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Exploring Relationships with Non-human Nature in Planning: The Potential of Embodied Research Methodologies

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Abstract

The institutionalised land use planning system plays an important role in mediating our relationships with non-human nature. However, the dominant environmental discourses perpetuate a dualistic understanding of culture/nature, privileging scientific rationality over other ways of knowing, and humans over nature. Embodied research methodologies offer an alternative mode of knowledge production to those traditionally used within the system, allowing planning researchers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complexity of human relationships with non-human nature. In this paper I use examples from my honours thesis and PhD research to demonstrate the potential of embodied research methodologies for promoting more connected relationships to non-human nature.

Keywords

autoethnography, sensory ethnography, embodied research methodologies, land use planning, nature

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Walking up the hill I run my hands through the tops of the grass, the seeds hitting my hands and each other. The outside of each is soft with two long bristles protruding; these tickle my palms, wrists and the backs of my hands. It's warm, late spring, and I feel lazy. Soon the grass will die and turn pale yellow, the stems dried and hollow and the seeds noisy in the wind. Come summer, the dry grass will need to be cut to prevent fire. But now the grass is lush, vivid green and almost as tall as me. Sitting down I'm completely hidden in a circle of flattened grass. Lying in this space, the world is grass and sky.

Figure 1: The world is grass and sky (Scherini, 2014).

Rolling on my tummy, the world is all grass.

Figure 2: The world is all grass (Scherini, 2014).

Through the above excerpt of autoethnographic writing, and the accompanying images, I invite you into my embodied experience of non-human nature. We know the world through our bodies,[1] so embodied research methodologies can provide planning researchers with a deeper understanding of how we relate to non-human nature.

The institutionalised land use planning system plays a key role in mediating our relationships with non-human nature. Within this system in Western Australia (the context in which I have learnt about and practiced planning) as well as others in the anglophone tradition, such as Australia, the UK, and the USA, the dominant environmental discourses perpetuate a dualistic understanding of culture and nature, privileging scientific rationality over other ways of knowing, and humans over nature. The

planning system can benefit from insight gained though alternative modes of knowledge production, such as those that focus on embodied experience. The knowledge gained from embodied research methods will allow planners to form a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complexity of human relationships with non-human nature. These methodologies also lend themselves to alternative approaches to disseminating knowledge, such as autoethnographic writing and the use of haptic, auditory, and visual techniques. The use of these techniques can be a valuable addition to the existing modes of communication used within institutionalised land use planning. In this chapter, I use examples from my honours thesis and PhD research to demonstrate the potential of these techniques.

Planning as part of the project of modernity

As part of the project of modernity, planning aimed "to diminish the excess of industrial capitalism while mediating the intermural frictions among capitalists that resulted in a city inefficiently organised for production and reproduction".[2] Modernist planners believed that the world could be understood, and thereby controlled,[3] using "rational decision-making and problem-solving techniques, grounded in rigorous social analysis".[4] Although this was a state-based intervention, planners were seen as value-neutral: "planners laid claim to a scientific and objective knowledge that transcended the interests of capital, labour and state".[5] Through this same claim to disinterested scientific and objective knowledge, planners were understood to be equipped to identify, and act in, the public interest.

Inherent in modernist thought are binaries. Plumwood[6] explains that,

> [k]ey elements in the dualistic structure of western thought are the following sets of contrasting pairs:
>
> | | | |
> |---|---|---|
> | culture | / | nature |
> | reason | / | nature |
> | male | / | female |
> | mind | / | body (nature) |
> | master | / | slave |
> | reason | / | matter (physicality) |
> | rationality | / | animality (nature) |
> | reason | / | emotion (nature) |
> | mind, spirit | / | nature |
> | freedom | / | necessity |
> | universal | / | particular |

human	/	nature (non-human)
civilised	/	primitive (nature)
production	/	reproduction (nature)
public	/	private
subject	/	object
self	/	other

According to Gaard[7], the following can also be included:

white	/	non-white
financially empowered	/	impoverished
heterosexual	/	queer
reason	/	erotic

These binaries mean that in modernist planning culture is privileged over nature as well as concepts aligned with nature (e.g. women, body, non-white, queer).

