# Guessing, Wandering, Learning

Ellis Saxey
February, 2019



This interactive piece was inspired by a year of teaching myself Old English, and my interest in the interactive ethnography, The Long Day of Young Peng.

In early 2018, I began to read the Old English elegies: *The Wanderer, The Seafarer* and *The Ruin* are strikingly painful and human poems from around 1000 years ago. I was free to learn the new (old) language however I wanted. I found that I failed when I made myself read dry passages about grammar. I succeeded when I spoke phrases aloud, made guesses at their meaning, traced patterns and narratives, and only turned to declension tables when I was motivated by a specific vivid example.

I came into contact with *The Long Day of Young Peng* through my job as an academic developer. *The Long Day* is an interactive ethnography designed as a teaching tool.

> *It makes use of many of the things I admire in teaching, things which I'd benefitted from in my own learning: narrative, richness and vividness, interactivity, empathy and identification.*

This piece was a chance to bring Young Peng and Old English together. It was also an opportunity to create a short interactive piece using Google Slides. Links between slides provide basic branching, and one can adjust fonts and images with ease. Google Slides is a potentially useful tool for anyone making interactive resources.
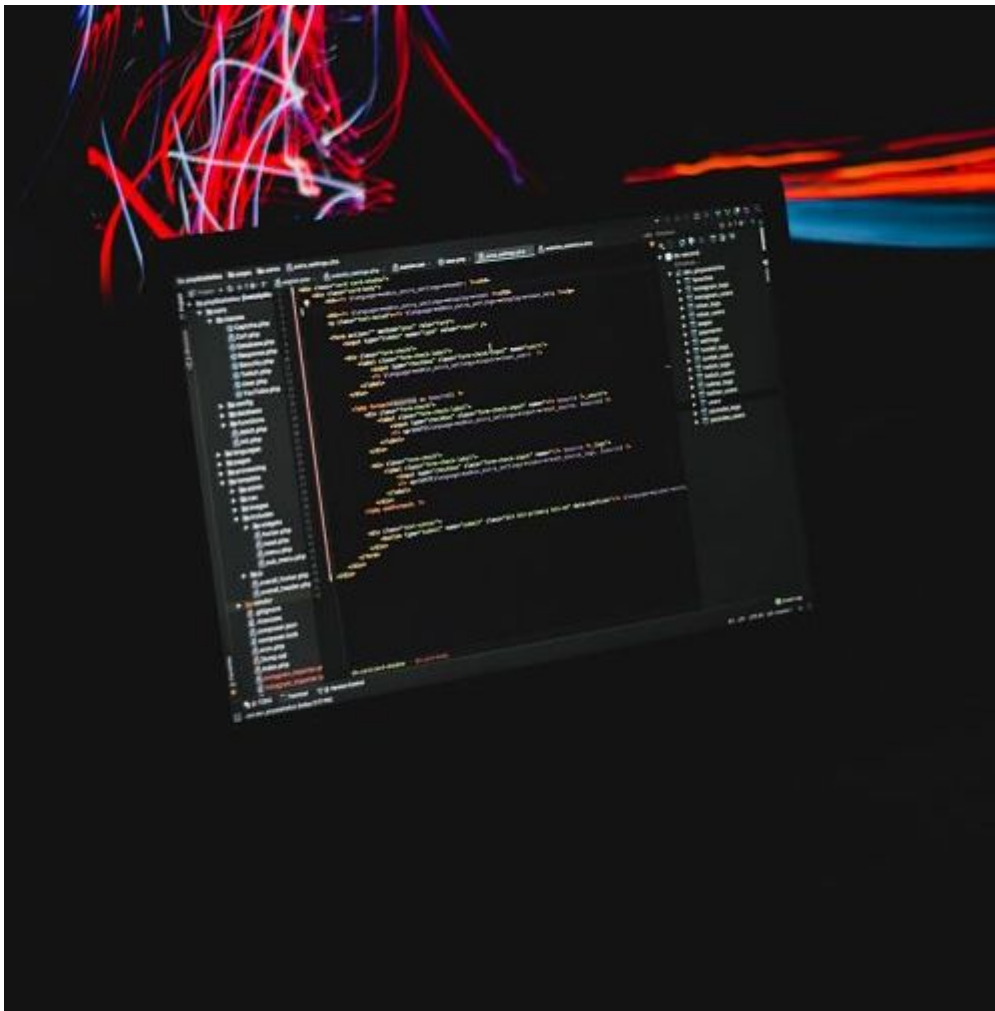
Featured image by [Inja Pavlić](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# On Digital Ethnographies. Anthropology, Politics and Pedagogy (PART II)

Andrea Pia
February, 2019



Let me begin this second part of my non-linear surveying of digital ethnographies by quoting the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff once more. Along with him, I do also have difficulties with 'identifying the analytical work that *digital* is supposed to accomplish' (2008: 18) in common parlance. When I say that Peng is a *digital ethnography* then, I mean two specific things.

On the one hand, the game is a fieldwork-enabled *computational artefact* that aspires to deliver situated insights into the largest peacetime movement of people in history: China's four decades of continuous internal migration.

*The game's non-linear narrative weaves together the notes of my own ethnographic diary with actually-recorded fieldwork conversations between Peng and his own relatives, friends and colleagues to enfold the player in a contextually rich "view-from-somewhere" on Chinese migration.*

Similar to any ethnographic monograph, the game balances this point-of-view perspective with parallel accounts of Chinese migrations found in the scholarly literature. But differently from classical nonfiction narrative, the way it achieves generalisability and ultimately relevance is *virtual* rather than *referential*. The nonfictional character named Peng is given the opportunity to fictionally meet other nonfictional fieldwork participants from the specialist scholarship on urban and migrant China, so that more than one single perspective on migration can be addressed in the game. The game makes a point of blurring the line between fiction, non-fiction and ethnography to complicate the various hierarchies of ethnographic storytelling as well as the unidirectional framing usually entrapping

the mainstream narrative on migration. In doing so, it does also raise the critical question of how, as Elizabeth Enslin puts it, we should go about engaging 'audiences who need to hear about the people we study'.



The *computational mechanisms* of Peng's gameplay involve a multi-choice taskbar, which is every bit the by-product of my childhood proclivity for fantasy literature as it is of fieldwork methodologies: I spent several months of my stay in Lingshui asking Peng hypothetical questions about his future as we waited together for the day of his eventual departure to Beijing. These mechanisms strive to produce what the game theorist Ian Bogost's calls 'procedural rhetoric' (2007). 'Procedural rhetoric' is the capacity that videogames have of mounting an argument about how social and material practices do, could or should work in real life by compelling players to take consequential choices in relation to their virtual unfolding. **(If you are intrigued by this, go to 3 now.)** By making choices for/with Peng, the player is made to reflect on the analytical opportunity to study migration outside the usual economistic binarism of push and pull factors, and within the ethnographically more accurate register of instability, incompleteness and serendipity, qualities that ordinarily beset any migratory choice in real life.

That is, Peng is both a classical ethnographic account of the migratory experience of a Northern Chinese young man as well as a social scientific argument in support of person-centred analyses of migratory processes. In the latter sense, Peng's interactive gameplay is meant to persuade the player that to better understand migration as a social phenomenon one has to ask oneself, and take a stance on, those very ethically-fraught questions about subjectivity, mobility, belonging and marginality that every migrant grapples with in their daily life. In a way, this type of 'ethnographic interactivity' operationalizes an argument first advanced by the machine-learning theorist Jimmy Lin (2015) that the use of digital artefacts in the social sciences ought not to be predicated on their ability to deliver 'better science', but rather 'better engineering': making our arguments and truth claims about social process less aloof and more relatable to our potentially very different publics.

**If you are wondering about who these publics can be, head to 2.**

**If you want to reassure yourself that Peng is not the harbinger of some new form of digital exploitation, go to 3.**

## 2. Neo-reaction and Twineries

*Peng* was developed, with the assistance of the creative coder Tom Chambers from Random Quarks, on the open-source, web-page builder tool *Twine*. For those among you who are not well versed in any programming languages (I am one of you!), nor seem to hold so strong an appetite to learn any, the engrossing thing about Twine is that it does not require any proficiency in coding to be taken up. For the digital ethnography Peng, creative coding was indeed sought after to include game-like mechanisms such as a toolbar, a glossary and dealing with its complex visuals. But here or here you can find equally interesting examples of thought-provoking, twine-based games which I believe engage the player along similar lines to Peng. Though, as I'm not in the business of scaring anyone off with technicalities, let me turn to an apparently minor aspect of entry-level coding

tools such as Twine which will be certainly more relevant to the ALLEGRA reader.

The reason why Twine should matter to the only cursorily digitally engaged reader is its short-lived, amusingly twisted and poorly digested appearance as an object of (Euro-American) contentious politics around 2014-15. This is the toxic yarn of gender harassment that goes under the name of Gamergate (Mortensen 2018). I will spare you most of the dumbing details of what in hindsight represents the 'coming-out' moment of the systematic form of online trolling now championed by the American alt-right, whose aggressive online tactics have been recently credited for the noticeable tilting of the Euro-American political compass to the far-right (Nagle 2017). This one drama plays out in four acts: 1. Twine is made popular by the videogame designer Anna Anthropy who, in a widely-acclaimed book about the emerging counter-cultures of the gaming industry (2012), had prized the platform for lowering the coding barriers to entry in the business. 2. The sense of first-person identification that Twine games offered resonated with traditionally marginalized groups whose efforts to either raise awareness of (and perhaps change) their status as marginalized could benefit from the platform 3. Zoe Quinn, a feminist video game programmer and artist, publishes her Twine-based interactive narrative on depression called *Depression Quest*. 4. A flurry of hateful online assaults, including rape and death threats, is directed against Quinn and other female video game critics, who are variously accused of infidelity, opportunism and of needlessly politicizing what should remain mere entertainment. 5. Milo Yiannopoulos weighs in on *Breitbart*. I should stop here.

In a long *New York Time Magazine* article dedicated to progressive voices in the videogame industry, Laura Hudson has summarised Quinn's online slandering 'as a battle over not just entertainment but identity: who gets to be called a gamer, what gets to be called a game and who gets to decide'. As Grace Converse puts it, 'hypertext narratives allow participants to engage experimentally in alternative realities, subjectivities or behaviours. Hypertext users may experience new kinds of freedoms and new kinds of consequences'. Because they ultimately broaden one's cultural horizon and change cultural demands for what can be consumed

through gaming, interactives games – it has been [argued](#) – are loathed by a corporate gaming industry that design video games to be formulaic, status-quo preserving and riskless.

> *Much more so than in traditional academic publishing, videogaming is becoming a vehemently contested terrain for today's increasingly digitalised political cultures. And perhaps, this is the one place where the question of the democratisation of the means of cultural production can be addressed in the most consequential ways.*

In this respect, Twine's ease of use, creation, sharing, and participation, offers a vantage point for those among us who believe in the wider relevance of anthropology as a contributor to public debate (Harvey 2014). Digital ethnographies like Peng may contribute to diversify the cultural offer of online gaming and expand the imaginative resources and endpoints of online journalism too.

**If you wish to know more about students' reaction to playing the Peng game, [go back to Part I](#)**
target=
**If you are asking yourself what real-life Peng may think of all of this, [head to 4.](#)**

## 3. Ethics

The Peng game incorporates interactive choices that are designed to directly interrogate students' ethical reasoning. As explored by an emerging body of work on digital ethnographies – and as we have discovered by introducing the game to students – the immersive gaming environment allows for novel forms of apprehension of ethnographic knowledge. Following Roland Barthes (1980), videogames work similarly to photography in explaining content through context

while demanding self-identification. In videogames though, it is the interactive context that forces player to identify with the storyline proposed. Importantly, this unstable environment interrogates not just players' comprehension but their very own ethical agency and interpretative capacities. How would a Chinese male migrant behave in this situation? Should I send remittances home or keep them to myself? Should I comply with laws and register to the local police station even if this exposes me to unfathomable dangers? What about involving oneself with union politics? In this light, videogames place students in a so called "ethical gym" (Bittanti 2005) where seemingly ethical or un-ethical choices are experienced as separated from their consequences.



Conversations in class have often revolved around what type of "Chinese son" Peng really is and how he could survive the many obligations his family and friends are putting on him. Interestingly, students seemed to be going through some kind of internal conflict when, on the very last class of term, I asked them to use their own understanding of the Peng game to discuss recent public statements made in China about the need of democratic reforms in the country. Would Peng benefit from living in a more democratic China? To ask this question, students had to triangulate between what they had been learning about China

during many months of teaching (that China has its own axe to grind when approaching the question of democracy), from the Peng game (that whatever the regime in force, Chinese migrants are usually at the losing end of reforms) and their own personal feelings about that question (that democracy is largely a good thing) to come up with a principled argument in support or against the afore-mentioned statements. That is, the game provided involving if largely ambivalent ethical counterpoints to what students had been learning throughout the module, thus pushing them to reflect on social change in China on more nuanced, less abstract terms.

**If you feel you have missed too much of what came before, **

**Else, scroll down to end-game**

## 4. Reflexivity

And then of course there is the question of my own ethical standards for even considering turning someone else's life into a 'game' for pedagogical purposes. While consent for this project has been gathered from a selected number of individuals at various stages of the collection, designing and implementation process, not all the characters that appear in Peng do in fact know that their likeness has been captured and computed in an open-access videogame. Anonymisation in the game cuts both ways, names do not correspond to real people just as individual appearances do not always match their real-life owners. But evidently this is a long shot from declaring that the people who are made to inhabit my game have been thoroughly and exhaustively advised on the potential implications of digitalisation, mostly because I do not know what these may be either. For my friend 'Peng', a hardcore MMORPG player himself, things are slightly different. Last time he checked from China, the game could only be played with a VPN. But for the few times he managed, he thought it was good fun. Some of the endings he'd have actually preferred over how real life ultimately

played out for him and his family. Speaking of which, he has recently tried to convince me to turn *Peng* into an *advergame* for promoting rural tourism to his home village and the surroundings. The next interactive indie game I'm planning to discuss with him received [sensational reviews](#) in China, and you can play it [here](#).

**Feeling like playing Peng? [Click here](#).**

**Else, this is the end – game over – for now.**

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*Featured image by [Fabian Grohs](#) on [Unsplash](#)*

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# On Digital Ethnographies. Anthropology, Politics and Pedagogy (PART I)

Andrea Pia
February, 2019

I'll start with the most embarrassingly candid disclosure one could possibly make in the context of this thematic week: I am not such a big fan of videogames myself. Most of what I know and appreciate about gaming was imparted to me by my older brother – he truly is the reputable gamer in the family, topping the online European *Street Fighter* ranking for a while around 2010 – and by a childhood spent among systematically absent, hardworking parents. True, my adolescence did reek of torpid late spring afternoons spent leafing through some

*Choose your Own Adventure* playbook or stuck into the convoluted plots of the latest point-and-click videogame. And yes, one of the origin stories I recently started telling myself about my interest for ethnographic fieldwork harks back to the supposedly pivotal encounter I had in my teen years with *Dungeons & Dragons* and role-playing in general – a fantasy world filled with alien languages, exotic magical rituals and conflicting ethical codes you either master or end up being subjugated by.

But surely enough, that very white-male-adolescent effervescence I basked in while playing fantasy games was soon to evaporate in contact with the systematic study of actually-existing cultural differences, and their imbrication in regimes of political oppression and exploitation.

