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“Doing” cultural geography/“being” a cultural geographer – reflections by an “accidental geographer” on practising cultural geography in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper comprises reflections by the author on developments in cultural geography in the Netherlands. In so doing, it briefly explores the historical context of geography in the Netherlands and considers reasons for what could be construed as a “lagging behind” in Dutch cultural geography (when compared to the UK). The paper then zooms in on the local and personal context of the author at the University of Groningen, thus illustrating “a” Dutch cultural geography, impacted by research traditions and teaching contexts. Ways in which research here may materialise into interesting new developments in cultural geography in the Netherlands (and elsewhere) are proposed in conclusion.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel reflektiert die Autorin auf Entwicklungen in der Kulturgeografie in den Niederlanden. Der Artikel beschreibt kurz den historischen Kontext der Geografie in den Niederlanden und erörtert Gründe für ein mögliches „zurückbleiben“, zumindest im Vergleich zum Vereinigten Königreich. Folglich wird eingezoomt auf den lokalen und persönlichen Kontext der Autorin an der Universität von Groningen. Somit wird „eine“ niederländische Kulturgeografie dargestellt, beeinflusst durch Forschungstraditionen und Lehre. Schliesslich werden mögliche Wege zu interessanten neuen Entwicklungen in der Kulturgeografie in den Niederlanden (und woanders) vorgestellt.

1 Prelude

My “being” a cultural geographer necessitated a (meandering) journey through different disciplines and countries. As a teenager, I discovered a passion for the (protection of the) environment. I volunteered as a “watcher” for the World Wildlife Funds (observing the occurrence and behavior of crane birds) and for the AGA Artenschutzgemeinschaft

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(mapping turtle activities and providing environmental education to tourists) and later “specialised” in forest issues and environmental education as a member of a local Greenpeace group in Germany. Largely due to these personal interests, I first began studying biology and later “added” geography out of necessity when I switched to a study that would lead to a qualification as *Gymnasium* teacher in both of these subjects. During a student exchange year in the UK, I took both biology and geography courses but ended up with a Bachelor in (Physical) Geography because, in the British system, I had earned more credits in that subject. When a PhD opportunity presented itself in Social Geography, I re-oriented myself in order to conduct a study on the changing geographies of women in rural Eastern Germany. This was a lucky turn in my training as a geographer since it enabled me to apply (and be selected) for a job in the regional geography department at the University of Groningen (Netherlands) in 1999. Through my work on gender, I first mingled with those working on gender issues – at least at international conferences. In Groningen, and I would argue elsewhere in the Netherlands as well, feminist geography was not viewed as relevant or interesting¹. In a way, this was a barrier as much as an opportunity. I began to look more broadly at issues of difference, inclusion and exclusion and, in so doing, explored many interesting literatures and personal connections. It has also led to a continuous (re-)assessment of what kind of a geographer I am, where my “home” is conceptually and even, in frequent debate with colleagues, what geography is, particularly cultural geography.

2 A (non-representative) review of cultural geography in the Netherlands

Based on a (non-representative) review of Dutch social geography in the Netherlands, I would argue that in spite of publications such as *Dutch windows. Cultural geographical*

¹This has not always been the case. As Linda Peake has demonstrated in an overview of feminist geography teaching in 1989, Dutch geography was one of the forerunners. The University of Amsterdam introduced an elective course “Geographical Women’s Studies” as early as 1983 (and until 2000) (see van Hoven et al., 2010).

essays on *The Netherlands* (published in 2003 by Gorp et al., geographers from Utrecht), initiatives emerging from the *Humboldt* lecture series in Nijmegen, and a number of publications by individuals at the University of Amsterdam, Nijmegen and Groningen that could be “labelled” cultural geography, one might not speak of a broadly recognised “cultural turn” in Dutch geography. Valentine (2001), for example, ascribes the cultural turn to Great Britain, the United States and perhaps Australia, and Barnett’s (1998) earlier discussion of the cultural turn as fashion or progress equally implies that it is largely a turn that took place in the UK. In the following, I briefly want to outline some developments in social geography in the Netherlands and, using Barnett’s discussion, illustrate the lacking mechanisms that would have “spinned off” a cultural turn of international allure.