Modernist planning has been challenged on a number of grounds since the 1960s. For example, Sandercock and Lyssiotis[8] argue that not only was modernist planning failing to deliver good social and built outcomes, but that in fact planners had never been the detached, objective experts that the model implies.[9] In addition, theorists provided feminist and postcolonial counter-histories that showed how planning institutionalised a rational, white, male, scientific ordering of the world that marginalised women, people of other races, the poor, and queer and non-able-bodied people.[10]

Despite these critiques, modernist thinking still dominates planning practice and continues to reinforce these binaries. This has real-world implications because, through policy documents and plans, planners allocate meaning to land, making possible some uses but not others, and thereby making some futures more likely than others.[11] In their longitudinal analysis of Perth's city plans, where the case study for my PhD research is located, MacCallum and Hopkins[12] found that:

> In spite of demonstrably changing relationships between planners and their political co-actors in urban development, a notion of planning as a technical activity continues to influence its practice. Technical registers, which tend to present processes as relationships of cause and effect (Halliday & Martin, 1993), dominate all the documents, giving them a rationalist flavour even in the face of internal contradictions and openly political statements.

The use of technical registers points to the continuing privileging of scientific, rational knowledge over other ways of knowing in planning, including emotional and embodied knowledges.[13]

Embodiment

The notion of embodied and emplaced experience is central to sensory ethnography and autoethnography. Embodiment refers to the idea that we relate to and experience the world through our bodies.[14] Rather than the Cartesian notion of the mind as outside the body, and the body as a machine receiving and processing data, Merleau-Ponty[15] theorised that:

> the body is no longer *an object in the world* under the purview of a separated spirit. It is on the side of the subject; it is *our point of view on the world,* the place where the spirit takes on a certain physical and historical situation.

Explaining Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'living body' or 'phenomenological body', Bigwood[16] writes:

> The body is a *sentience* that is born *together* with a certain existential environment. It does not passively receive sense data but has a unique sensitivity to its environs. It genuinely experiences rather than merely records phenomena as empiricists claim, and it does this through an *openness* that is fundamental to its sentience. The body is actively and continually in *touch* with its surroundings. It is directed outside itself inexorably entangled in existence.

According to Weiss, our experience is also 'intercorporeal'[17]; it is dependent on social and cultural factors. Thus, "the experience of being embodied is mediated by our continual interaction with other human and non-human bodies". Planners can use this understanding of experience as embodied and intercorporeal to provide insight into how people experience the places they live and work in – the places for which plans are made.[18]

Planning and human relationships with nature

Along with the rejection of the Cartesian split of the mind from the body, the human/nature binary has been the subject of extensive critique. In response, there has been a turn to the 'post-natural',[19] which promises a non-dualistic way of thinking about human relationships to non-human nature.[20] One example is the proposal that ecofeminism adopt Haraway's 'Cyborg' metaphor[21] and the emergence of queer ecology from ecofeminism,[22] and the field of political ecology.[23] However, as Soper[24] points out, "for the most part, when 'nature' is used to speak of the non-human it is … in a concrete sense to refer to that part of the environment in which we have had no hand in creating." Further, Castree[25] argues:

> It would be wrong to think that nature no longer matters. The baroque jargon of academia may confidently declare that there never was a Maginot line dividing natural things from social things. But in several walks of life people continue to speak and act as though such a divide were self-evident.

According to Head, this binary is particularly entrenched in Australian thinking because of our colonial past:

> The year 1788 establishes for us a boundary of belonging, between Indigenous and not. This is applied in much of our thinking about plants, animals, peoples and land use practices such as agriculture.[26]

Research by Trigger and Head[27] shows that the result of this thinking is that, along with non-native plants and animals, many non-Aboriginal Australians see themselves as outside of nature. Consequently, the attitude of many Australians towards non-human nature is complex, tied up with feelings of guilt, non-belonging, and nostalgia for other places. Nature is understood as being outside the city, comprised of native, undisturbed vegetation and as separate from humans.[28] This human/nature binary is also present in environmental and planning policy discourse.