*In a way, my induction to anthropology was also the moment this comforting relationship with (video)games, and the creatures they are inhabited by, suddenly broke down.*

For instance, how could I keep figuratively hanging out with the elven-kind, a people who now appears as entirely composed of undatable racist snobs? And to be clear, the disingenuous levity of this rhetorical question is here only to shelter you from the more 'hardcore' ethical complicities that the game-entertainment industry and its accompanying racialised economies ultimately depend on: from the slave labour undergirding the 'improvised' Congolese coltan mining sector (Mantz 2008), to the 'docile and dexterous' Navajo women weaponised by Silicon Valley's semiconductor manufacturers (Nakamura 2014), from the recent spate of suicides among China young electronics workers (Pun et al. 2016), to the misogynist, neo-reactionary subcultures infesting and policing the ludic boundaries of Euro-American online gaming (Sandifer 2017).

the Long Day of Young Peng

Yet, despite the pervasive structural and symbolic violence coiling around the global digital industry, there's something about videogaming that always stayed with me. Think of the ways in which games can be intellectually stimulating, how they could 'encourage players to think in terms of relationships, not isolated events of facts' (Gee 2008). How they 'sharpen […] critical thinking competencies' (Faeber 2015), or 'force players to inhabit' particular 'political ideologies' (Anthropy 2012). It could be argued that to truly appreciate gaming one needs first to stop bracketing out the harrowing circumstances of videogame production and consumption – to paraphrase Donna Haraway, one should 'stay with the trouble' – and begin playing videogames 'critically' (Flanagan 2009).

That is, I am here assuming a sceptical audience and still suggest that videogames can appear 'good to play with' if explored along the discursive tension generated in the friction between their disquieting origins and escapists intentions and the opportunities of self-transformation that their mechanisms arguably 'afford' to players (Cardona-Rivera, Young 2013; Knox, Walford 2016). With this ALLEGRA thematic-week we propose a fair-minded rapprochement to an otherwise inappropriately belittled conversation – but one with an important

pedigree in the social sciences (i.e. Huizinga 1949, Vygotsky 1978) – between gaming, anthropology, politics and teaching, to generate insights into the increasingly relevant question of what kind of relationships do and might as well exist between games and those who play them (Spencer 2018).

Following Tom Boellstorff (2006), we will begin our investigation by positing that anthropological theory and methodologies have a lot to offer to the study of (video)games.

> *But rather than considering videogames as an objet trouvé for anthropologists, I will take the less explored route of proposing videogames as one of the potential products of ethnographic research itself.*

To do so, in what follows I will plunge into the experience of researching, designing, writing and implementing a concrete *digital ethnographic* piece into class teaching – experience which constituted a good slice of my pedagogical effort for the last couple of years. The anthropological/educational game I will ask you to wrap your heads around is called *The Long Day of Young Peng*, and it has been designed, among others, by the author of this text.

This is a two parts introduction to an Allegra thematic week that does not follow received editorial conventions. In the footsteps of the indie videogame designer Anna Anthropy (2015), and as a homage to my beloved *Fighting Fantasy* books, I am organising this short essay around a choice-rich reading structure. Therefore, in what follows you will be asked to make a choice. What you choose will determine the order and the subject explored by this piece.
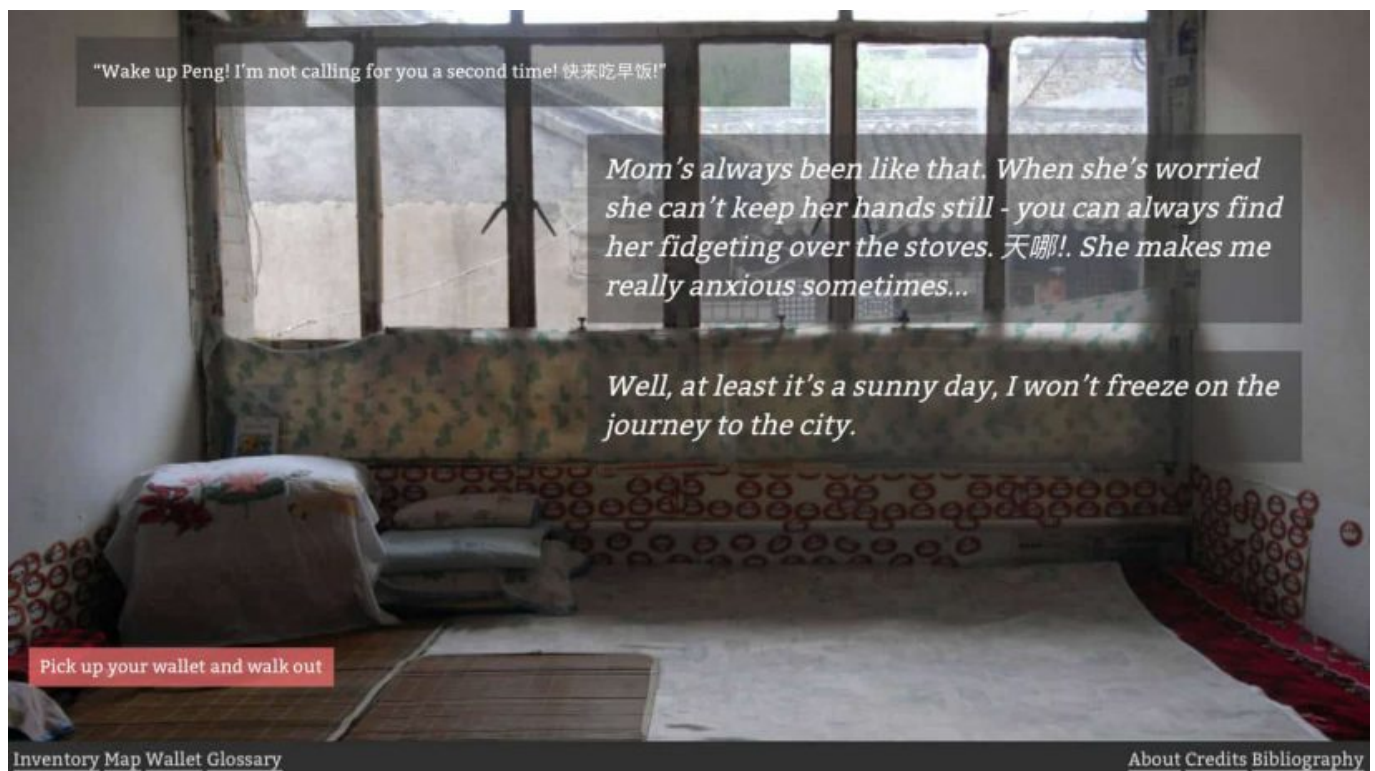
And so it begins:

**To engage with the main focus of this thematic week, scroll down to 1 and continue following instructions.**

**If you are into teaching and want to jump straight to the pedagogy of videogames, and do as advised there.**

**To disregard the non-linearity of this text (and spoil yourself the fun), simply continue reading and ignore instructions**.

1. **The Game**



Tom Boellstorff opens his mesmerizing ethnographic journey into the online virtual world of *Second Life* (2011: 3) with a homage to Malinowski's famous opening in *The Argonauts*. I am compelled to engage in a similar ludically altered allegory here:

*Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by your few properties, alone in the corner of an unfinished spare room of a traditional North-China rural house while your mother's weakening shouts bring you the notion that the long-delayed*

*day of your departure is finally here. You have nothing to do, but to start at once what may be your last day home for a while. Imagine further that you are an under-age migrant, without previous experience of urban life, with nothing to guide you and only few people to help you.*

This exactly describes the beginning of the digital ethnography *The Long Day of Young Peng*. But it also closely approximate how Peng – here a fictional name given to a real-life friend from my 2007-09 fieldwork in North China – had decided to colour, in both off- and online conversations with me over the years, the story of his first journey to Beijing.

*The Long Day of Young Peng* is a nonlinear, interactive HTML encoded storyline that uses original ethnographic material (fieldnotes, excerpts from interviews, pictures, videos) to chronicle one day in the life of Peng, a young Chinese migrant **(if you are curious about the technical wizardry that makes this possible [jump to 3 now](#))**. In this digital ethnography, the player is put in Peng's shoes on his journey from his native village to Beijing in search of employment. As in the text you are reading right now, the game is based on a multiple-choice mechanism. Through interacting with other characters, the player relives Peng's first day in Beijing as well as familiarising themselves with topics in the study of contemporary Chinese society.

> *The player makes choices throughout the game that will determine the places, people and ethnographic themes Peng will eventually encounter.*

Throughout the game, the player collects items, money and keywords that could be used to unlock further content in the game as well as provide more detailed analysis of the ethnographic material. The game also includes a bibliography, as some of the topics the digital ethnography touches upon are elucidated through ethnographic examples taken from the anthropological literature on China and scripted into the game. The game ends in diverging ways – none of which reflects what really happened to the real person named Peng, but which nonetheless reproduces some of the most likely outcomes of second-generation migratory

projects in China (Sun 2014) – depending on the cumulative effects of the choices made throughout it.
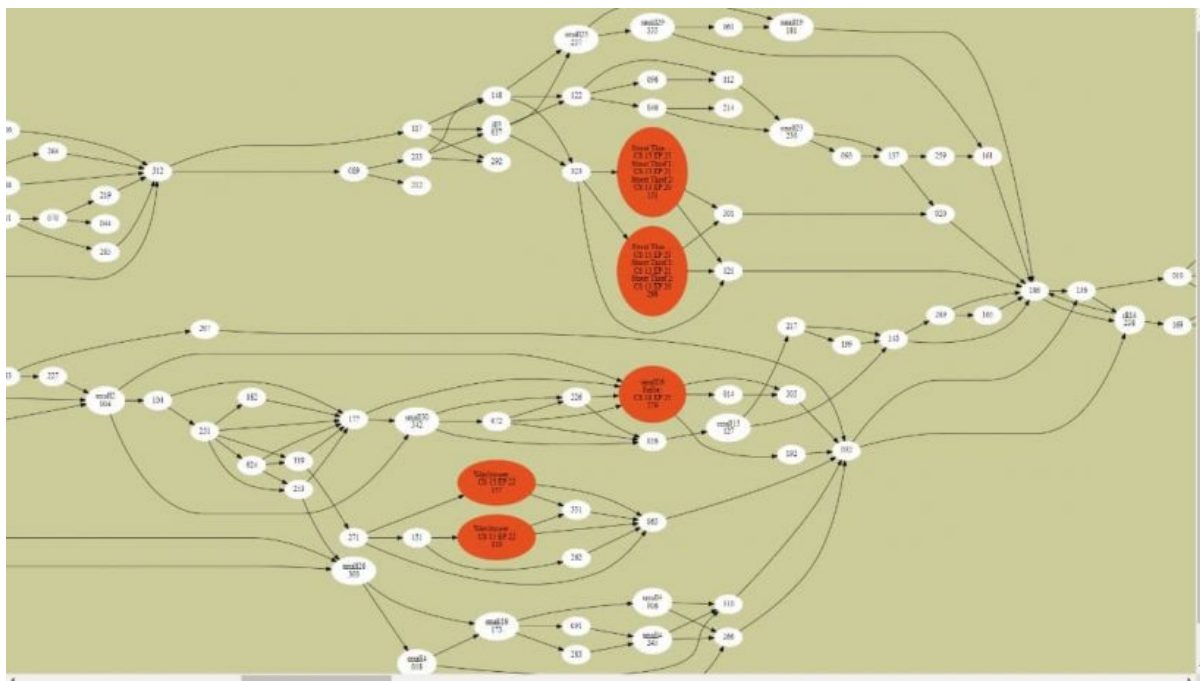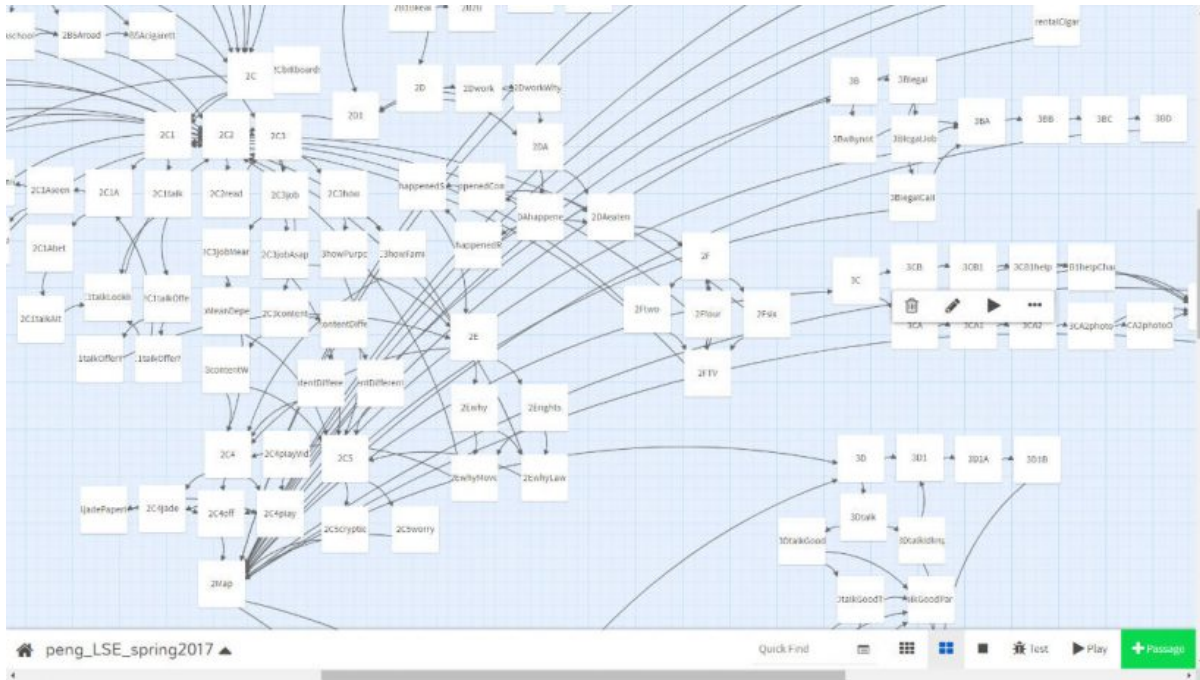


Busy interactive pathways in *Peng* (from [Twinery.org](Twinery.org)) and the interactive book *Lone Wolf* (from [Projectaon.org](Projectaon.org))

The idea of developing a digital ethnography came in response to a 2016 LSE Learning and Technology grant to support large-scale, technology-informed initiatives with the potential to have a substantial and lasting impact on teaching practices around the School. This call reasoned along similar lines as a previous attempt at digitalizing ethnographic material that I had been toying with in previous years. The ethnographic material on which the *Peng* game is based has been collected during eight months of fieldwork in Lingshui village, Beijing Municipality, People's Republic of China, as part of my first MA ethnographic project on the nexus between environmental degradation, rural-to-urban migration and marginality in rural China (Pia 2016). That piece of research was subsequently extended in the summer of 2009 period during which the media artist and digital curator [Marco De Mutiis](#) and I visited Lingshui together to record a new set of interviews and videos and produce extra photographic material. Of great inspiration for this second period of ethnographic work was the then single most influential interactive journalism piece to be published online, *Voyage au bout du charbon*, produced by the French newspaper *Le Monde*. In 2010, we put together a proposal to pitch our original web-documentary project to the Sheffield Doc-Fest, an international documentary festival and marketplace, but failed to seize enough funding. The project was then put on hold for several years awaiting new funding opportunities.

At this point in the text, you could either **jump to the practicalities of how the Peng game was introduced into class teaching by scrolling down to 3** or you could [**click here**](#) and *play* the digital ethnography yourself, until at least Peng's final departure from Lingshui. Once you are done, **come back to this page and [read 2.](#)**

As you make your way through Peng's last day in the village, try to fit into his shoes and think carefully to what he/you shall do. However, as you move further into the digital ethnography, do not forget to cast a critical eye on the ways in which the game addresses you.