Like geography’s history in the UK, the advent of Dutch geography is related to Dutch colonialism (until the independence of the Dutch Indies in 1949). In addition, further developments in the discipline can be associated with the demand for geography teachers in schools (van der Vaart et al., 2004). Pieter Roelof Bos, a geography teacher from Groningen, successfully promoted a geography akin to the natural sciences (in the late 19th century), in which the “detailed study of the natural forms in the world should be at the basis of comparison, classification, and generalization. In geography, “the social” should follow “the physical” (van der Vaart et al., 2004: p. 140, see also Knippenberg and van Schendelen, 2002). Since the 1930s, the role of geography and geographers remained prominent as they played an important part in large-scale planning projects in the struggle against water and development of new land. Van der Vaart et al. (2004) assert that “Dutch geographers may be seen as the ‘socio-spatial engineers of the welfare state’” (p. 141). Musterd and De Pater (2003) concluded, in their overview of developments in human geography in the Netherlands, that geography’s roots in spatial planning and regional-economic policy rather than an interest in socio-cultural processes still persist, and they represent the discipline as an applied and practical science. Droogleever Fortuijn (2004) added to this perception by noting that many Dutch geography graduates find employment in the civil service

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or as policy consultant, Dutch geographers are often involved directly in policy making through their role as advisory board members and media experts and much research is government funded². For those working in a geography department in the Netherlands, this means that the choice of topics and (lack of) funded research opportunities reflect these constraints. Returning to the virtual disappearance of gender from the curriculum, this can be explained then by a lack of urgency from a societal perspective. The “gender issue” had after all, at least according to policy makers, been solved (see van Hoven, 2009). Geography in the Netherlands then has, in general, been less “abstract” and “critical” but more “applied” than geography in the UK. If we take Barnett’s depiction of the cultural turn, not many Dutch social geographers’ way of “doing” cultural geography may qualify. Barnett conceives of the cultural turn as: “a commitment to epistemologies, often loosely labelled ‘poststructural,’ that emphasise the contingency of knowledge claims and recognise the close relationship among language, power, and knowledge” (1998, p. 380).

In addition, if we consider the mechanisms relevant to establishing what the cultural turn implied and what the “new cultural geography” came to be, much of it is located in the UK and utilizes the English language³. Barnett lists the special issues, new

²Some research is funded by national research organisations (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, NWO, and the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences KNAW) but here, too, the themes reflect areas of high policy priority or strategic international partnerships. There are few opportunities for senior researchers in geography, most calls are targeted at PhD research.

³See also more recent reflections on language and hegemony in geography: Short et al. (2001); Garcia-Ramon (2003); Helms et al. (2005); Garcia-Ramon et al. (2006). Garcia-Ramon et al. (2006) discuss the dominance of the English language in *Gender, Place and Culture* and explain: “we take a short look at publications in GPC from a quantitative perspective. Out of a total of 242 authors of articles and viewpoints, only 19 are not based in Angloamerican universities or research centres, that is 7.3% of the total, and they come from France, Canada, Spain, Finland, Hong Kong, India, Israel, Nigeria, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Uganda. US and UK authors represent around 64% of the total (both countries are quite evenly represented), and Anglophone Canada stands

journals, conferences and institutional developments emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s that helped authorize “programmatically and theoretical statements on the ‘new’ cultural geography” (1998, p. 381). Commercial academic publishing played an important part, too, with new introductory readers (featuring mostly UK or US authors) that outlined and defined themes, methods and directions in cultural geography. In the Netherlands, no new journals or conferences around the new cultural geography emerged. In addition, the (website of) the national research institute NETHUR, which encompasses the geography departments in the Netherlands, does not imply a particular interest in outcomes of the cultural turn either⁴. In fact, a brief scan through the publication lists of geography departments in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Groningen and Nijmegen corroborates a lack of concern for “being known” (in international circles) for one’s work in *cultural* geography: many articles have appeared in urban planning, housing journals, journals on (geo)politics, or journals outside of geography, and there is a notable bulk of work that appears in *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie (TESG)* and *GeoJournal* (incidentally the “most international” journal according to Short et al., 2001). A considerable number of articles appear in policy-oriented, Dutch journals and magazines and many geographers also write for the Dutch magazine *Geografie* – none of these are esteemed highly in research assessment exercises such as the most recent one in 2007 (which was influenced strongly by UK developments in publishing and ratings thereof). Adapting West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) statement that gender “is accomplished in *interaction with* out with almost 19%. The share of non-Angloamerican authors does not increase through the 12 years of publication [...] Looking at the bibliography in the articles, we observe that Angloamerican authors are not using sources written in languages other than English and references are massively monolingual (in English). English sources reach over 95%, with marginal references in German, French and Spanish” (p. 2) (see also Short et al., 2001, for a more extensive analysis of journals).