Through statutes, plans, and policies that regulate how land is used, the planning system plays a key role in mediating how we interact with and perceive our relationships with non-human nature. Within Western Australia, the planning system acts to separate people from non-human nature. The system takes a reductionist approach, where strategic planning and environmental protection are treated as two separate concerns, carried out by separate agencies. Planning at a state level is carried out by the Western Australian Planning Authority (WAPC) under the *Planning and Development Act 2005*, while environmental impact assessments must be carried out by the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), a separate body formed under the *Environmental Protection Act 1986*. This separation is also present in the discourses used in planning policy. Similar to those Whatmore and Boucher[29] identified in the British Planning system in the 1990s, the Western Australian planning system contains three competing discourses about our relationship with non-human nature:

- Conservation – enacted through planning regulation that separates non-human nature from human activities in national parks, and a focus on conservation of endangered species and habitats.
- Market – evident in moves to 'cut red tape', the use of offsets and the desire for, and inevitability of, continued growth.
- Ecology/systems – evident in references to a whole systems approach, catchment management, and threatened ecological communities, used to provide scientific evidence of the importance of conservation.

The conservation discourse seeks to protect non-human nature from human impact through planning regulation. In a similar way to the UK system, the WA planning system "focuses on a regulatory, or state led, system of zoning and formal plan-making which embodies and reinforces a

conceptualisation of nature as external to society"[30], enacting through land use planning the Cartesian binaries of human/nature, mind/body etc.

Introducing the methodology: Autoethnography and sensory ethnography

I am using the embodied research methodologies, sensory ethnography and autoethnography, to study my own and others' engagement with non-human nature, primarily using a community garden in Perth, Western Australia, as a case study.

Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology in which the researcher's experience and voice become central to the research. It is described as part of the 'narrative turn', which seeks to allow new and multiple stories to emerge.[31] A broad range of formats, such as dramatic performance, artistic practice, poetry, and fiction writing can form part of autoethnographic research.[32] The approach I am taking is 'analytic autoethnography',[33] which aims to connect my own experience to that of other people, as well as theoretical concerns. Autoethnography has been used to explore urban issues including place and memory[34]; gentrification[35]; skating, gender and urban space[36]; and the framing of race and crime.[37]. Although attention to embodied experience is important in autoethnography, an explicit focus on the sensory nature of experience is less common. However, narrative methods and autoethnography with a focus on the multisensory nature of experience are well established in the field of sport science.[38]

A focus on embodied, sensory and emplaced experience is also central to sensory ethnography. Researchers using this methodology use their own sensory and emplaced experience to help them understand the experiences of others.[39] This means "self-consciously and reflexively attending to the senses throughout the research process, that is during the planning, reviewing, fieldwork, and analysis and representational processes of a project"[40]. The imperative then is to present the research in a way that enables people to imagine themselves in the place of those being represented.[41] Sensory ethnography has been used to explore a wide variety of urban issues, including sustainability,[42] drinking and the night-time economy,[43] and inner city cycling.[44] In urban planning research, it has been used with success to explore the impact of quality of place on physical health.[45]

Both autoethnography and sensory ethnography require the researcher to be reflexive – to "acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of enquiry".[46] They also rely on memory (or headnotes) recalled and incorporated with field-notes,[47] allowing the researcher to work with both field-notes, which

encompass both the personal and cultural, and headnotes, which provide insight into their embodied and emotional experience of a particular activity.[48] Moreover, in both sensory ethnography and autoethnography, researchers aim to communicate in a way that allows others to identify with the embodied experience of the subject being represented.

The potential of the methodology

The use of embodied methodologies, such as the one outlined above, offers a way to challenge the dominant rational discourse of planning, by presenting alternative voices, or counter-narratives, from people marginalised by planning (e.g. women, people of other races, the poor, the queer, and non-able bodied people).[49] Unlike the modernist notion of the planner (or researcher) as an expert, embodied methodologies require researchers to acknowledge their subjectivity[50] and to be reflexive.[51] Research incorporating autoethnographic or sensory ethnographic narratives has the potential to present a different relationship with nature to that of the dominant planning discourse.