*What does interactivity do to our ethnographic accounts? How is the*

*storytelling of anthropology challenged or transformed by this media form? And what about the 'truth claims' (Rutherford 2012) we advance through our ethnographic findings?*

To paraphrase a recent [curated collection](#) by Darren Byler and Shannon Iverson on the relationship between fiction and nonfiction narratives in anthropology: 'what is the work the *interactive* stories do?'

## 2. **Pedagogy**

There's a growing amount of evidence (Blank 1985; Gee 2005; Squire, Jenkins 2003; Squire 2005; Kardan 2006) suggesting that the role-playing afforded by gaming tools often translates into the ability of challenging one's own default assumptions and enhances a more flexible and unorthodox appreciation of complex social phenomena. All these outcomes, you will agree, represent highly sought-after goals in the teaching of the social sciences. But this begs one further question: how can games possibly be educational? The Peng game, as all interactive simulations, provides students with an alternative virtual sensorium that is rich of learning cues. In the constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky 1934; Laurillard 2002), much is made of the notion that knowledge is assembled out of a given context by the purpose-driven cognition of the active learner. While all contexts are potentially conducive to some form of learning, some contexts may be explicitly designed to be saturated by teaching affordances, i.e., learning opportunities embedded in an environment to support teaching activities. The Peng game is one such context.

The game is replete with cues pointing to salient facts about contemporary China, which are made explicit subjects of analysis in course lectures and readings. For example, one picture could show the inside of a rural house plastered with

propaganda posters of Mao Zedong. While the interactive text may not directly pick up on the visual content of the background environment, the player may still find it compelling, or be reminded of relevant discussions in some of the course's readings or lectures.

*At a different moment in the game the player may be left wondering why some of the characters Peng meets seem to treat him badly or dismissively, without the game giving much explanations as to the underlying reasons for such behaviours.*

A case in point is the derogatory language that urbanites resort to when dealing with rural migrants.



When playing through these scenarios, students have often been able to pick up on such cues. From there, they would usually move to question their peers or me as to the reasons behind such content or behaviour. In class, students often commented that the game "is very deep" and that they enjoyed the challenge of reading between the game's lines. When briefed on the reasons behind the choice

of introducing teaching affordances into the game, students were also reminded that deep reading was a skill that students were also supposed to be employing when reading academic articles and books. During the five weeks of gaming, students learned to become more curious and inquisitive about the game and successfully transferred this attitude to tutorial meetings and class discussions.

Here one could think with Marshall McLuhan about games as epistemological devices, less carriers of information than shapers and enables of human experience and cognition. In my current teaching on an introductory module to Anthropological texts and films at the LSE, I have followed this approach and introduced 'serious' games such as *Phone Stories*, *Balance of the Planet* or *Papers, Please* as class activities. Answering the question of how impersonating the role of a border officer, an e-waste scrap worker or of a 'green' public financer may contribute to shaping future anthropologists' understanding of concepts such as 'exploitation', 'the State' or 'sustainability' would likely take an additional ALLEGRA thematic week. Rather, it'd be useful to conclude this section with Gayatri Spivak's recent admonition (2011) that as educators we have an obligation to consider how our teaching practices implicitly 'train' the imagination of our students.

> *Consciously training the imagination requires that we recognise the inescapable need to inhabit the ethical world of others if we want to attain the most plausible representation of their social world.*

I posit to you that such recognition may also be arrived at through a form of 'radical play' that makes explicit – and not simply more fun or entertaining – the very impossibility of such pedagogical stance. Playing the life of a Chinese migrant through a digital ethnography may not in fact give us any deeper understanding of said migrant's ethical subjectivity than what nonfiction narratives can already afford. But the interactive act of completing Peng's journey with our own sensibilities does, at least to my mind, render much more explicit something crucial about anthropology. Anthropology ultimately entails handling

the interpretation other people's lives. What we do with this power ought to be at the core of teaching in the discipline. The explicit 'constructedness' of digital ethnographies could then contribute to make the communication of the many contradictions and impossibilities of ethnographic work a more honest, empathetic and participated endeavour.

**If you want to learn a bit more about how the game was played in class, scroll down to 3.**

3. **Practicalities**

The game has been used as one of the teaching activities on AN447, the core component of the [LSE MSc Programme 'China in Comparative Perspective'](#). Peng was played during seminars in groups of three to four students on iPad devices during five consecutive weekly seminars. All gaming sessions were facilitated by me. The game would save students' progress in the game and students kept playing in the same group until they reached one of the game's seven possible endings. Class was organised so that after 15 minutes of gaming, the groups were mixed together and students discussed in pairs what they thought relevant about the game. The remainder of class time was usually spent on a diverse set of teaching activities that would bring topics and readings from different weeks in relation to the game's storyline.

During seminars, students were prompted to connect what they saw in the game to the social scientific models described in lectures, similarly to what happens with class readings.

*However, the immersive virtual environment of the game would spur students*

*to reflexively embed themselves and their game choices in the very material, requiring explanations.*

This exercise enabled students to think more deeply about how social sciences construe their object of study and determine the limits of valid explanations. Students were also asked to report on the reasons why they took one decision and not another. This exercise would further elicit students' reflection of their own life choices as a comparative foil to Peng's **(the second part of this text has more on the ethical implications of digital ethnographies).**

One feature of the Peng game is the interactive glossary. While playing the game, the player encounters specific Chinese expressions that are particularly salient to current debates on contemporary Chinese society. One example is the Chinese linguistic register for discussing migrants and migration projects, which is laden by important political and cultural implications. When students played the game in groups, these terms would spur lively discussions as to their translations and usage. Notably, Chinese-speaking students have been very eager to take on the opportunity to provide their own original interpretations of these terms to their non-Chinese speaking peers and ready to critically engage with the in-game glossary's definitions of these words.

*Name xinku*, It is very tough!

[locked]

*Nongming Hukou*, Leg. Agricultural Household Registration.

People registered under this household label are allotted a piece of land in the countryside and allocated welfare provisions on place of residence. Individual's rights of free movement, residency, health care and education are severely curtailed under this registration.

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Back to story                                                    About Credits Bibliography

All in all, the implementation of the game during seminars enabled students to pattern their growing understanding of migration as a social phenomenon in general – and of its Chinese characteristics – with their own sensibility and attentiveness. They also gained insights into what anthropologists call reflexivity: how social life is ubiquitously and uncharacteristically navigated through comparison-like techniques of social likening and othering, and the role that one's social position or class have on one's perceptions of things other and alike.

**Is there any evidence in support of introducing videogames in class? Well, there is plenty, [go to 2.](#)**

**Are you eager to know what's coming next? [Read 4.](#)**

4. **What's coming next**

On Tuesday, Andrea Pia continues to engage with the subtle political and ethical

implications of writing ethnographic hypertext. On Wednesday, Ellis Saxey, a collaborator and [reviewer](#) of Peng, will go beyond the digitalisation of ethnography to show in practice how hyper-text can be harnessed for the study and preservation of endangered or even dead languages. Something anthropologists have all the reason to consider as one of the most impending goals of their scholarship. On Thursday, Greg Bruno from [Project Syndicate](#) relates his gaming experience as one of my students on the very first trial run of Peng as a class activity. Finally, on Friday, Peng's co-author Marco De Mutiis will look at games that simulate the photographic act of capture as a core game mechanism. He will explore how these mechanisms push forward a specific notion of photography and reinforce the power imbalances of representation and of the relationship between photographer and subject.

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# (Im-)mobile Travels: Navigating Categories of Movement and Identities

Silvia Wojczewski
February, 2019



In October 2018, I went to a 'Black travel symposium' in Brussels. Its aim was to bring together travel writers, bloggers and photographers to share and discuss

their experiences of being a travel writer of colour in a predominantly white travel writing industry. For me, it was an opportunity to meet with Nina again, a woman from Uganda who had come to Germany about 10 years ago to study and is now writing her PhD on Black British writers. She is one of my interlocutors for my research on the role of travel in the development of Afrodiasporic identities. Being a blogger herself, she was interested in attending the symposium, which took place as part of the EU-project 'Disothering – Beyond Afropolitan and other labels.'

One panel addressed the similarities and differences when it came to Black people travelling, especially in relation to gender, nationality and economic capital. The question of privilege was central to the discussion. On the panel, there was a British middle-aged novelist, Geraldine; Mona, a photographer, who was originally from Nigeria, and who had migrated to the US and then to Sweden; a moderator from Brussels, Michael; and Salman, a writer living in Belgium, who came to the UK originally from Eritrea as a political refugee.

It was interesting to bring these different people and their perspectives together for one panel, under the umbrella of discussing experiences of travel on a personal level. That is, personal motivations that are read about in voluntary migration and leisure travel are almost never discussed in studies on refugees. While both 'migration' and 'tourism' are forms of travel, they are defined by discrete geographies, moral connotations, participating populations, legal and political frameworks. This panel opened up a space to discuss positive as well as negative aspects and experiences within all kinds of movements: voluntary migration, leisure travel, as well as forced migration.

Everyone talked about their experiences of travel with a particular focus on tourism and leisure travel, because they felt that this was the category where Black people or people of colour have traditionally been excluded: tons of travel literature have been written from the standpoint of the white (male) European gaze contributing to the construction of 'the tourist', as being a white, European, economically privileged person, while 'the migrant' or 'the refugee' are Black

people and people of colour. This simplistic binary is something that the panellists and also Nina who sat next to me knew all too well. In the last years, Nina told me, she had been 'mistaken' for a refugee several times: 'It got worse since the so-called migration crisis' she said. The moderator, who was born in the UK, first spoke to Geraldine about tourism and her privilege of travelling with a European passport. After addressing her, Michael jumped to Salman and the moderator stepped directly into the 'category trap'. By this, I mean wanting to talk about Salman's experience as a political refugee, he opposed the privileged tourism experiences of Geraldine to the supposed opposite of Salman's travel as a refugee, linking his travel experience to disadvantage, force and compulsion:

*Michael: Salman you don't have – Geraldine was talking about privilege – the reason that you are in Brussels today is not really a choice, it's not that you were born and raised in the UK with a white environment; can you tell me what your take is on travel, on the meaning of travel and the link to literature, too?*

*Salman: Ok. First, I contest the word 'privilege', because I don't see my life as in any way unprivileged; all of us here, we got here through different routes. I believe that everyone can be privileged compared to others. I grew up in a refugee camp for example and some of them have stayed there, some of them have died there, so I see myself as more privileged than them. I don't see my life in any form as kind of tragic. So yes, it has been done through migration, I was born in Eritrea to an Eritrean father and an Ethiopian mother and then I grew up in a camp because of the war between the two countries. Then I went to Saudi Arabia and then to the UK as an under-aged immigrant. I didn't speak a word of English then. I came to the UK with my brother and being there I began to feel this freedom. And so yes, maybe it was difficult but I kind of felt this freedom to discover another culture. To learn a new language, and because I did not speak English, and I didn't have family around me, the way I felt adopted, or I felt assimilated or I felt part of the British society was through walking. And I walked a lot. South, East, West – walking was a way of being only with myself; in a way you know that you are isolated, but you find a language in that loneliness and you find a language in being different. So it is not victimhood, but I felt it was an*

*opportunity to discover something new.*

'Existential mobility', a concept coined by Ghassan Hage, explains the idea that spatial movement is attached to the idea of moving forward in one's life when one feels stuck in it: '*We move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better*' (Hage 2005, p. 470). Salman's experiences add a layer to Hage's argument: Living in Saudi Arabia in a refugee camp and being relatively immobile physically, as the movements of people were rather controlled, the only way to 'travel' was through reading. Even in contexts of immobility the idea of travel stayed with Salman, and if it could not be achieved through the body, than he achieved it through the mind:

*Salman: Now I was thinking about this idea of travel that we all associate with passport or going from one place to another, but I think for a lot of people travelling is mostly done through reading, wishing or even talking and listening. And I know for a fact for example when we were kids in Saudi Arabia most of those novels that we wanted to read were banned and so we were actually taking risks in getting those books because we thought we were travelling to those different places. I read Kafka in Saudi Arabia and that was a huge risk. We felt like it was an alternative form of travelling metaphorically by engaging emotionally with these characters and I think that is why reading novels is incredibly important because it gives you access to different cultures.*

In order to grasp the full spectrum of experiences when it comes to diverse im/mobilities, we need a space that also includes the description of positive experiences of people who moved because they were forced to.

*Moral judgement shades the way we as anthropologists study mobilities and use categories such as 'migration' or 'tourism'. In order to avoid conflating categories like 'migrant', 'tourist' or 'refugee' with a person or a group, it would be interesting to look at them as intersubjective processes.*

Categories frame how a person is viewed from the outside *and* affects how a

person constructs and understands Self and Other in relation to these categorizations. It would be important to explore mobilities further from an existential perspective that focuses on how a person negotiates and navigates the structures surrounding her. Seen from an existential perspective that puts the experiences of the human being at the center of research, 'tourism' or 'migration', as forms of human movement in the world, have potential overlaps that are interesting to explore for either category. Thinking from the perspective of 'destination communities' essentialisations of culture and imaginations of alterity are means of reassuring themselves of who they are (stability). While at the same time essentialisations of culture are used in politics or media for populist reasons and as a means of mobilising politically against the 'threat' of immigration or the 'waves' of ill-behaved tourists. Another topic would be to explore the element of quest for (transformative) experience and adventure underlying many forms of travel. Further, the analysis of different 'contact zones' [1](Pratt 1992, Bruner 2005), that is, practices and cultures of hospitality to study the mutually co-constitutive relationships between different travelers and 'the host society' through transfers and transculturation processes.

I am not saying that 'tourism' or 'migration' are the same phenomenon. It remains important to make a distinction between forced and voluntary travel because there are, of course, questions of power and discrimination in different forms of movements to address. As Glick-Schiller and Salazar remind us, there are indeed different '*regimes of mobility that normalize the movements of some travelers while criminalizing and entrapping the ventures of others*' (2013, p. 189). The potential of mobility of a person depends on nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality and other socially and culturally constructed categories.

However, categories such as 'tourist', 'migrant' or 'refugee' only frame how a person is able to travel and do not explain the wider emotional, experiential and motivational base of a person on the move. A more person-centred perspective on how it *feels like* to be in another country or place allows taking a closer look into how a person copes with what Michael Jackson terms being a 'what' and a 'who' at the same time: a person who actively creates a lifeworld through their agency

and is being acted upon by others (Jackson 2013). Taking an existential anthropology perspective (Jackson 2012) while working on 'migration' or 'tourism' can contribute to the critical reflection of categories of mobility.

A great example of this approach is Annika Lems's *Being-here: Placemaking in a World of Movement* (2018) which follows the life and movements of three middle-aged Somalis who came to Melbourne as political refugees and documents their steps and negotiations towards making Melbourne their home. This contributes to our understanding on how constructed categories and boundaries work on a person and how s/he negotiates and transgresses imposed boundaries of categories. It shows how social reality emerges from the subjectively experienced life-worlds of humans, who use their senses and intellectual apparatus to structure their experiences.

Listening to and following biographies like Salman's can help us understand how a person navigates through diverse categories of movement and identity ascriptions, and what strategies are deployed by a person to deal with these in order to live a decent life.

> *Salman chose to begin his talk in the panel with contesting that word 'privilege'. He did not see himself as not privileged simply because 'privilege' is also a matter of perspective. Instead, he chose to free himself from the negative characteristics that are attached to a person labelled a 'refugee'; he swapped tragedy, trauma, and constraint for freedom, privilege, and imagination.*

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[1] Edward Bruner uses the concept of the 'touristic borderzone' (2005, p.17) to describe a space, 'a behavioral field' (ibid.), where travelers and locals meet and that emerges through tourism. Mary Louise Pratt defines a contact zone as a 'space of colonial encounters' (1992, p.6). For Pratt these contact zones are marked by 'coercion, racial inequality, and intractable conflict' whereas Bruner characterizes these border zones as stages for performances of both 'locals' and 'travelers'. Both authors have in common that they deconstruct the notion of 'locality', 'emic' and 'etic'.