⁴The site lists projects headed by full professors rather than all staff. It is important to note, then, that research by younger staff who adopt less conservative approaches are under-represented.

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others” (p. 21, emphasis added)⁵, it can be argued then that available networks within the Netherlands have not provided much interaction that would allow one to identify (and be identified as) as “cultural geographer” (see also Bosco, 2006⁶).

An interesting aspect of the rise of new cultural geography is, according to Barnett (1998), the presence of academic celebrities and fandom. Barnett (1998) notes:

“Geography has always had its own favoured academic personalities, of course. What is perhaps new about the present conjuncture is how some of them have recently been swept into international circuits of academic celebrity, a move that is dependent less upon internal disciplinary modes of evaluation than on the shifting imperatives of knowledge dissemination [...] the cultural turn in human geography involves a turn toward a set of disciplines in which distinctive individualised modes of authority are predominant. [...] Fandom as the corollary of the rise of academic celebrity has implications for the ways in which theoretical ideas are discussed, criticised, and evaluated.” (p. 388)

It is, perhaps, precisely in this treatment of celebrity geographers that a resistance to UK’s cultural turn in the Netherlands can be explained. The Dutch national spirit has been characterized as average and sober which is exemplified by the Dutch saying “*Doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg*” (“Just act normally, then you act crazily enough”) (see Sanders, commentary in the newspaper NRC, 2008). It seems that, certainly prior to the increasing pressure to “publish [in English peer-reviewed

⁵West and Fenstermaker (1995) further maintain: “while individuals are the ones who do, the process of rendering something accountable is both interactional and institutional in character: it is a feature of social relationships, and its idiom derives from the institutional arena in which those relationships come to life” (p. 22)

⁶Fernando Bosco notes: “From the perspective of ANT [Actor-network theory], I would no longer be a geographer with the ability to write papers and produce knowledge if my computer, my colleagues, my books, my job, my professional network, and everything else in my life that allows me to act as what I am were taken away from me [...] if that were to happen, I would become something different.” (2006, 137)

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journals] or perish”, “just doing” geography may have been sufficient. And not to forget: geographers did have a rather important societal role (as I noted above) which might have nurtured their “being” geographer sufficiently. Whilst this may support the notion that cultural geography has been viewed largely as a “fashion” in the Netherlands, it underplays the importance of past and ongoing initiatives that have surfaced here. I already mentioned some initiatives from Utrecht and Nijmegen above, and must add a recent “mini-symposium” entitled *Van folklore tot kapitaal: de “cultural turn” in de Nederlandse geografie* (from folklore to capital: the cultural turn in Dutch geography) organized as part of the farewell for Amsterdam political geographer Hans Knippenberg (well-known for his work on religion) in June 2008. If social geography in the Netherlands has, in general, been less accepting of the cultural turn, what then does a Dutch cultural geography look like? I illustrate a Dutch cultural geography by using my own department of Cultural Geography in Groningen as an example. This is, incidentally, the only Department in the Netherlands carrying “Cultural” in its name.