It was my interest in our relationship with non-human nature that led me to this topic. However, the more I read, the more I realised that many of my own assumptions and emotional responses to human relationships with nature needed further examination. I was troubled by a contradictory relationship where I positioned myself as outside of, and harmful to, nature. If it is the case that humans will always be harmful to nature, what is the solution? On this, Cronon[52] writes:

> The tautology gives us no way out: if wild nature is the only thing worth saving, and if our mere presence destroys it, then the sole solution to our own unnaturalness, the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would seem to be suicide.

Even when I engaged intellectually with the idea that humans are in fact part of nature, my response differed. The catalyst for a change to this feeling was a trip to Lake Ballard – a remote salt lake located 800 kilometres inland from Perth, the capital city of Western Australia – which I carried out as part of the research for my honours dissertation. There I explored the relationship between artwork in 'natural' or 'wilderness' areas, and people's relationships with nature.[53] Lake Ballard houses Antony Gormely's site-specific artwork 'Inside Australia'. This comprises 51 metal figures spaced 750 metres apart on the salt lake.[54] To get to each, visitors walk across the surface of the lake, leaving track marks in its soft surface.

Despite my enthusiasm for visiting the artwork, I was surprised that, upon seeing it, my unedited response was that the lake would be better off without it. I felt affronted by the tracks left by visitors,

and alienated by the harsh, hot landscape. However, I had a different experience on my second visit in the early evening, when I set out to view more of the artwork:

> *The mud under my bare feet was cool, soft and fine, and the surface of the lake was bouncy. The mud squished between my toes. The distance between the artworks meant I was drawn further and further onto the lake. The setting sun coloured the lake and the salt reflected the light back in silvery tones; a cool breeze kicked up bringing the scent of the scrub. I found myself running across the lake in bursts enjoying the texture and springiness of the surface, then stopping to look at things: animal prints, rocks, patterns in the mud.*
>
> *I no longer felt alien.*

Reflecting on this, I realised that without the permission given by the presence of the sculptures, I would not have walked on the lake – I saw myself as hostile to it and felt that I was better off staying in the camp area, which had already been disturbed (ruined?!) by humans (A fallen landscape?).[55] I was struck by the difference that the tactile and playful experience had on my relationship with the place, and following the completion of my project, became convinced that this sensory experience was important to human relationships with non-human nature.

Sensory ethnography is especially well suited to exploring relationships with non-human nature, as engagement with non-human nature is overtly sensory.[56] Like the long distance runners, as described by Allen Collinson and Hockey[57], who engage all their senses in navigating their routes and moderating and monitoring their performance, participants have a heightened awareness of their senses when engaged in activities in the garden. These activities require both physical engagement and judgement, and the use of many senses. The following excerpt of autoethnographic writing, in which I have an unexpectedly strong emotional and physical response to helping cut down a tree, provides an example of such an experience:

> *I am keeping the rope around the treetaut – my job is to pull the tree towards me to try to stop it from falling on the fence to separating us from the school oval or (even more importantly) over the fence to day care. I notice I am directing myself to keep my weight grounded, feet pressing into the overgrown, uneven, dirt, knees loose, arms firm and relaxed, shoulders down and tummy muscles on alert – ready to steady myself. The sudden aggressive sound of the chainsaw cuts across the background soundscape – lunchtime sport at the school, singing instructions from the day care and the mulcher chewing through piles of rotten cabbages for the worms. The smell of petrol and green wood. My breath comes more quickly, shallow in my chest, arms and neck tense, my chest compresses and folds inwards; I start to tremble a little, I'm flushed, my skin prickles; I think I want to cry(?!). I don't want to do this! I realise. Suddenly*

> *the tree is falling (and not as planned despite my effort!) and I'm jolted back to the immediacy of the task. It tilts towards me, slides off the stump, then, obstructed by a paperbark, drops straight down, and after a moment suspended there, falls sideways onto the fence of the day care.*

Furthermore, as Trigger and Head[58] have found in their research, relationships with nature are complex and contradictory. Thus, the project – and any enquiry into human relationships with non-human nature – is exploring questions that do not have a clear-cut answer. As such, participants may not be able to articulate answers to direct questions about how they see their relationship with nature. This has been apparent in some of the interviews and conversations conducted during my research so far, and in my self-reflection on this. Thus, the approach of observing the sensory interaction of myself and others with non-human nature in an urban setting can provide a way to explore these complexities, without relying on interviews alone.