*Featured image by Mr. Theklan (Flickr, CC BY-SA 2.0).*

# Anthropology? What 'Anthropology'?

Mateusz Laszczkowski
February, 2019



*In September 2018, Jarosław Gowin, Poland's Minister of Science and Higher*

*Education, abolished anthropology as an academic discipline by an executive decree. The much-protested new law on higher education entered into force on 1 October 2018. Amid mounting outcry, this post attempts to outline the significance of this decision, identify its practical consequences and situate it against a background of our discipline's more general crisis.*

In a famous scene from the 1980s Polish comedy film *Miś* ('Teddy Bear') a man walks into a post office to make a long distance phone call. 'London?' the jaded clerk behind the counter replies. Checking the thick register she responds, 'There's no such place called "London". There's only Lądek, Lądek Zdrój.' To a Polish ear, Lądek, pronounced '*Londek*', is phonetically similar to 'London'. The man patiently explains that he means 'London, a city in England', to which the clerk angrily exclaims: 'Why didn't you say it's abroad?! Gotta look it up!' The scene ridicules the ignorance and parochialism of Polish public institutions in the declining years of 'real socialism'. But with Minister Jarosław Gowin's recently introduced academic reform, foreign anthropologists seeking collaboration with their peers in Poland may soon expect to be confronted with a similar response: 'Anthropology? What anthropology? There's no such discipline.'

October 1 is the inauguration of the new academic year in Poland. It was on that day that the new law on Higher Education and Science entered into force. The law had been passed by the parliament against [widespread protests](#) last summer. Proudly dubbed the 'Constitution for Science', the law is the Minister's cherished brainchild. While Gowin and the right-wing government, of which he is a member, claim that the new law is a response to the Polish academia's calls for a reform, in fact many academics are concerned.

> *Gowin's new law centralizes academia, subjects it to increased control by political appointees and big business, and intensifies demand for commercially applicable research. It advances the tendency towards reducing universities to the role of boot camps for techno-managerial cadres.*

Many actions, not included in the law itself, were introduced by the Minister's

executive decrees. Disciplines were lumped together into a small number of newly created umbrella disciplines. Anthropology became included in 'Culture and Religion Studies', a subset of the Humanities, while most other branches of social science were listed under a separate category. The abolition of anthropology was immediately met with protest by the [Polish Ethnological Society](#) and all of the anthropology/ethnology departments across the country. International anthropological associations such as the WAU, WCAA, IUAES, and AAA, as well as the national anthropological unions in several countries were quick to express their solidarity with Polish colleagues, issuing appeals to Minister Gowin to revoke his decision.

*Beyond the obvious absurdity of [erasing anthropology](#) in Bronisław Malinowski's homeland, what does Polish anthropology's abolition mean in practice and why exactly are anthropologists crying out?*

# Evaluation

The abolition of anthropology as a self-standing discipline will make the work of Polish anthropologists far less visible to foreign colleagues and less recognizable to funders. The Ministry argues that the 'consolidation' of disciplines is necessary to enable accurate evaluation of research. 'Evaluation' is explicitly a keyword guiding the broader academic reform. Anthropologists will be immediately reminded of Marilyn Strathern's *Audit Cultures* (2000). Just how our work is going to be evaluated is very much part of the reasons for anthropologists' outcry. The Ministry has prepared a list of journals organized by the newly created umbrella disciplines. Only articles published in journals listed under the heading that corresponds to the author's official disciplinary affiliation will count as part of the researcher's output and basis of their individual evaluation. The list for "Culture and Religion Studies" does include most of the leading international anthropology journals, but very few if any interdisciplinary ones or those with a regional focus. This means that Polish anthropologists will have to think twice before they commit to an interdisciplinary research or writing project. Thus the

executive decree belies the Ministry's declared goal to facilitate the internationalization of Polish research by creating a simplified, more legible structure.

## Money

Other concerns are financial. Before the reform, centrally allocated funds for research and salaries used to be distributed to faculties according to the ranking of their respective research outputs. To take one example: my own home department, the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, is part of the Faculty of History at the University of Warsaw, which also includes the departments of history, archaeology, art history, and musicology. Owing, in part, to the anthropology department's contribution, the faculty's research has steadily ranked in the highest possible category, 'A+'. But the reform reduces the role of faculties in favour of the newly created disciplines (the exact structure and role of faculties is yet to be decided). The consequences of this will differ for different departments. For us, since the average rating of the newly created "Culture and Religion Studies" is lower, the change means less funding.

> *Furthermore, money is also allocated to specific disciplines according to their 'cost absorption coefficient'. Basically, the more expensive the kind of research in a given field, the more money the discipline receives.*

Fieldwork-based disciplines such as archaeology or (until now) anthropology receive a bit more than those disciplines, primarily in the humanities, whose research is conducted mainly in libraries, and natural science disciplines that require labs furnished with expensive equipment receive significantly more. This was so before the reform and the new law preserves the general principle. The reform introduces a more nuanced scale for calibrating the various disciplines' respective research costs. Previously, with 1.0 being the basic standard, the maximum coefficient for any discipline used to be 3.0, and most humanities disciplines ranked 1.0 or 1.5. The new decree extends the scale up to 6.0. On the

face of it, the change would seem beneficial, and perhaps it is – for some. But with anthropology's merger with non-fieldwork based Culture and Religion Studies, our coefficient drops to the minimum level. Our already miserable research funds become even more pathetic. Again, by curtailing the financial possibilities for conducting research, participating in international conferences, and quite simply staying up-to-date with international literature, the executive decision belies the Ministry's proclaimed goal of internationalization.

## Research and Teaching

Moreover, the fear is that the merging of disciplines might be a first step towards a de facto abolition of anthropology research and teaching. For now, the departments and study programmes stay in place. A confusing situation is created in which anthropology (or 'ethnology', as for historical reasons it is more commonly known in Poland) remains recognized as a study programme but not an academic discipline. Students will continue to be enrolled and receive degrees in a field that's a Schrödinger's cat – at the same time alive and dead. But the new law gives rectors and newly created supervisory boards composed of government appointees and business representatives free reign in restructuring universities. The threat appears quite real that at some point in the near future the rectors and supervisory boards might decide that non-profitable departments representing non-existent disciplines such as anthropology should be shut down in the name of austerity and 'rationalization'. Coincidentally, a new Polish edition of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* came out this year – now *that's* useful social science! It offers a clear understanding of the world's contemporary challenges. Who needs anthropologists with their esoteric hair-splitting, their 'predicaments of culture' (Clifford 1988), 'gender trouble' (Butler 1990), 'blurred boundaries' (Gupta 1995) and 'partial connections' (Strathern 2004)? Who needs their nonsense about 'mushrooms at the end of the world' (Tsing 2015) and forests that 'think' (Kohn 2003)? They only make things complicated, while Poland (and humanity) needs solutions and applicability to become great again.

# Visibility

This points to a final set of issues concerning the reasons why the Minister's meat-axe fell on anthropology. Talking to colleagues abroad, they often think this must be part of ideological warfare, eradicating anthropology as a source of ideas hostile to Poland's nationalistic and conservative government. Much as I wish anthropology in Poland was so politically significant as to merit the nationalists' and conservatives' in government special (if malevolent) attention, I don't think this is the case. More likely, it seems to me, the abolition of our discipline is a result of its low public visibility paired with the sheer ignorance of Ministry officials. 'What's that anthropology?' I imagine them wondering, 'Dunno – something about culture, you know, folk dances and strange beliefs and rituals.' 'OK, so it's Culture and Religion, right?'

In the newest issue of *Anthropology Today*, Bruce Kapferer ([2018](#)) writes about the threats to anthropology posed by the enmeshing of our discipline and academia as a whole in what he calls 'techno-corporatizing realities' and 'economic pragmatism'.

> *The pressure to produce applicable and commercializable results deprives anthropology of its distinctive strength: the capacity, by drawing on ethnography, to move beyond the confines of the already known. 'Anthropological practice is vulnerable to outside political, economic and socio-cultural forces', Kapferer states.*

But he also points out how anthropologists are, in part, themselves to blame. Abandoning the project of ethnographically derived theory-making, we have de facto accepted a secondary position in relation to other disciplines whose theories colonize our work and to whom we often serve as mere purveyors of 'raw data.'

While the details of Kapferer's argument are debatable, I think his analysis broadly describes, in part at least, also the origins of the specific situation of anthropology in Poland at present. For historical reasons too complex to explore

here, Polish anthropology had been isolated from the developments of the discipline in the English-speaking world for decades. Still today there is a significant gap in terms of the availability of Polish translations of anthropology's modern classics. Departments and university libraries are often too underfunded to afford access to current international literature. These problems are not specific to Poland only. Faced with structural, financial and institutional obstacles, and additionally confused about our discipline's transnational legacies and distinctive strengths, we have been unable to establish public relevance and recognizable voice for anthropology around the world in general, and in Poland in particular. We have thus found ourselves unprepared for the present assault by the combined forces of conservative government and corporate power.

This might help understand why, for instance, informatics, initially also slated for 'consolidation' with other fields, has been able to secure its standing in the disciplinary landscape of Polish academia redrawn by Minister Gowin, while anthropology hasn't. I do want to think all is not yet lost, but we're fighting an uphill struggle, and we rose up late. Our colleagues in astronomy have succeeded in getting their discipline back. Perhaps the Minister hopes they will name a star after him one day - though an Armageddon asteroid might be more apt. But anthropology? What could we possibly name after Gowin? A savage tribe?

Please sign [Allegra's letter to Minister Gowin here,](#)

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Photo by [Ioana Cristiana](#) on [Unsplash](#).

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# Collective Letter Against the Eradication of Polish Anthropology

Allegra
February, 2019

Allegra Lab asks its readers to please consider giving their signatures to a collective letter we have drafted to the Minister of Science and Higher Education in Poland, Dr. Jarosław Gowin. In doing so, we join the recent outcry over a new decree that effectively removes anthropology/ethnology as an independent academic discipline from the Polish academic landscape. For already published reactions, please see here, here, and here.

PLEASE SIGN OUR COLLECTIVE LETTER BY ADDING YOUR NAME IN THE COMMENT FUNCTION BELOW THIS POST!

**UPDATE:** **On 31 January, a first batch of 550 signatures was sent to the Minister. We will continue updating the Minister with each new 500**

Dr. Jarosław Gowin,

Minister of Science and Higher Education

ul Hoża 20

00-529 Warszawa

Poland

Dear Minister,

We are writing to you to express our concern with your decree from 20 September 2018 "On the branches of science, scientific disciplines, and artistic disciplines", merging the discipline of Socio-Cultural Anthropology (Ethnology) with a conglomerate discipline called "Cultural and Religious Studies". For anthropologists, this means that the unique knowledge, the distinctive insights gained by the ethnographic approach, and the respective regional expertise of our colleagues in Poland will de facto become invisible.

We fear that the change will impede international academic collaboration, making it more difficult for anthropologists in other countries to identify their Polish counterparts. Funding institutions might impose restrictions on collaborating with experts outside of the internationally recognizable field of anthropology. Anthropology PhD students in Poland might have problems locating external supervisors, let alone secure funding possibilities. ERASMUS cooperation might be more difficult to realise as it is not clear what role anthropology and ethnology are going to play within the new "Cultural and Religious Studies."

The Inter-Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological

Societies – the world's largest anthropological association – will take place in Poland in August this year. This fact testifies to the prominence of Polish anthropology in the international academic arena – a prominence that we fear is now threatened. Indeed, Polish anthropology has been salient on the international agenda ever since Bronisław Malinowski's foundational work on the Trobriand Islands. We trust that you share our conviction that this Polish intellectual heritage should be cherished and given utmost visibility. We urge you to restore Anthropology/Ethnology as an independent discipline.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Dr. Judith Beyer (Allegra Laboratory; University of Konstanz, Germany)

Dr Miia Halme-Tuomisaari (Allegra Laboratory; University of Helsinki, Finland)

Dr Julie Billaud (Allegra Laboratory; University of Sussex, UK)

Dr Jon Schubert (Allegra Laboratory; Brunel University London, UK)

Dr Agathe Mora (Allegra Laboratory; LSE, UK)

Dr Felix Girke (Allegra Laboratory; University of Konstanz, Germany)

Prof. Dr. Michał Buchowski (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland)

Dr Elżbieta M. Goździak (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland)

Dr Mateusz Laszczkowski (University of Warsaw, Poland)

PLEASE SIGN BY ADDING YOUR NAME IN THE COMMENT FUNCTION BELOW!

**UPDATE: On 31 January, a first batch of 550 signatures was sent to  the**

**Minister. We will continue updating the Minister with each new 500 signatures – please help!**

Thanks, Allies!

*Featured image* *by* *Tom Page* *(flickr,* *CC BY-SA 2.0*).

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# Green Economy and Promises for the Future in Greece

Daniel Knight
February, 2019

The green economy is supposed to reduce environmental degradation while supporting sustainable development within the framework of neoliberal markets by incorporating accountability into the appropriation of nature (Fairhead et. al. 2012:254). As defined by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) "to be green, an economy must not only be efficient, but also fair. Fairness implies recognizing global and country level equity dimensions, particularly in assuring a just transition to an economy that is low-carbon, resource efficient, and socially

inclusive". The green economy realigns the relationship between humans and nature within the existing neoliberal system by reimagining corporate responsibility – the market remains at the heart of economic activity yet maintains an ethical edge. The call is for "ecological modernization where economic growth and environmental conservation work in tandem" within a just social and ethical calculus (Fairhead et al. 2012:240, Knight 2017a).

The green economy is widely viewed by both political and environmental commentators as a sustainable way out of financial turmoil in countries suffering from long-term austerity. Promising a future based on alternative markets, community-ownership, and corporate responsibility, the green economy should fill people with feelings of hope and anticipation at a Time of Crisis when livelihoods are being transformed beyond recognition.

*However, often these green programmes are hijacked by multinationals who exploit the Time of Crisis for financial gain, overlooking local communities and engendering similar relations as found in extractive resource economies.*

A whole multitude of sins can be kept from the public imagination when strategically packaged as 'green', leaving people feeling disillusioned, dispossessed and exhausted as promised futures are never realised.

In Greece, over the past decade wind, solar and natural gas exploration programmes have been supported by the European Union and have attracted substantial private investment. However, these green initiatives often exhibit an undesirable underbelly, either as extractive economies, veils for so-called 'green grabbing', or vessels to deliver a plethora of broken promises. In short, the movement towards the green economy in a Time of Crisis has encouraged a repetition of the neoliberal model of privatization, short-term accumulation, rentier agreements and resource extraction. This is contrary to views that cast 'crisis' as an incubator of economic strategies that may feed green ecological transformations of the economy leading, ultimately, to sustainable growth (Argenti and Knight 2015, Knight 2017a).

In all instances, local people are asked to speculate about their (seemingly bright) energy futures – harnessing the potentiality of natural resources, raising expectations that employment and prosperity will be just over the futural horizon, hope that the economic momentum provided by renewable energy generation will deliver individuals, families, nations from a Time of Crisis. Unavoidably, green economy initiatives fuel the imagination since the activities seem overtly futural, promising ultra-modern, technological, internationally-endorsed solutions to what now seem like archaic problems of economic stagnation, self-sustainability and ultimately climate change. There is the overpowering idea in the public mind that everyday people will have ownership of their future (both environmental and economic). But while orientations entail planning for the future, they also often involve the collapse of those efforts, resulting in feelings of exhaustion, resignation, apathy as the future does not turn out as expected (Bryant and Knight 2019).

