was kept to a minimum (see Spradley, 1980) and I moved around the site watching what was happening in the guise of a really keen gardener that was avidly writing down aspects of the plants on sale there. Through such means a sense of how people are not always so resolutely and corporeally *in* plant environments, as Cooper (2003) puts it, came to the fore. Here, what was the case was that bodily encounters with the plants on sale were much less of an easy process for the vast majority of Londoners than were encounters with other products. Around displays of pots, for example, people would confidently move them around, hold them to the light, tap them as they pass, and they would also talk more animatedly about them, confidently passing judgement on the quality, price and style. With plants, there were far fewer more physical encounters, it was a cautious touching of the pot and glancing at the requirements of the plant as enumerated on a label. Pots and furniture were more of a resolutely material culture in their fixed differentiation and the way in which they sat happily under human controls. Plants were different and seemed to be treated with more of a embodied respect as their potential unpredictability and assumed fragility made for a different and more occasional encounter. They seemed to be too alive and so people were unsure of how to best approach them.

They were also harder to physically organise into individual items for purchase by the centre managers once again because of their continued determined life. Garden centre staff would have to stop racks of plants growing into each other as they became an aggregate mass, struggling together to find more light. It is within this context that a less tactile and knowledge based and more visual plant encounter is fostered by many garden centres now as set displays of plants incorporated into visual arrangements replace more immediate considerations associated with behaviour and plants arrangements according to type. Far from enacting an ethic of commitment to plants, here, what was evident was the ways in which plants seemed too alien to be handled within the assumed formats of retail that people were accustomed to. Garden centres gradually, then, found themselves offering less differentiated types of plants and a greater range of products to customers without the confidence to deal with plants within these more practical embodied consciousnesses.

An attention to how people are physically around plants and what they do together here then can say something else about the ways in which people and plants might or might not be able to forge relationships. What is evident from the first case is the way in which children have a robust and eager dealing with plants. What is evident from the second is the way in which adults, or at least those in the London garden centre, in common with city dwellers more generally (see Burgess, 1995), can have less of an easy physical encounter with the properties of the organic. What is also evident here is the ways such dealings could only be drawn out through an observational approach to research where such physical encounters are considered as they happen or do not happen repeatedly through time. Although perhaps best used in conjunction with

others, this method allows some access to the unconscious ways in which plants are encountered and approached together with the senses. An overtly observational approach generates an additional sense of what people do within plant contexts which provides another layer of understanding that can either complement or challenge those that are more easily represented through speech (on this potential disjuncture between talk and action in green space encounter see Milward and Mostyn, 1989).

Conclusions

The ways in which we go about knowing plants is clearly context dependent. For Schneekloth, our current relation with the vegetable world is broadly consumptive: we know the vegetable world as a resource for lumber, production for food, wilderness for trips and, within more domesticated environments, as adornment and decoration. Few of us today, she argues, are close to these 'alien kin' in terms of understanding their habits, their preferences and their sensibilities (Schneekloth, 2002). Vegetation is something passive in contemporary understanding: to be in a vegetative state is to be without mind. Yet the root meaning of the word vegetative is associated with activity and enlivened animation (Ayto, 1990) which suggests a closer, more intimate, connection with the active concerns of the organic in past societies.

The purpose of this paper has been to explore ways of undertaking geographic research that explores the potential for documenting some lively contemporary vegetable relations where we aimed to find a way to reconsider how we might relate to the plant materials in their immediacy as a set of individuals helping compose a larger and rather unwieldy category of nature, environment, or landscape. We have sought, therefore, to enliven geographic approaches to the organic and more closely question how we deal with plant encounters and what this might, more generally, suggest about how, as humans, we see our place in a world of independent forces.

In our attempts at uncovering these relations we have sought to explore a shifting process of both connection and rupture in our practical relations with plants. Social science methods clearly have some certain assumptions written into them and, in order to look at these potential connections, we should be aware of these and be ready to adapt them accordingly (Whatmore, 1999). Yet, in the absence of much clear discussion of these matters, here we have offered an elaboration of the particular methods that we adapted and adopted with these interests in mind. Environmental ethics, we would argue, can be situated in practised relations and we have uncovered how a variety of different standpoints and stances towards our plant companions are evidenced in different settings. Elements of indifference, care, confusion and confidence towards individual plants have all been instantiated through different sorts of activities in our work and it has only been through exploring how these different relations and attitudes are co-constituted through the research method that we have been able to document these. Within a context of a current keen geographical interest in, but scant methodological elaboration of, research into human and non human relations, our hope here is to suggest some ways in which these can be practically explored and, through such means, show how a living landscape is encountered practically in contemporary settings. Hopefully others will follow.

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