Communicating research outcomes

In communicating the findings of autoethnography that pays attention to sensory experience and sensory ethnography, the intent is to invite others to understand the experience studied. There has been an increasing interest in how researchers might do this using modes of communication other than, or alongside, traditional academic writing.[59] Drawing on the idea of place as an 'event', places are described by Massey[60] as "*spacio-temporal events"* comprised of people and their stories so far, their interactions with each other and their surroundings, including non-human nature. Pink[61] develops the idea of 'ethnographic places', which are created by the researcher as they communicate the findings of their research by "*intentionally pulling together* theory, experiential knowledge, discourses and more into unique trajectories." The researcher does this by drawing on their memory and imagination.[62] Like place–events, these 'ethnographic places' – and therefore knowledge 'created' by researchers – are temporal and open, and dependent on the audience, the method of dissemination, future research, and so on. When using creative methods, it is important to "do this in such a way that invites our audiences to imagine themselves into the place of others while simultaneously invoking theoretical and practical points of meaning and learning".[63] The exciting potential for researchers is to do this in a way that extends beyond academia to reach a broader audience and invite engagement with the subject of the research.

Autoethnographic writing offers one way in which to do this – autoethnographers who attempt to write narratives include "aesthetic and evocative and thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience",[64] inviting the reader to connect emotionally as well as intellectually with the story.

Autoethnographic writing, with its attention to the senses, has the potential to talk about human relationships with nature in a way that is different to a traditional academic text. We know with our bodies, so paying attention to these experiences, and telling stories about them, might allow us to imagine or experience these relationships in a way that is beyond intellectual, and to form physical, emotional connections to non-human nature. By communicating this way, rather than relying solely on theoretical argument, autoethnographic writing has the potential to reach a greater number of people, "a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people".[65] Additionally, the use of visual, haptic, and auditory means can help to create an immersive experience. For example, artist Lynette Wallworth[66] engages viewers with issues around sustainability using haptic and visual artworks. The same approach could be used by researchers to both communicate the sensory experience of others in a way that research institutions will accept[67] and to invite a broader audience to think about the issues raised.

Although I am in the early stages of my research, I have been exploring ways to communicate the outcomes of my research, including the use of autoethnographic writing and images to begin to create an immersive experience. An excerpt of this, which I presented at the Fifteenth Humanities Graduate Research Conference, with images projected on screen, is included below:

> *From a distance, the sloping field looks like a continuous unbroken expanse of sea-sky, but here, in the grassy room, there are spaces between the blades, where each grows up from the damp earth. I break one of the tough, fibrous stems off at the base, turn it sideways, parallel with the ground, and balance it on my forearms, raising my hands upwards to the sky causing the grass-baton to slip backwards towards my elbows. I enjoy the slight weight balancing on my arms and the cool touch of the stem on the delicate skin in my inner elbows. I close my eyes, feeling myself balance the grass, then open them. The leaves encasing the stem that holds the seeds grow in layers. The one closest to the base is sand coloured, dry and crinkled – already straw. The following three are rich dark green, coated in a silvery powder that rubs off when I touch them Each layer grows from a bulbous joint in the stem, hugs the stem, then peels back revealing the next joint.*

Figure 4: Tall grass (Scherini 2014)

Conclusion

Embodied methodologies such as autoethnography and sensory ethnography offer planning researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how we relate to non-human nature. This can be valuable to planners who, as part of the institutionalised land use planning system, play an important role in mediating human relationships with non-human nature. These modes of knowledge production can offer an alternative understanding of our relationships with non-human nature to those of the dominant rational discourse of planning. Additionally, knowledge gained from the use of embodied methodologies can be communicated using a range of methods such as autoethnographic writing, haptic, auditory and visual techniques.

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