In this short piece I focus on how developments in Greece's green economy have inspired and disappointed futural-thought, specifically speculation, in a Time of Crisis. The green economy provides a lens through which people orient themselves toward the future, often trapping people between speculation and disillusion on what the future holds.

## Speculative Futures at a Time of Crisis

Between 2009 and 2011 three natural gas fields were discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean. Named Tamar, Leviathan and Aphrodite, the revelation that 122 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of untouched reserves were just waiting to be tapped sparked intense political debate between Cyprus, Greece and Israel, and later Egypt and Lebanon, over ownership and extraction rights. Cyprus and Israel were quick to commence negotiations, establishing an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in 2010 that, in a bid to reduce costs, included a joint agreement on the extraction of natural gas by the American company Noble Energy. Europe requires 19 tcf of

fuel per annum; Cyprus believes that its EEZ holds 60 tcf. Licensing for the exploration blocks is expected to start at around 80 million euros per drillship. Suffice to say, Greece felt left out of the fun and games.

*Amidst the political bickering and points-scoring that has marked the so-called Greek economic crisis that has raged since 2010, the Greek government lost sight of the potential of a major gas field on its doorstep.*

Only in 2013 did Greece sign a memorandum of understanding and in 2015 broker a deal to export gas to Europe. This was despite much public speculation about the potential benefit of natural resource extraction for the Greek public in the grips of chronic austerity. A news broadcast in late 2012 bemoaned the lethargic reaction of the Greek government in allowing Cyprus and Israel to get a head-start on a matter that "might be the answer" to the financial problems of the Greek state. Their government, argued the presenter, was too interested in fighting among itself and its politicians focused on holding onto their seats in parliament. Rather, a longer-term view should be adopted to serve the future of the country. Cyprus, the audience was told, had the luxury of a consistent energy policy that was passed from one administration to the next. In Greece, with the (regular) change of government came a change in energy policy.

Among the general public there was an air of excitement, tinged with frustration and myriad conspiracy theories. Rumours, myths and hyperbole concerning the extent of the discovery and the potential financial benefits of exporting energy reigned supreme in cafeterias across the country. People were living the future before a drill had even been sunk (cf. Weszkalnys 2015, on gossip and rumour see Pipyrou 2018, Rapport 1998). Since 2011, the Eastern Mediterranean energy field has been one of the main topics of conversation/gossip between me and Vasilis, a 65-year-old retired salesman from Central Greece.

*Vasilis's imagination runs wild when he discusses the natural gas field, he races into the future in leaps and bounds, imagining a world in which Greece is energy self-sufficient and the Time of Crisis has transitioned into a Time of*

*Prosperity for the everyday citizen.*

When he first learned of the potential gas field, Vasilis felt that this was a great opportunity for Greece to become a major player in the European energy industry. He thought that the discovery might signal a way out of the financial quagmire, certainly on a national level, and that perhaps some benefits might even filter down to the everyday person, at least in the form of employment and cheaper energy bills. His son had just qualified as an engineer and Vasilis had dreams of him working the rigs and providing for his cash-strapped family.

In the apparent emptiness of the present (see Dzenovska 2018), with not much left to hope for—Vasilis had recently had his pension cut by 33 percent and both his children were unemployed—the mind was racing. Over the years, Vasilis's optimism for the future has turned from disbelief, to disillusion, to apathy. He has since started speculating as to why political consensus has not been reached and drilling has not started. In what could be classed as conspiracy theories, Vasilis speculates that the United States and Israel will corner the market for energy extraction in the Mediterranean in an attempt to keep the Greek people in poverty, "in the same way that the United States broke up the Balkans into small countries – to have more markets to sell their McDonald's and Budweiser and keep the local people poor." He states that "our politicians could make this country rich by agreeing a contract to drill for gas and oil, but they are in this together with the Americans and the Jews. They (the Greek government) are as corrupt as the foreigners" (on blame see Knight 2013, Brown and Theodossopoulos 2003, Rakopoulos 2018).

His initial excitement which provoked him to dream of a better life for his family, projecting a bountiful time of inclusion, prosperity, a return to Greece's futures past, has now firmly turned to resignation that international power-games are set to conspire against the Greek people. His speculative future has collapsed, and he has shifted from the optimism of dreaming for a better future for family and nation, to cynicism and conspiracy about the colonization of the future by

corporations and subversive political forces. Vasilis believes that this is a deliberate attempt by his own government and external forces to promote cynicism about the future and keep the population under control by making resignation "a dominant mode of political action" (Benson and Kirsch 2010:474). His visions of a prosperous future based on the fruits of the energy industry may never come to fruition as he had once projected, but it still holds potential – evidenced by the physical existence of natural gas under the Mediterranean Sea (cf. Weszkalnys 2015). Yet, for Vasilis, this potential was no longer a topic on which to speculate.

I have written at length elsewhere on how the energy industry, particularly wind and solar, has been hailed as the saviour of the Greek economy (Argenti and Knight 2015, Knight 2017b). The solar (photovoltaic) industry has been heralded as a lifeline for poor Greek farmers and national economy alike, a way to pay back debts and decrease the country's fiscal deficit. Yet, the solar initiative has rarely benefitted local communities, instead being targeted toward international export. Public speculation on the benefits of new energy initiatives has been quick to turn to narratives of economic extraction, neo-colonialism and the punitive impact of excessive private investment on local communities.

*Futures based on new models of ecological and economic sustainability have failed to materialise and hope-filled speculation for a different future and a way out of a Time of Crisis has descended into disillusion and resignation.*

From gas fields to solar and wind, the current energy landscape is full of paradoxical images. Saviour packages turn public opinion from excitement to apathy. This is primarily because, Sam Collins (2008) suggests, new programmes tend to recapture their own potential, harnessing little surprise, being neoliberal schemes reborn in their own image. As Gisa Weszkalnys (2015:630) has argued in the context of Saõ Tomé and Príncipe off the coast of West Africa, the social and economic consequences of investing in speculative futures drains local people not only financially but also emotionally as stories of prosperity, spread through

rumour and gossip, insist that people invest themselves wholeheartedly in a future that is always just over the horizon, yet never quite materialised.

## Conclusion: "I want to believe"

The green economy is packaged as offering futures based on inclusion, prosperity for all, corporate responsibly toward the social, and ethical clean-green ecological arrangements. As such, green economy initiatives persuade people to positively orient toward the future. Energy futures encourage hope, speculation and anticipation of dramatic change. Green energy is packaged as 'futuristic', 'modern', 'high-tech', 'cutting-edge' and belonging 'to the people, for the people'. However, the reality of futural promises in the green economy tends to be 'more of the same' – multinational opportunism and extractive economies that leave local people feeling disenfranchised. Futural orientations shift to exhaustion at being exploited yet again, and feelings that the Time of Crisis is here to stay.

For Weszkalnys (2015:621), "speculation about resource potential thrives at historical junctures characterized by the foreclosing of previous material possibilities while it opens others alongside new markets." The natural gas fields under the Eastern Mediterranean fuelled speculation and expectation about a prosperous future as people expressed excitement at owning their own destiny after a period of disenfranchisement. Spread through rumour and gossip, green energy still remains a basis for hope that Greece can one day be delivered from a chronic Time of Crisis.

*Speculation suspends the need for certitude in the desire for change, meaning that the energy sector continues to be immersed in future-orientated speculative investment, with one prophesied life-saving programme following another.*

Often fuelled by rumour and gossip, local people and corporations buy into

indeterminate futures. The all-encompassing desperation of a Time of Crisis is fertile ground in which to plant the seeds of hope. Locals feel that they have very little to lose in pinning their futures to shaky scientific evidence and hollow promises. Multinationals, private investors, and foreign governments are well aware of this and the green economy is the perfect 'wolf in sheep's clothing' to prey on people who simply 'want to believe'. Through the green economy, sustainability (particularly green energy) has been framed as a saviour pathway out of a prolonged era of political and economic turmoil. Yet, all too often the promised futures do not materialise and, rather than assisting everyday livelihoods, green futures replicate and reinforce the status quo.

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# The Endangered Fishers of the Archipelago Sea

Kirsi Sonck-Rautio
February, 2019



## Regulation and the Archipelago Sea

"You are looking at the last generation of coastal fishers!" a fisherman told me, as

I was getting my coffee at a seminar celebrating the 100th anniversary of Independent Finland's fisheries of the Archipelago Sea, in December 2017. He was not one of my interviewees, but I knew who he was anyway. After all, there

are not so many small-scale fishers, or — as they more often refer to themselves — coastal fishers in the area anymore.

The situation was totally different less than a century ago. The Archipelago Area, which consists of about 40,000 islands, making it one of the largest archipelagos in the world, was once characterized by its viable fishing communities, fishing and farming being the most significant livelihoods on the islands. In 1934 there were 3447 fishers in the southern parts of the Archipelago Sea alone, whereas by 2015 there were less than 100, with only a small proportion of full-time fishers. In general, coastal fishers practice their livelihood alone, or with their family members. 90% of Finnish fishers are small-scale. In the past 40 years, European fisheries (and fisheries globally) have been subjected to heavy regulations and governmental management, in order to ensure sustainable use of fish stocks. Fishing in Finland falls under the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Union. The Common Fisheries Policy "aims to ensure that fishing and aquaculture are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable and that they provide a source of healthy food for EU citizens" (European Commission 2018).

These regulations and managerial procedures have not, however, ensured the viability of small-scale fisheries. All over the world it has been noted that due to ever increasing regulations, small-scale fisheries are losing their flexibility, resilience and capacity to adapt, while they are facing at the same time the stress caused by urbanization, increasing competition, globalization and climate change.

*Not only the environmental, but also the cultural, social and economic sustainabilities of fisheries are under serious threat, so one can reasonably ask the question: whose sustainability are we really talking about?*

## Fishing communities

The distinguished fisheries researcher Svein Jentoft (2000) stated that viable fisheries need viable fish stocks, but that is not the whole truth. Jentoft argued,

and many fisheries researchers agree, that viable fish stocks also need viable fisheries communities. He also argued that fishers who no longer have social responsibilities, whose moral bonds and values are loosened due to the lack of community, are no longer good "stewards" for the resources they are exploiting. This leads to overfishing which, according to Jentoft, could be prevented, if fisheries management were aimed at sustaining the well-being of the fisheries communities instead of concerning itself with fish stocks exclusively. The notion of traditional values of the community ensuring sustainable use of resources should be problematized, of course, since traditional fishing can be just as unsustainable as modern one. Nevertheless, being subjected to strict top-down management has certainly had an influence on the spirit of my interviewees.

Is it true then, that fisheries management is not taking the community aspect into consideration? From the research and fieldwork I have conducted between 2015 and 2018 I can draw a few conclusions. Of course, there is no straight answer, but fishers who I interviewed feel very much left out of the decision-making processes. The interviewed administrators and managers in the local fisheries sector mostly side with fishers, saying that the ability of local fishers to have an impact on policies and regulations is rather minimal. Even the scientists who provide data to inform decision-making processes are very much divided in their opinions about the state of aquatic ecosystems and what kind of procedures should be applied.

## Multi-species competition

The factor that the fishers feel is most threatening to their livelihood today is not climate change or the eutrophication of the Baltic Sea (which is caused by excess nutrients originating from farming, industry and habitation, and which cause intensified algae growth, oxygen depletion and changes in species composition), but the emergence of competing species (although climate change could well be a factor in this). The grey seal, which is no stranger to the area, but was almost hunted to extinction before 1980, has reappeared. Today, a population of almost 10,000 individuals is residing in the Archipelago Sea. Nowadays a protected

species, its hunting is strictly regulated. Also, due to the EU ban for seal products ([Regulation (EC) No 1007/2009](#)), the selling of any seal artefacts is forbidden, making the seal, from the fishers' point of view, a nuisance instead of a resource. Seals are causing considerable economic loss to fisheries all over the Baltic Sea, since they are able to tear fishing nets apart to eat the fish. Maybe even more importantly, fish are fleeing the seals, seeking shelter in the shallow bays, where fishing is prohibited.

*Many fishers have been forced to give up their traditional fishing waters, in which their families have been fishing for generations, since there is simply not enough fish to harvest anymore.*

Another species the fishers are up against is the great cormorant. Cormorants arrived to Finland in 1996, with the amount of nesting pairs increasing exponentially since. In 2018 the number of breeding couples in Finnish waters reached its peak at 26,700 pairs. Over 20% of this population live in the Archipelago Sea area. The great cormorant is protected by the EU wild bird directive. From the fishers' view, great cormorants are extracting significant amounts of pikeperch and perch, two important commercial species, from the Sea. Great cormorants are not only disliked for their eating habits, but their nesting habits as well: to find an islet covered with cormorant feces and with the entire flora dead is a common sight for the people who sail the Archipelago Sea.

## Endangered species

At the same time, scientists have found that the pike perch is developing earlier maturation. This means that they are gaining their spawning age earlier (and smaller), thus promoting larger numbers of smaller sized fish. This is of course bad news for fishers. The common opinion is that this development is fishing-induced, since the fishers naturally prefer to extract the bigger fish from the water. Therefore new fishing regulations were introduced: the minimum landing size of pike perch was raised to 40cm. For coastal fishers, this is catastrophic, since pike perch is commercially very important.

*Now, one would think that fishers would endorse regulations which aim to ensure the growth and abundance of fish stocks. It is not so simple, however. Why not?*

"We are the ones who are endangered here. But no one cares", a fisherman told me. "Whose green", we might hence ask, are the environmental rules which are increasingly ruling fishing lives? The fisher went on to explain how unfair it is that seals and cormorants are protected, while fishers are constantly punished with stricter regulations, even though the protected species also consume significant amounts of fish. Fishers are not only afraid for their own livelihood, but for the existence of coastal fisheries altogether. Newcomers to the industry have quickly given up after experiencing how hard it is to fight the seals, the cormorants, and the regulations which neither acknowledge their predicament nor have any power to change it.

## Power and knowledge

Knowledge is power, and scientific research concerning fisheries plays a key role in decision-making.

*By contrast, local ecological knowledge has no room in these decision-making processes. In fact, the fishing communities' ecological knowledge is rarely acknowledged in scientific research on fisheries either.*

It matters how research questions are formatted, or what kind of methodology is used. For example, most of the fisheries-related decisions are based on statistics. This type of research does not include any reflections from the practitioners themselves. The statistics concern the amount of fish harvested or the amount of fishing vessels owned or how many registered fishers are operating. Fishing, however, is so much more. When it comes to the local ecosystem, people are not considered experts of the system in which they work and live. Fishers tell of researchers who have called them liars, or disregarded their observations and

views as false, since their scientific models do not support the fishers' views on things. This has created a lot of bitterness among the fishing community, making them unwilling to work with scientists. "Why would we?" asked one fishermen, "every time we do work with scientists, we only get more regulations. They do not consider us experts, and there is no money and nothing to gain."