3 Perspectives from Groningen

In 2004, the Department of Regional Geography reinvented itself as Department of Cultural Geography. A key reason was, as Valentine (2001) similarly states for UK’s cultural turn’, a desire for a transformation into a “cool and sexy subject” (p. 167) which might draw different and more students. However, this reinvention has also brought forth a re-assessment of the curriculum and opened up new spaces for research. Cultural geography was introduced in the bachelor as part of more general courses (e.g. through a guest lecture on gender, and later otherness (and orientalism), using, for example, Crang, 1998) as well as a full course on cultural geography (structured around Holloway and Hubbard, 2000, and later adding Cresswell, 2004). With the introduction of the Master Cultural Geography, students played an important role in shaping cultural geography. For example, after a first assessment of a potential handbook by members of staff (e.g. through a discussion-afternoon about the book), students commented on

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accessibility and relevance in their “Dutch context” (and that of their perceived future employment). As a result, the course tried out and abandoned several books over the years (e.g. Shurmer-Smith, 2002; Blunt et al., 2004), eventually arriving at Oakes and Price (2008). Master theses were encouraged around the themes of the books but depending on the supervisor, the subjects were dealt with in a more conservative way, or a more “post-structural way”. In so doing, UK cultural geography, as represented in the handbooks used, was often modified and “toned down”.

The link between research and teaching is strong in Groningen (as was indicated as characteristic for the Netherlands using Droogleever-Fortuijn’s reflections above). Many members of staff in cultural geography experience their work as embedded in teaching and feel they work primarily in an educational institute (rather than a research institute⁷). The combination of teaching and research is reflected in themes adopted in the curriculum but also in co-authored (often Dutch) articles based on student research⁸. This all may appear as a restriction, especially if staff were to aspire international academic superstardom⁹, but it certainly opens up opportunities as well. For example, there is a considerable emphasis on the “doing” which includes (time-consuming) data collection, or experimenting with new methods such as the use of video (which is a part of the course “Representing Places” in which Master students experiment with journalistic writing, photography and videography in crafting stories about places)¹⁰.

⁷Even though there is increasing pressure to place more emphasis on internationally appreciated research output, sometimes at the cost of teaching.

⁸See Van Hoven and Jager, 2001; Meijering and van Hoven, 2003; Poelman and van Hoven, 2003; van Duinen and van Hoven, 2003; van Hoven and Poelman, 2003; van Hoven and Meijering, 2005; Klaassens et al., 2009; Klunder and Haartsen, 2007; Dickhoff and Groote, 2009; Salemink et al., 2009; van Hoven and Elzinga, 2009; Zijp and Groote, 2009.

⁹And perhaps it does present a convenient excuse to neglect publishing strategies of a more international nature.

¹⁰However, often the “doing” consumes so much time that there is little left for reflection,

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In a nutshell then, the Department of Cultural Geography in Groningen has been interested, predominantly, in “Making Places” which implies an interest in relations between people and places and the role of difference in establishing such relations. The key mission of Groningen’s cultural geography is akin to what Mitchell, and Cosgrove and Jackson defined as the cultural in “new cultural geography” (in Valentine, 2001: p. 167):

“Mitchell (1995) suggests that it is fundamentally about the *patterns and markers of differentiation* between people, the *processes through which these are made*, and the ways in which these processes, patterns and markers are *represented and ordered*. For Cosgrove and Jackson (1987, 1999) it is ‘the medium through which people transform the mundane phenomenon of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they *give meanings and attach values*’” (emphasis added).

Although viewed from an actor-perspective, in Groningen the focus is explicitly on *places*. In so doing, several different “entry points” are used¹¹: there is research which is interested in the natural and social processes that impact on the formation and representation of places (see Mouissie et al., 2008, and Meijering et al. 2007a, b, respectively), some research draws on regression models in order to discover and visualise patterns (Haartsen et al., 2003; Klaassens et al., 2009), other focuses more on issues of difference, power and identities, and utilises in-depth interviews to study the personal experiences of respondents (such as in research on prison spaces (van Hoven and Sibley, 2008; Sibley and van Hoven, 2009) or blind people in Groningen (van Hoven and Elzinga, 2009)). More recently, methods have begun to include photography, video, or walks (Trell et al., 2009) in order to explore “the unseen” aspects (at least when compared with interviewing) of how people relate to and interact with places. With the exception perhaps of my own research, little research seeks explanations

theoretical embedding and writing (in academic English) of such “doing”. As a consequence, many initiatives remain to go unnoticed by a larger (academic) public.