There is an obvious conflict here, which is further exacerbated by the fact that the science on fisheries is itself deeply divided. All of the scientists I interviewed agreed upon the fact that coastal fisheries are in crisis; however, there is disagreement about how this crisis should be solved. Some feel that fishers should be included more in scientific research (although they may not know how that should be done), while others feel that even though the observations of fishers are important to note, it is up to scientists to do the analysis and make conclusions. For example, while all of the fishers I interviewed concurred that the existence of the grey seal is changing the behavior of fish, causing them to flee their traditional routes, not all scientists agree. One view is that there are other factors involved, and the seals are not to blame. Although the official view of the environmental administration is that the great cormorants' impact on the local ecosystems is not substantial and that therefore there is no reason to start regulating the bird population with egg-pricking, there is a large group of marine biologists and ecologists who think otherwise, and who have argued that, in the popular fishing areas, the great cormorant does in fact extract similar amounts of fish from the sea the fishers do (Hansson et al. 2017). Therefore, the impact of the great cormorant in specific ecosystems is significant. The question the fishers are then asking is why the regulations are only directed at fishers, and not at the competing species as well. This may be because the decisions regarding the conservation of species are actually made by the environmental administration, whose objective is to conserve wildlife, not livelihoods nor cultural heritage.

*So fisheries-related decision-making has not only eluded the reach of the fishers: it has been assigned to institutions which do not advocate fisheries-related issues.*

## Ethnography and other voices

Svein Jentoft (2000) has suggested community-based co-management as solution to the problems in fisheries management. Community-based co-management would empower fishers, produce more locally applicable and appropriate management and enhance the sense of community. However, as Jentoft himself realized, it would create power imbalances. Power would likely be centralized in the hands of a few fishers' representatives, marginalizing others. Including local ecological knowledge and ethnographic research in the co-managerial process might go some way towards addressing these problems. In this way, decisions could be based on both scientific knowledge and local ecological knowledge, gathered among the fishers of the community, regardless of their position and status. Fishers may tell us something about fish stocks that the scientific parameters such as biomass and maximum sustainable yield cannot provide, as fisheries researcher Philip A. Loring (2017) put it. After all, fish are important actors in the socio-ecological system, but as they cannot speak for themselves, the fishers, who actually possess a lot of knowledge on fish, could maybe do some of the speaking for them.

*Of course, even if the fishers were granted some power over their own livelihood, way of life, and cultural heritage, they would still have to face the fact that ecology is political, and sharing resources is fiercely political.*

In addition to dealing with multispecies competition, fishers also have to deal with vilifying campaigns, conflict between conservation groups and recreational fishers (almost every third Finn is a recreational fisher), who are extracting almost the same amount of fish, but who are not subjected to the same regulations at the managerial level. No wonder it is hard to find new generations to take over the Archipelago's fisheries.

*Featured image: Fisher and his nets by Teuvo Kanerva (1975-1986), the collection*

*of Finnish Heritage Agency CC.*

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# WhoseGreen? Reflecting on Alternative Routes to Chemicals Production

Sally Atkinson
February, 2019
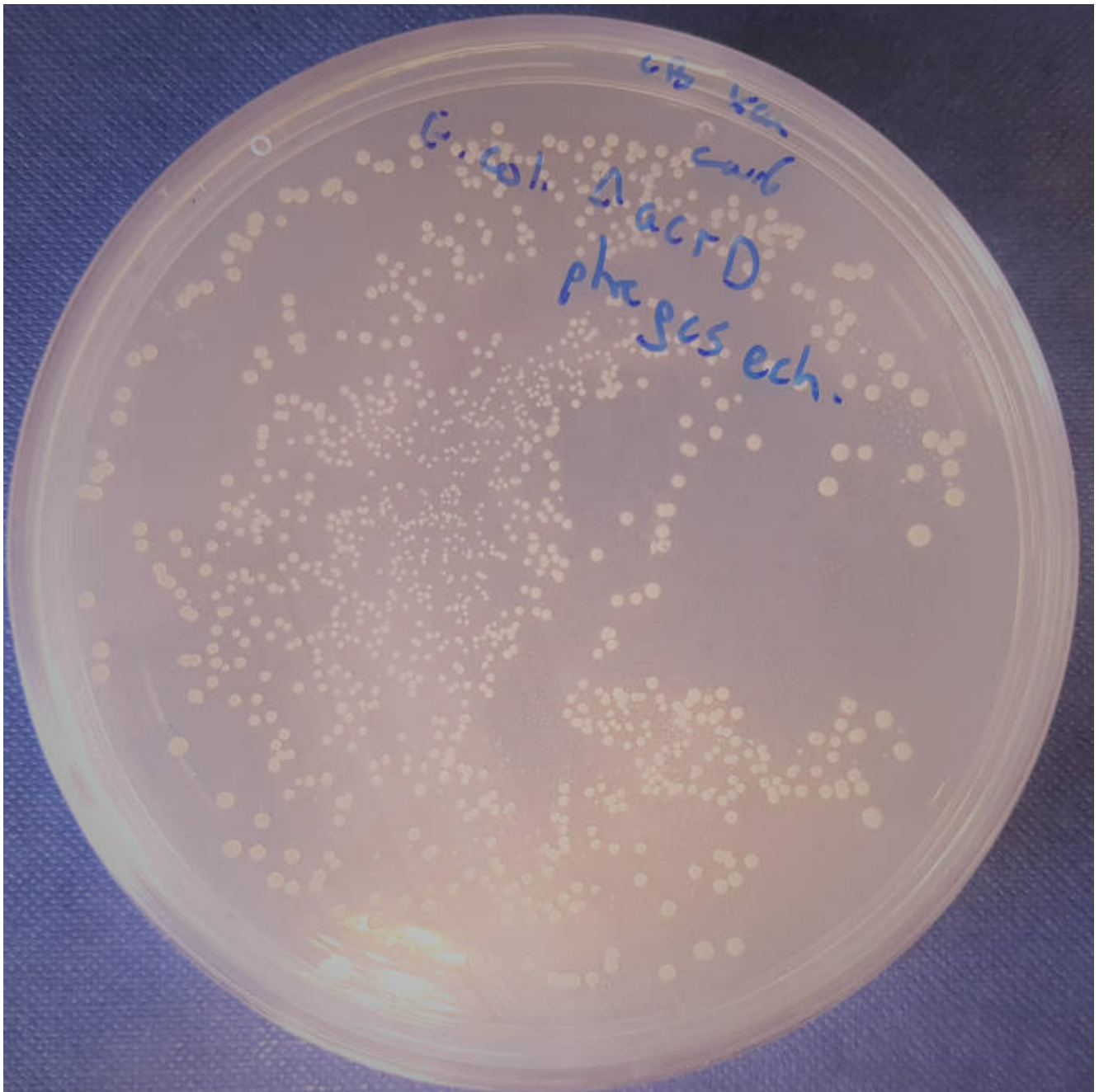
Whether it's our disposable coffee cup or the vanilla flavouring in the coffee; this morning's shaving cream or last week's false nails; lifesaving medicines or the components for our renewable energy infrastructures; we are entangled in a world of the products of petrochemistry.

The consequences of this entanglement are increasing evident. Weather extremes, unbalanced ecosystems, species extinction, plasticised oceans: we are well aware that humanity continues to consume its way toward a tipping point in

global climate change and environmental damage (UN, 2018). Industrialized societies' reliance on the consumption of finite resources, particularly petroleum and its chemical derivatives is a major and growing contributor to that long list of current crises (IPCC, 2018). And it will be the most vulnerable (human and non-humans) who will disproportionately bear the impacts.

In response, some nation-states are looking toward technoscience to 'fix' the system, to transition from petro-based production models to more 'environmentally sustainable' routes for the materials and goods of everyday life (European Commission, 2007). The idea of a 'bio-based economy' is gaining political, economic and scientific traction. Proponents intend to meet national and transnational demands for industrial chemicals in 'cleaner and greener' ways, whilst fuelling emerging national bio-economies as a route to new forms of economic growth.

We need to start a conversation about *how* technoscientific research is helping us move toward more sustainable futures and question the possibilities and limitations involved. What techno-solutions are being proposed to create this bio-based economy? Who are the actors involved and what stakes do they hold?

*Are bio-economic futures necessarily, always greener ones? Or does technoscience continue to sleepwalk on the path of growth, consumption, and newness that are defining anthropogenic impact?*

The technoscientific fields of green chemistry (GC) and synthetic biology (SB) propose two, radically different solutions to the social and technical possibilities of 'sustainable chemicals production'. Working collaboratively with industry and academic scientists we have been exploring what these model 'green' solutions entail and where their limits or challenges lie, exploring what applied social science can do to understand 'whose green'?

'We have a machine in a plexiglass dome

Which listens and looks into everyone's home.

And whenever is sees a new sleeper go flop,

It jiggles and lets a new biggle-ball drop'

(Dr Seuss's Sleep Book)

## Petrochemical legacies

In the first half of the nineteenth-century, chemists discovered how to synthesize organic molecules. By the mid nineteenth-century, routine chemical synthesis had revolutionized human understanding of organic chemistry (Yeh and Lim, 2007), heralding the emergence of the petrochemicals industry which transformed human life (Bensaude-Vincent and Simon, 2012). Powerful and pervasive, synthetic organic chemicals are usually hidden from human gaze, mundane particles woven into the fabric of everyday life.

[By 2013, the petrochemical industry accounted for more than a third of the growth in world oil demand](#), predicted to grow to a half by 2050. The longevity, versatility and economic value of products of petro-chemically derived synthetic organic chemicals make them important and powerful materials (Geyer, Jambeck and Law, 2017). Chemicals production contributes a 'multi-faceted burden on the environment', consuming water and energy and contributing 18% of total industrial global carbon emissions, in addition to toxic by-products and the long-term accumulation and dispersal of non-biodegradable waste (IEA, 2018). For good and for ill, chemicals production is an integral, systemic, albeit highly unevenly distributed, feature of global life.

*Within chemical industry and research there is growing awareness of the incontrovertible environmental consequences of petrochemical production.*

However, arguments centred on the economic and social consequences of changing practice are enrolled to resist changes to production pathways.

## Greener futures

But alternatives are emerging. Green chemistry (GC) and Synthetic biology (SB) come under the umbrella of technologies of and for the 'bioeconomy'. The bioeconomy promises to deliver solutions to interlocking  'grand societal challenges' included jobs, economic growth, the development of new products to benefit society and cleaner manufacturing processes to mitigate climate change through non-petro based technoscientific routes (IBLF, 2018). Based on ethnographic research, we show how notions of environmental sustainability are constructed and contested these two emerging models for alternative industrial chemical production.

> *Superficially GC and SB share a commitment to alternative feedstock. In practice they offer very different routes to production, but routes enmeshed in a shared structural challenge, that of a continued assumption of growth of production and consumption of chemical-based materials.*

This is a version of technoscience as the triple 'win', a simultaneous route to successful bio-ecology, bio-technology and bio-resource (Bugge, Hansen and Klitkou, 2016). This is what we have come to think of as **'Relevant Green'** where notions of sustainability are made inseparable from resource exploitation, knowledge commercialization and the imperative of growth embedded in national and global political-economic networks.

**Green chemistry** arose in the late 1970's related to long-term efforts toward a cleaner chemicals industry, emerging environmental legislation, punitive costs and shifting public perception (Clark and Macquarrie, 2002). Increasing in importance in the 1990's, GC molecularly redesigns chemical products and processes to reduce environmental impact by managing waste, hazards and end-

product biodegradability (Woodhouse and Breyman, 2005). So, a GC scientist asks: what alternative chemical and biochemical pathways can we exploit to generate new products to meet existing needs? However, the concepts of 'greenness' and 'sustainability' in GC are multiple and contested. Choices must be made about which elements of sustainability researchers address. Identified as a form of 'elite social movement', GC is described as a genuine commitment and potential for meaningful leadership toward bio-ecology from within science (Woodhouse and Breyman, 2005). But such work is undertaken within the existing sociotechnical circumstances of industry systems, public-private funding and policy imperatives where industry priorities around cost, efficiency and consumer perception dominate. This is technoscientific innovation which relies on a version of green that is maximally industrially relevant, where feasible choices about sustainability are circumscribed, and partial sustainability can be co-opted into a symbolic process of 'green-washing' (Walker and Wan, 2012).

**Synthetic biology** has since the early 2000s been framed as the next promissory pathway to a 'sustainable' chemicals industry. Combining diverse disciplinary knowledge. SB protagonists ask: how can we replace petro-based processing with genetically engineered microorganisms acting as 'cell factories' to make in-demand industrial chemicals? The target compounds are identical to those in current production. The only change is the process, which aims to mitigate the environmental impacts and resource limitations of petrochemistry whilst continuing to meet growing market demand for existing materials such as paint additives and polystyrene. SB's claims to sustainability combines the three visions of the bioeconomy: bio-ecological possibilities of renewable feedstock, reduced use of toxic reagents, lower $CO_2$ emissions and better management of by-products; bio-resource claims around security, stability and renewability of resources and biotechnological arguments that research can realize marketable tools to cement nations as leaders in the emergent field.

Just as in the case of GC, SB researchers actively critique the limits of sustainability. Researchers describe the tension between working toward creative ecologically sustainable solutions and the pressure to do so within the economic imperatives of industrial research and policy strategies in precarious working conditions (McLeod, Nerlich and Mohr, 2017). In projects associated with products such as plastic pre-cursors, researchers ask how sustainable are those chemicals and their products?

*The IB company has gone down the route of let's make an identical product, like Perspex in a different way. If you are going to make a different product using microbes, you then have to go to the people using Perspex and convince them to use my 'not Perspex', are they going to accept that?*

> *When researchers begin to ask what other products could be made by bio-production they consider the systemic social challenges of path dependencies.*

They evoke the challenges of locked in systems: product safety and utility, their value in everyday life, livelihoods, broader economic systems and the pragmatics of changing global chemical industries and material supply chains.

As a biotechnology still in-becoming there are emergent questions around cost and competitive viability and actual environmental impact. But bio-production of such chemicals is kept relevant and imperative because existing process options remain worse and alternative products cannot be imagined in current research and funding structures:

*[the plastic] is still going to be produced and it is still going to be produced chemically, so if we can do it biologically, it's a big achievement. […] But if you see the big picture, then this plastic is something that isn't necessary to the world to survive.*

Repeatedly SB researchers discussed the limits to sustainability of the kinds of products that currently drive investment in the SB field for industrial bio-

production.

## Whose Green?

Social research is increasingly demonstrating how sustainability talk takes place in a context of **'sustaining the unsustainable'** (Barry 2012, Blühdorn and [Welsh] 2008), where underpinning ethical questions of sustainability are detached from scientific endeavours. As a result, technoscientific research becomes unable to tackle questions such as: what should be sustained; why should it be sustained and for whom? Social science can pose provocative questions: How are problems and solutions being defined and what interests are at work? *What was the problem? How is this the solution?*

The cases of GC and SB demonstrate how two technoscientific models for sustainable chemical production are entangled in a similar quandary. Both offer coherent narratives about how sustainability might be reached. But when we look in practices at key decisions, we find that researchers themselves contest the concept of sustainability in tangible ways. This tension between a model and attendant practices has been explored by Strathern (2018) in the concept of audit culture.

> *If, in spite of evidence from practice that a model requires fundamental change, we persist with that model, we become trapped in trying to fix an already broken system.*

In terms of audit ethics this becomes a case of being 'seen to be social'; in the ethics of sustainable chemicals practice do we risk becoming 'seen to be green'?

## Conclusion

Work has begun elsewhere on expanding the idea of responsible stagnation (de Saille and Medvecky, 2016), asking if it is possible to shift out of the current

innovation paradigms and the assumption that innovation must lead to growth? From this purview, current approaches to developing the bioeconomy are fundamentally unsustainable. Questioning the claims to 'green' from within technoscience, through serious conversations around political economy and forms of growth can generate novel concepts that can be brought into the discussion of sustainability in chemicals production and consumption.

*Given the challenges of modifying existing unsustainable behaviours and entrenched economic systems, we must question whether the existing technoscience fixes for petrochemical problems are enough.*

If academic and industrial scientific endeavours remain attached to narrow understandings of the socio-economic dimensions of life, then we have to conclude: no. If society wants to know how we get from the petrochemical here and now, to a (more) sustainable bio-based 'there', hard questions need to be asked. Not least, to what extent is the bioeconomy an opportunity for a more sustainable future or another form of 'lock-in' to existing consumption patterns – a **sustainability of convenience** rather than unpicking the problems of production and consumption.

Perhaps at the core of the problem is our inability to reconcile our past with our future. When we are talking about radically rethinking pathways to sustainability it requires us to imagine routes which may break away from the paths of scientific discovery and industrial developments upon which many of the largest global economies are founded, and whose vested interests permeate our political and economic systems. There is both a genuine will and interest to explore meaningful technoscientific alternatives that break from these routes. But politically and financially what realistic and open pathways are available for those interests to be realised in practice?

'This may not seem

Very important, I know,

But *it is.* So I'm bothering

Telling you so.'

(Dr Seuss's Sleep Book)

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# Decolonising Environmentalism

Elaine Forde
February, 2019

## Urgency and Transition

Environmentalism is rhetorically framed as a "Good Thing", unquestionably. Being environmentally friendly is, as it were, a no-brainer. Anthropologists have shown many times however, that what constitutes good environmentalism can be flawed *vis-a-vis* other ontologies or even contradictory to seemingly compatible beliefs. As an example of the former, Rival (2006) has shown in the Ecuadorian

Amazon that conservation programmes that begin with the premise of pristine forest environment have totally disregarded a landscape history shaped by generations of Huaorani trekking groups subsisting in, and indeed cultivating the forest flora. Exemplifying the latter, a five pence tax on disposable carrier bags implemented in shops in Wales, UK was [donated by one retailer](#) to a charity whose conservation programmes included a widespread [cull of grey squirrels,](#) considered a "non-native" species. How to make sense of such a variety of interventions made under the banner of "The Environment"?

Alexander (2005) points out that sustainability is "a potent but empty rallying cry", it is a concept laden with value but perhaps skimpy on precise details, producing a rise in "greenwashing" as a corporate marketing device. Claims to environmentalism therefore warrant scrutiny.

> *At a moment in which the sense of human-derived environmental chaos, captured by the term "the Anthropocene", has become highly palpable, the question of transition has emerged with growing urgency.*

This urgency, if not checked, risks intensifying the colonial politics of environmentalism. This essay seeks to decolonise environmentalism, by situating environmentalism in dialogue with other modes of human-more than human relations.

The idea of "transition" frames the significant changes to climate, resource use and energo-social relations that have occurred and which still need to happen to avert environmental catastrophe, such as that detailed in this recent [IPCC report](#). In energy terms, transition is broadly taken to mean the transition from heavy reliance on fossil fuels to greater everyday use of renewable energy resources from domestic to industrial and transport uses.

This essay looks at the transition movement in broad terms, above all as embodied in Transition Town initiatives, but with a particular focus on green lifestyle migration informed by my research in west Wales, UK.

## Planning for the Future

I have conducted ethnographic research in rural west Wales since 2010 and examined ecovillages and households that choose to live off the grid and an emergent policy context (One Planet Development/ OPD, 2010) which positions living off grid as a viable zero-carbon development model. Living off grid is a practice that can be seen as part of a new wave of the back to the land movement and is very definitely situated in the transition movement (Forde, 2015; 2017). Off-grid dwellings were usually built in remote locations without planning permission particularly prior to the OPD policy.

The planning policy "One Planet Development" (OPD) has been developed by the devolved Welsh Government as part of its 2009 Sustainability Strategy "One Wales One Planet" (2009). The OPD development model relaxes planning restrictions in open countryside for demonstrably zero-carbon smallholdings and as such encourages Green lifestyle migration to rural areas. The first of its kind in the UK, OPD attracts people from across the globe.

## West Wales and Green Lifestyle Migration
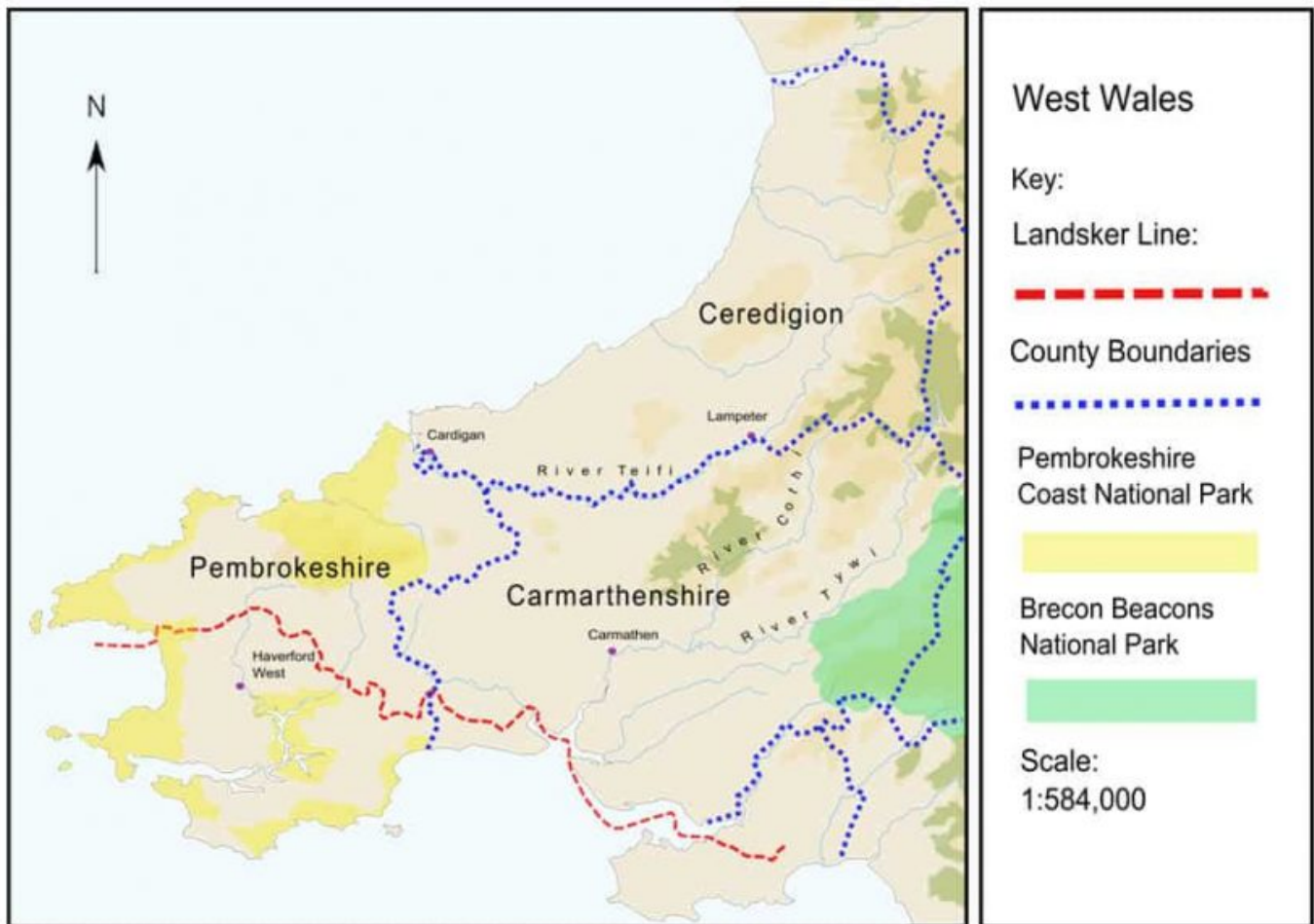
West Wales is a rural region characterised by pastoral farming in small, predominantly family farms, dotted across verdant undulating valleys. Welsh farmers sometimes describe their land as "*ddaear*" (ground), the relatively small parcels the result of an historic system of partible inheritance so that holdings contain the history both of family and of ground. The region doesn't precisely map onto any administrative region, and over the years I have come to realise that west Wales is more of a feeling than a rigidly defined place. West Wales is predominantly a Welsh speaking area, *Y Fro Cymraeg*, where most peoples' preferred everyday language is *Cymraeg* (Welsh). Yet after any amount of time spent in the area it becomes apparent that there is a significant English-speaking population concentrated in and around the rural hinterland, something Janice Williams (2003) picked up on in the mid-1990s and which she termed "alternatives".

*While the English have a long history in Wales, the 1960s saw the beginnings of an influx of holiday-makers and second-home owners. Several decades on, and as Gallent et. al. (2003) have shown, second homes are less the controversy they once were, whereas green lifestyle migration is becoming a more significant, and in some respects more controversial, form of migration.*

Michaela Benson examines lifestyle migration in her work on rural France. This is the British/English search for a better quality of life abroad. I have adapted the term from Benson, and use "Green" lifestyle migration to describe the similar process in rural Wales. The aspiration to have a "better" life is shared; in the latter case however, a commitment to environmentalism appears to be the primary motivating factor.

This wave of green lifestyle migration has seen people and groups moving to rural Wales to go back to the land since at least the 1970s. The author John Seymour was perhaps foundational in the movement. Arguably it was Seymour's own family's move from a small holding in Suffolk to a small farm in west Wales (North Pembrokeshire in fact)—as documented in *The Fat of the Land* (1974)—that inspired the fascination with, or at least perception of, West Wales as a haven for back to the landers, a source of cheap but expansive rural property, and a place where "the locals" were still farming in a traditional way. As such the region supports a number of ecovillages, off grid dwellings and other people and projects in a network of sites pursuing environmental and ecological transition, from permaculture farms to housing co-ops. It is no surprise that planning policy would eventually develop a response to support and regulate this kind of development.

Jenkins' fascinating 1971 ethnography of a west Wales farming community juxtaposes the oral histories of old timers with contemporary observations to document over a century of changes in the west Wales agriculture scene. Published in the early 1970s, in the same period as Seymour's books, Jenkins offers an alternative portrayal of the socio-economic context.

Far from the idyllic communism of shared labour at harvest-time that Seymour

describes, or the Anglicised romanticism of the "village" that so many back to the land projects in Wales emulate (without irony), Jenkins outlines the systems of indentured labour that saw isolated farms support multiple households as retainers in hereditary positions held for generations.

*In Jenkins, the farm is a socio-economic unit of production that ties multiple actors together in complex relationships with each other and the ground itself.*

Using these texts, and my own observations and participation, it has been possible for me to draw comparisons between the contemporary back to the land movement in Wales and the rural "traditions" that are central to how going "back" to the land is imagined. What emerges is a composite environmentalist discourse based on a relationship between transition and tradition.

## Transition Narratives

Simple historical-to-contemporary comparisons neither push the frameworks for social analysis nor critique practice in unexpected ways, therefore I suggest using a lens of settler colonialism to understand the issues at play. According to Veracini (2010), settlers differ from other migrants as they "'remove' to establish *a better polity*, either by setting up *an ideal social body* or by constituting *an exemplary model of social organization*" (ibid, 4. My emphasis). While there is no overt racial discourse in this context, the idealised notion of an OPD settlement is contentious.

*As a dominant ideology, environmentalism silences alternative views and stifles negotiation, and as such is hard to challenge. Some ethnographic examples may help to illustrate the problem.*

Most puzzling to my informants has been the coupling of in-migration to West Wales with the desire to change the area, symbolised by a crop of Transition Groups and Initiatives.

To avail of OPD planning permission, applicants must submit to a number of reporting exercises to demonstrate the use-value of their development. In an early publication outlining Lammas' "Aims and Intentions" (2009), one resident described the economic potential of the site's transformation, from a regime of sheep monoculture grossing £2,500 per annum to a productive permaculture-inspired village producing over £100,000 worth of abundance, from fruit to smoked hams, from baskets to educational experiences (ibid: 34-35).

*A history is elided by this narrative, however. I learned later on that prior to its sale in the 1970s, (after which the farm had been sold off in smaller lots of fields and buildings, one parcel to become the Lammas ecovillage), the farm held the biggest milk quota in Wales. This had been an immensely productive dairy farm, the decline of which told the story, not only of in and out migration, but family, state, policy and ground.*

On one occasion in 2011 I attended a guided tour of the new Lammas Ecovillage in Pembrokeshire. the UK's first fully legal, fully lawful and fully planned ecovillage. This place had been a milestone for advocacy for low impact development in Welsh planning policy and one of the subjects of my doctoral research. We were a mixed bunch of people on the tour. City families looking for something new, old hippies, knowledgeable "types" coming for a look, even a local farm woman who shared several raised eyebrows with me as we heard about outlandish ways to grow strawberry crops on shale banks.

This was a blustery, bright spring day in North Pembrokeshire, at the foothills of the impressive Preselis, and we were lucky they weren't shrouded in mist as they usually tend to be. It truly was a glorious day. Our gaggle of tourists started milling around and at this point our guide gestured lazily across the valley as she outlined her vision for how the Lammas model would change the world.

"Just look at that empty blandscape over there. Now imagine 10 or more eco-smallholdings dotted about with busy families all living and working on the land. That's what Lammas wants to inspire".

*Inspired, but in a way other than intended, a local farm woman protested: "It's NOT empty, it's beautiful!"*

These two competing perceptions of the very same view exemplify how the colonial concept of *Terra Nullius* functions. On one hand a local woman and neighbour of the village, saw the landscape as intrinsically full, of beauty, of memory and history; on the other, a settler, saw potential, a blank canvas, an empty "blandscape", or (another favourite term to critique agribusiness) a Green Desert. The concept of "busy families working the land" evokes a labour theory of value in which visible "work" produces value and less tangible forms of occupation do not.

What is more, the critique of agri-business is not simply external, many farmers express the uncomfortable knowledge that their industry is both unsustainable and insecure. Overstretched, undervalued and uncertain, Welsh agriculture under the looming shadow of Brexit is not a happy place to be. But using the notion of consubstantiation (Halfacree, 2007), referring to a belonging to and constituting of the land, a farmer's ground is not simply their piece of land: it is them, they take the name of their farm, they become they belong and are grounded there. The value of land can therefore not be modelled in purely economic or environmental terms.

## Conclusion

Recent growth in scale and speed in the Back to the Land Movement in Wales has invited this critique of green lifestyle migration and the policy frameworks that support transition. This is not a critique of migration and free movement; when viewed simply as the desire to put a low-carbon future into practice now, a policy such as OPD seems outwardly benign at least. There is a need, however to decolonise environmental discourse, particularly when it borrows its tools from colonial discourses.

*Examining patterns of settlement in rural Wales using settler colonial theory is*

*controversial, yet some commonalities are too consistent to ignore. The actions of "pioneer" groups and the premise of Terra Nullius are crucial here, and are a consistent feature of new transition narratives.*

While some landscape histories may be unknown, others are elided by common transition narratives which are finding new traction in environmentalist policy initiatives.

The complex intertwining contradictions between, on the one hand, belonging, localism and consubstantiation, and on the other, the ideology of environmentalism, the desire to change, transition and improve to meet the urgency of anthropogenic climate change, highlight the importance of the question "whose green?". OPD policy prioritises an environmental-economic rationale over other notions about the land and environment. This rationale perhaps comes easier to green lifestyle migrants than it does to the extant rural population in Wales.

What is particularly remarkable about this case study is that the OPD planning policy was devised by the devolved Welsh Assembly Government. The coupling of this policy to an extant in-migration trend has become a potent evocation of settler colonialism, but is not a politically external imposition.

## Postscript: Decolonising Scholarship

While inspiration comes from many quarters and surely many more acknowledgements are due, certainly to Nina Moeller, my writing mates here and members of the ASA 2018 "Whose Green?" panel at Oxford, my particular gratitude goes to the members of the "Settler Toxicity" panel at Cultures of Energy symposium at Rice, April 2018 for the illuminating discussions about Settler Colonialism and the (surprisingly many) Problems with Environmentalism (Montoya, Simmons and Spice).