¹¹It must be noted that most members of the department became geographers in a more positivist “milieu”, having a more quantitative background.

within larger social processes (such as patriarchy or capitalism, see van Hoven, 2001, 2004). In addition, although the Master Cultural Geography does include attention to non-representational thought (to name but one example of a more recent “fashion or progress” in UK geography), this is not explicitly mirrored in research conducted within the unit.

A key concern for the way in which geography is done (and transmitted to students) is an emphasis on empirical investigation, something which is perhaps less prominent in cultural geography in the UK. Barnett (1998) commented on the lack of empirical investigation in his discussion of the cultural turn but personal experience confirms that this may still be the case, at least in part. An anonymous referee for David Sibley’s and my article “Just Duck: The Role of Vision in the Production of Prison Spaces” commented:

“The author(s) do what is so important, and relatively rare these days: go out into the world, conduct some relatively simple empirical research, and find that the big theorists of prison and by extension the disciplinary society we live in, don’t know much about prison (indeed, they get some important points exactly wrong), and so we must wonder about their general theories, in spite of the woven of words that have become part of an intellectual generation’s argot. Though the author(s) don’t go this far, and probably don’t intend to, I think this is the question the reader is led to face.” (7 April 2008)

Overall, representations and discourse remain of a central concern in research, so in spite of a more moderate approach to cultural geography, Groningen’s cultural geography does resonate with elements Barnett (1998) has named as characteristic of “new cultural geography”. However, perhaps geography currently finds itself in a period of developing a “new” new cultural geography in which the representational is viewed much more critically. It is unlikely that Groningen will adopt these newer directions very readily¹².

¹²Having said this, at the time of writing, there was a job opening for a full professor in Cultural Geography in the department. It is conceivable that the extent to which newer directions will become more or less important will depend, at least in part, on the selection made of this

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It transpired from the above, that research (and teaching) in Groningen has been affected by its national framework of reference. And my own research has been impacted by my employment at the University of Groningen, as well as the agendas of funding agencies, the views of journal editors and social developments occurring all around me (see also Purcell, 2007; Cloke et al., 2004; Kitchin and Fuller, 2003; Lairumbi et al., 2008, and Garvin, 2001, for discussion of the impact of each of those aspects on doing research). In the following, I want to zoom in a little further, explore a few examples of my own research.

4 From “accidental geographer” to “cultural geographer”?

As indicated in the prelude above, I am somewhat of an “accidental geographer” myself, coming from biology, via physical geography to cultural geography. I do have “favourite” issues, belonging and identities and they might be viewed as a guiding line through my work. I also like to experiment with methods. But I am no “specialist” and easily enthused to go down previously unknown roads if they hold the promise of some inspirational encounter, regardless if this road is uncovered in dialogue with senior geographers, students, or friends.

For example, in October 2000, I began to correspond with a prisoner on Death Row in Livingstone, Texas. Throughout our correspondence, I went to visit him a few times. The issues we discussed via mail and my (emotional and intellectual) response to the materiality of the prison led to a research proposal and a project funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). It was a challenging period in which I had to negotiate more conservative attitudes towards researching prisons and an interest in studying prisoners’ experiences and identities in a more exploratory way, e.g. by letting the respondents “take over” interviews. I did not approach the study with an aim of providing policy recommendations. A significant challenge was acknowledging the emotional side of conducting research in prisons. Being professor.

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somewhat confined by a more conservative geography in the Netherlands, in which the position of the researcher is deemed largely irrelevant, as well as the everyday demands of work and life (and a pregnancy in between), this aspect remained utterly under-explored. Looking back, it would seem I missed an opportunity to contribute to emerging discussions of the role of emotion and affect in geography. Most of my pondering over emotional aspects of prison research were confined to a “public” research diary which appeared frequently in the faculty’s student magazine *Girugten* between 2002 and 2004. In 2006, I presented some of the more “emotional” research at the Annual Meeting of American Geographers in Chicago (“Abandon hope, all ye who enter here”: Discussing everyday experiences of hope in prison) but the paper never made the special issue which focused more on the non-representational aspects of hope, something I had largely ignored at that time. It was not until 2006, when David Sibley joined our department as a visiting scholar, that I had the luxury of time and suitable company and became engrossed in the data collected. Whilst I brought the data (interviews with prisoners and correctional officers) and visual knowledge of the prison (from the inside), David brought new angles and literatures. Whilst my focus had been on identities (and particularly masculinities), David brought his interest in the psycho-analytical and a wealth of knowledge of various (often older and currently ignored) readings. This was an opportunity which I assume is rare for most academics, to spend hours discussing one’s respondents’ words in detail and exploring links to both our personal, academic interests and “necessary” works (such as a Foucauldian approach to prison). In spite of a significant amount of data that still remains unexplored and unpublished (but see van Hoven and Sibley, 2008; Sibley and van Hoven, 2009), this work and way of working, of “doing” has had a considerable impact on my “being” a cultural geographer.

Another example of the luxury of time (and freedom) in “doing” geography is a project that, in many ways, took me back to my roots in physical geography whilst opening up new opportunities to try out new ways of generating data and transmitting these to different audiences. The project was producing a documentary on “the making

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of” Great Bear Rainforest. The Great Bear Rainforest is an area which comprises 6.5 million hectare (twice the size as Belgium). It is situated along the coast of British Columbia, Canada, stretching roughly from northern Vancouver Island up to the border of Alaska. Depending on time, scale and discussion partner, the Great Bear Rainforest has variously been known as Mid-Coast timber supply area, the North and Central Coast of British Columbia or one of 29 First nation territorial designations (Prescott-Allen, 2005). It is one of the last and largest remaining, intact temperate rainforests in the world. In 1997, environmentalists and forest industry clashed in this area over destructive logging practices (CBC, 1998, see CBC Archive “the fight for spirit bear”). When environmentalists targeted the international market, the forest industry saw their sales figures dwindling and agreed to begin negotiations over the future management and protection of the area. Negotiations between these parties, the provincial and national government, First Nations and various other stakeholders took over ten years.

I saw this as an interesting case of how a place is made, how different values are (re-) negotiated in complicated, emotional and lengthy meetings (see, for example, Clapp, 2004). It illustrates how representations and classification assign meanings, reproduce them and, assisted by science and media, naturalise them. All of these issues are at the heart of what cultural geography in Groningen does, both in terms of research and teaching. In terms of teaching, it offered gaining experience in crafting a story about a contested place using a combination of moving and still images, narrations by people “on the ground” as well as music to underscore our intended message. When converted into a text (for an English, peer-reviewed academic journal), many nuances and emotions get lost in translation. For example, in our documentary, we wanted to give precedence to the First Nations since it was our aim to portray the area as a place that had belonged to someone *before* the environmentalists claimed it. It was important then for the audience to first see our First Nations respondents before any of the others. When introducing the area in the documentary using images of forests, water, and animals, we only use a voice that describes the ecological significance of

the area rather than showing the narrator. The narrator is not First Nation but one of the “environmentalist” respondents. In writing, the description of the Great Bear Rainforest as ecologically important area (by the invisible respondent) and the account by First Nations of the area as their home (since 10 000 years) would all look the same: Times
5 New Roman, black on white, possibly indented. Facial expressions, body language, pauses, wandering of a respondent’s eyes whilst s/he is thinking all remain hidden. Another aspect of story-telling in this visual way is the power of the producer to not only select quotes (as in texts) but to emphasise (desired) meanings through the use of certain kinds of images, the speed in which they are shown and follow each other
10 and the choice of music. Again, this evokes a much greater emotional response than a written text where the message is conveyed in writing only¹³.

Due to the limited means to distribute such a videographic result amongst an academic audience, we were restricted largely to conferences which allowed extra time for showing the documentary (therefore allowing more space than just a slot
15 in a session), or addressing a different audience altogether. We therefore focused on secondary schools and developed a book with in-class exercises to accompany the documentary and provide opportunities for going into more depth through these exercises (van Hoven and Logtmeijer, 2009). Within the faculty, this project was first treated with skepticism. It did not set out to target major journals and did not have
20 funding for anything but travel and equipment. Most of the work therefore occurred in the spare time of staff involved and with the help of volunteers (for example for editing and providing additional score). However, the published book attracted relatively more attention than an account in an academic journal would have: many schools ordered the book, teachers sent excited responses and viewers were moved by the
25 subject. I wish to add here, too, the value of this project as a “personal journey” of “becoming”. As such, the experience of being in the field, sharing space with large predators (grizzlies, black bears, wolves, wolverines) in close proximity, to smell their

¹³Even where illustrations are added, these do not appear simultaneously with the image and sound.

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presence and to walk in a landscape made by bears¹⁴ rather than humans provided a physical experience of a topic that is hard to transmit in writing or otherwise. It is an embodied way of “doing” geography and “being” a geographer that reading theory and discussing readings can never provide. This embodied experiences, linked with the various stories by people in the area have strongly influenced my self-identity as cultural geographer in a way quite different from the “becoming” described in the prison research above. Nevertheless, the documentary project incited an interest in, for example, actor-network theory and non-representational theory which was woven into a co-authored chapter (with Louise Meijering) for the forthcoming volume *Companion to Social Geography*. In this chapter, I had the opportunity to revisit my work as physical geographer and make space for “the elements” in the production of knowledge, e.g. by considering the purposive agency of trees.

5 Some thoughts on possible directions in cultural geographies

There is no doubt that much of the cultural geography done in Groningen can be classified as “new cultural geography” with its focus on “the patterns and markers of differentiation between people [and places], the processes through which these are made, and the ways in which these processes, patterns and markers are represented and ordered” (Valentine, 2001: p. 167). The question really is, where it will go from here. With the strong quantitative presence of people doing geography in this location, it is likely that a wariness of the post-modern slant and a “refusal to get carried away with new trends” (Musterd and de Pater, 2003: p. 555) will persist and the “new” new cultural geography will not be easily incorporated. It is interesting then to consider what style of scholarship will be established and in what way will this be recognised by a wider audience.

¹⁴Grizzlies dig up sedge grass leaving the terrain rough and bumpy, and making for a challenging walk (by humans) across it.

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There are a few important and interesting “seeds” that are, at present, perhaps a little too dormant. First of all, the focus on empirical investigation in Groningen may provide interesting contributions to some of the theories generated elsewhere, for example on belonging, community, rurality and identity. In that way, such theories might be enlivened or even contested. The challenge will largely be in the division of teaching and research and the opportunity for members of staff to take time to read, think and write (in a foreign language). Secondly, there are at least two interesting foci in teaching (and related to research interests by staff) that link well with some developments in the UK. I already mentioned the central position of experimental methods and different ways of discovering knowledge. In addition to having the potential for some interesting work, it also provides opportunities to re-think the role and relations of and between researcher, respondents and “the elements” in doing research. A second focus in teaching is on landscape which combines physical geography and social geography. This interest in building bridges between physical and social geography, rather than confining them to different locations in the curriculum (or even faculty¹⁵), offers exciting opportunities for research on/across perceptions of nature/culture (and the “divide”). Interestingly, it is here that connections can be made with writings on actor-network theory and non-representational theory, again leading to the examination of epistemological questions¹⁶. A third and final point I wish to highlight is the emphasis on “relevant” research. Largely due to the *Mansholt Chair in Rural Geography*, which is funded by the government, a significant amount of money to spend on research comes from this Chair. This implies that cultural geography in Groningen will be shaped significantly by the contribution from this chair which is in the rural, the policy-oriented and the quantitative. There lies an interesting challenge here for cultural geography to bridge the gap between the applied and the abstract, and the quantitative and qualitative. Again the department is drawing on its research-teaching link to explore

¹⁵Physical geography at Groningen is located within the department of cultural geography.

¹⁶The course “heritage” could also be an interesting starting point (see, for example, Navaro-Yashin, 2009).

directions here by developing a new course on “applied cultural geography” which will attempt to combine, for example, issues raised in Oakes and Price (2008) with current social developments at the local scale, thus drawing out the possible policy-relevance of theory as well as their relevance to the everyday lives of ordinary people.

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