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# #WhoseGreen? Chololo Ecovillage and the 'Secret Formula of Development'

Margherita Lala
February, 2019



The village of Chololo is situated around 40km South-East of the political capital of Tanzania, Dodoma. Often described as the poorest in the country, the region of Dodoma is constituted by a semi-arid area that is widely affected by increasing deforestation, soil erosion, droughts and flooding. Chololo was created during the villagization period in the 70s under the most famous Tanzanian President, Julius

Nyerere, some years after the country's independence. The great majority of Chololo inhabitants would identify themselves as Wagogo, a semi-pastoralist group of Bantu origins. Livestock keeping plays an essential role for the inhabitants, who mainly rely on subsistence agriculture though, based on the cultivation of local varieties of sorghum and millet.

A 32-month EU funded project took place in Chololo between 2011 and 2014 (Chololo Ecovillage, 2014). It was scaled up, in the following years, to three surrounding villages under the name of Chololo 2.0 (Chololo 2.0, 2018). The project aimed to convert the village into an 'Ecovillage' by means of 'testing' and introducing ecological technologies, 'innovations' in the domains of water, energy, agriculture, livestock and forestry in a multidimensional approach. Some examples of these 'innovations', amongst others, are 'improved' seeds, 'improved' livestock, and 'improved' stoves (Chololo Ecovillage, 2014). Chololo Ecovillage has been presented as a model of good practice for adaptation and mitigation to climate change, particularly in East Africa.

In the 90s, Crewe and Harrison (1998) posed the question of 'whose development?' collecting ethnographic material from Africa and Asia in order to reflect on the ideas of technology, progress, race and gender in the field of development. It is fundamental to ask, around twenty years later, in light of the current entanglement of development and adaptation strategies, 'Whose green?' This is a key  question, even if not necessarily a comfortable one, which needs to be answered in order to promote adaptation strategies that can be considered as both fair and successful at different geographical scales .

In the context of the Anthropocene (Clark, 2014) – in which mitigation, adaptation to local environmental challenges, national and global discourses on climate change, poverty reduction and development are deeply entangled – the aim of my nine months ethnographic work in Chololo was  to investigate the following questions: 'What has been the impact of the introduction of technological 'innovations' to promote adaptation strategies? Why are some technologies adopted whereas others are not? Who, within the 'community', benefits from

these 'innovations'?' and, finally, 'When is it possible to claim that adaptation and mitigation strategies are just?

## Chololo Ecovillage: A 'secret formula of development'?

There was initial enthusiasm for Chololo Ecovillage project. Majinga, the one who brings gifts, was the name by which people in the village used to refer to one of the persons responsible for the project. The yields in the first year, in which the rain came regularly and abundantly, were considerable and allowed the households that were participating to the project to improve their economic situation. Chololo was described as *Kijiji cha mfano*, a 'model' village. However, when I arrived in October 2016, the situation was quite different. Some of the technologies introduced were simply not fit for the environment or not affordable and were abandoned at an early stage. The fish ponds, for example, were difficult to manage because of water scarcity, as well as the complete unfamiliarity of the people with fish farming techniques.

*This could be considered part of the process of testing technologies in a new context and in an open-ended way; however, at the same time, it does pose some questions about fairness during the supposedly 'bottom-up' phase of project implementation (Valero, 2018).*

More specifically, it interrogates its legitimacy (Adger, 2006), the actual possibility for the people in Chololo to have a voice in their own strategy to adapt to climate change beyond the formal mechanisms of participation in workshops and village meetings.

Moreover, other technologies – 'improved' stoves and 'improved' bulls, for instance – were initially taken up but were not adopted in the long term. *Nja* (scarcity of water and food), was quite widespread in the village, and food security was becoming a serious concern. The question of how it happened that the effects of this 'secret formula of development' and climate change adaptation strategies were barely perceivable at the village level just a few years after the

end of the project could hardly be avoided. Three elements of the Chololo formula deserve detailed attention.

1. **Multidimensionality**

A recent report claimed that multidimensionality was one of the major strengths of Chololo Ecovillage project (IPES-food, 2018). Dealing with interconnected interventions in water, agriculture, livestock, energy and forestry, multidimensionality has, at least on paper, a strong rationale. However, multidimensionality in Chololo played out in a rather complex way in practice.

For example, while describing their own conception of the 'good life', people in Chololo used to refer to water (as both the rain and the underground water sources), as the essential resource in the village, perhaps not surprisingly in a semi-arid area. As it is common to say in Tanzania, *Maji ni uhai na uhai ni maji –* Water is life and life is water. Without rain or irrigation (the latter is a recent practice in Chololo that is becoming widespread, especially amongst the youths), it is not possible to cultivate anything. As a consequence, daily life is increasingly hard. Moreover, without water, no project of afforestation can realistically work. Trees need to be irrigated regularly and this is not always possible when water is already scarce for people and livestock. Even if a holistic, all-encompassing, model could seem like a magic bullet to fight against poverty and climate change vulnerability, at the local level it is important to prioritize different interventions with realistic expectations, precisely because of the interconnected nature of socio-ecological dynamics.

Furthermore, this way of presenting 'multidimensionality' risks obscuring the political economic context in which the village is embedded. The 'local' scale, in this case a village, does never exists in a state of isolation and equilibrium vis-à-vis wider socio-economic processes. For instance, trees in Chololo are used mainly to produce charcoal that is sold in the nearby city of Dodoma. Chololo women collect dry pieces of wood in the forest and do normally not cut trees for the household needs. As a consequence, the wood fuel for local stoves results in a

very small percentage of the fuel production that is causing deforestation.

*In this context, it is legitimate to wonder whether interventions focused on household energy consumption at the village level can actually decrease deforestation when the latter is so deeply implicated in the metabolism of the city where the great majority of charcoal is sold.*

If broader patterns of energy consumption at the national level are underplayed or ignored, and deforestation is depicted as a straightforwardly 'local' problem to be solved with a technical intervention, not much progress will be made in decreasing the rate of deforestation in Tanzania.

## 2. **Participation and local knowledge**

The project's commitment to participation consisted of a preliminary climate vulnerability and capacity analysis, a series of village meetings, and a final evaluation of the different technologies introduced that involved 55 farmers (IPES-food, 2018). Participation, widely advocated at the international level, has to go through a process of transformation during its implementation at the local scale. This process takes place at the micro-level of embodied everyday interactions and occurs in a socio-cultural field that is imbricated in global, national and local power imbalances.

At the initial stage, people in Chololo did not have the opportunity to decide which technologies had to be introduced, or if 'improved' technologies were at all a solution to poverty, water and food scarcity, or the disappearance of their forest. But also at a later stage villagers felt that they could not in fact participate in the implementation of adaptation strategies. In the village meetings only certain people with high social status were normally able to speak, and the people that tried to question some of the dynamics of the project (for instance the 'equality' in the distribution of some of the technologies) were dismissed as backward and ungrateful.

*Lastly, without a constant process of engagement with local practices, the possibility of recognizing existing forms of competence in a meaningful way is highly reduced.*

Local material skills, such as intercropping and cultivation with manure, were presented as 'innovations' by the Chololo Ecovillage project (Chololo Ecovillage, 2014) but had been in fact already present in the village for a long time. Many people in Chololo claimed that they had been using manure and intercropping techniques for generations. The reason why some people were not using manure was that they did not own cows and it would have been too expensive for them to buy it. In this case, adaptation strategies were not about introducing a new agricultural technique. They could have been, maybe, about making its distribution more equal at the village level. Finally, spacing practices were already introduced in colonial times and, similarly to what happened in the past, were adopted only by 'well-off' farmers because they require a considerable amount of labour.

3. **Engagement with the national strategy for climate change adaptation**

A recent report claimed that 'the inclusion of local institutions in both project design and implementation has [...] allowed Chololo Ecovillage to become relevant to national-level policymaking and emerged as a benchmark case to build climate resilience' (IPES-food, 2018). The model of Chololo Ecovillage, it has been suggested, could spread nationally (Valero, 2018). However, recently, the government has reclaimed some of the arable and grazing land in the village, in the context of its effort to (re)-establish the role of the city of Dodoma as the capital of the country. A military base will be built in between the villages of Chololo and Mapinduzi. Even if they received monetary compensation, some Chololo inhabitants now see themselves without the means to sustain their families in the long run and will have to quickly change their livelihood strategy in order to survive.

In 2014, it was perhaps not possible to foresee the territorial plans of the Tanzanian government. However, it is quite difficult to imagine that Chololo could be a model for integrated national strategies of climate change adaptation and mitigation when some of its inhabitants (including some of the people involved in the project) see the source of their livelihood jeopardized by the national strategy of development.

> *Agroecological transformation cannot be reduced to the mere introduction of 'eco-innovations' at the 'local' level.*

Their novelty is highly questionable and their 'ecological' meaning ignores complex socio-cultural and economic dynamics at different geographical scales. As a result of this approach to adaptation, the 'green' strategies which were promoted in Chololo were not aligned with the lives of most of its inhabitants. Their voice was ignored despite formal mechanisms of participation. Consequently, these strategies did not lead to any meaningful increase in the actual possibility of the community to adapt to climate change. The crucial question thus remains: whose adaptation, if any, are we actually talking about?

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# What is a Public Space Without a Public?

Julian Dobson
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A warm lunchtime in Sheffield, a city of half a million people in the north of England. It is late October and unseasonably sunny. In Weston Park, a Victorian park adjoining the University of Sheffield and a cluster of hospitals, a gaggle of students listen to a talk. A woman walks briskly to an appointment. Couples spread themselves on the grass to soak up the sunshine. A small child stamps to scare away the feral pigeons his mother has been feeding for his entertainment.

A short walk away, out of one set of wrought-iron gates and in through another, is Crookes Valley Park. Gathered in the formal lake in the centre of the park is a

group of kayakers. Beside a bench a middle-aged man fixes his bike. In the children's playground a Muslim woman in full veil pushes a toddler on a swing.

*Across a main road and downhill is the Ponderosa: a park that was never meant to be a park because it was originally intended for housing. Its accidental nature is reflected in its name: a nickname adopted by local children after a ranch in a 1960s TV programme.*

A horseshoe of woodland at the top descends to a flat area of featureless grass surrounded by tower blocks, and to one side is a small orchard planted many years ago by local environmental volunteers.

Today there are fewer people. Rubbish in the woods shows where visitors have passed, an elderly white woman walks a small white dog, and a smattering of Chinese students saunter towards the university campus.

Descending through these three parks is a journey through Sheffield's socioeconomic tiers: Weston Park, proudly displaying its Green Flag award for excellence. Crookes Valley, overlooked by substantial Victorian villas, many of them now divided into student accommodation. And the Ponderosa, surrounded by housing for people on low incomes in one of the poorer neighbourhoods, under-appreciated and vulnerable.

Revisiting the Ponderosa in early December, on a bright but cold weekday, raises the question of what kind of public space has no public – or what kind of public avoids public spaces. A woman, wrapped head to toe against the cold, wheels her child hurriedly across the green. The children's play area, the sheltered spaces under the trees, and the football pitch with its rusting metal goalposts are deserted. On a nearby church a sign reads: 'All accessible lead has been replaced with non-lead materials'. Even the scrap metal dealers have no reason to be here.

Behind the church is a small area of asphalt and grass, a few blue-painted benches to one side, reminiscent of South Yorkshire poet Gav Roberts' description

of '[perfunctory parks for the oppressed'.](link) But in Roberts' poem, the oppressed find their own forms of play. Here everyone is inside.

*Whose green, then, is the green of public space?*

The formal plantings, ornamental trees and duck pond of Weston Park fit a traditional municipal model of public parks, and the public – students, hospital staff and visitors, local residents – appear to love it. Paths are lined with memorial benches, including one describing Weston Park as a couple's 'favourite Sunday morning place'. Crookes Valley Park, formal, too, with a wooded border, attracts a steady flow regular and casual visitors. But the Ponderosa? Whose green might that be, and at what times?

## Insiders, outsiders

Sheffield Council is doing its best to ensure the Ponderosa has something for everyone. In the autumn it put its plans for improvements out to consultation, and posters and flyers encouraged local residents to have their say. But consultations can never tell the full story.

Stay long enough in the wooded edges of the Ponderosa and you'll see other forms of belonging. This is a territory for blackbirds, robins, the occasional kestrel; home to assorted rodents; the haunt of foxes, definitely, and possibly badgers and hedgehogs. In a world facing threats of climate change and a 'sixth great extinction' of living species, these unnoticed users matter. They matter not only in and of themselves, but because even in neglected green spaces, there are humans who find in them new connections and relief from the stresses of urban life.

*People who are lonely, depressed or isolated can find solace in the natural world. Frequently this is in marginal and incidental spaces that echo their own marginality.*

The curious amalgams that create a city foreground questions both of the physical inside and outside, and social and economic insiders and outsiders. They force us to ask what constitutes 'nature' in an urban context, and what it will become. The urban ecologist Marina Alberti (2016) describes cities as 'coupled human-natural systems'. But the value to humans of the more-than-human world is mediated through practices and rhetoric that legitimise or delegitimise the spaces where such interrelationships occur, and the activities that might best support connections with the more-than-human. The grounds of a former school, for instance, are valued and used differently when viewed as a habitat for biodiversity than when viewed as a development site for residential housing.

[Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature](#) (IWUN) is a three-year research project based in Sheffield which seeks to explore the connections and practices linking human mental health and the natural environment. Our findings both go beyond and disturb the simple 'green is good for you' mantra. Yes, we have found improvements in wellbeing as a direct result of noticing the natural world. But our research has also revealed the kaleidoscope of connections that go well beyond what is often on offer in a municipal park.

*Our findings have highlighted, too, that green is not always good for you: places designed for relaxation and restoration can become landscapes of fear and anxiety.*

All it takes is some vandalised play equipment, uncleared dog faeces or needles, or kids on motorbikes. The kids on motorbikes, though, are finding their own connections with the natural world even while they are perceived as damaging it.

So while the 'natural' is mediated through humanly constructed facilities and activities – and a municipal park is nature contained and controlled for human consumption – there is also strong evidence of human desires to be part of a wider world beyond human management, often discovered in 'urban interstices' – a 'reservoir of meanings, which may be constantly elaborated and explored' (Jorgensen & Tylecote, 2007).

## Legitimising and delegitimising discourses

Urban spaces are where the 'reciprocal interactions between ecological and evolutionary processes' (Alberti, 2016) become immediate, situated and personal. As IWUN is revealing, these everyday interactions are supported or frustrated through different framings of their value and priority.

*Discourses that legitimise green spaces as places of value tend to focus on attributes of aesthetics, wellbeing and social cohesion.*

Part of our research involved asking health, planning, greenspace and community practitioners what kind of interventions would best support mental wellbeing. Our research included stakeholder events, a questionnaire, focus groups and individual interviews; 122 individuals took part. Some of the responses were expected, supporting familiar conceptions of the role and value of green spaces. For example, participants described activities in green environments as ways of building confidence and self-esteem, providing routes to recovery from mental illness or trauma:

*People who come to our service are often very isolated, they have lost their skill in socialising, not really much going on in their lives, so coming helps people to work alongside other people in a way where they don't actually have to engage socially until they rebuild confidence, it's a way that people can actually do some activity and build up their self-esteem... (Head of gardening project)*

More generally, providing facilities that encourage the public to use green spaces was seen as a way of benefiting society at large, both through socialisation and through reinvestment of time and energy in the maintenance of natural spaces:

*It's a virtuous circle – you've got a nice cafe and loos so people come and they spend longer, so there's more revenue and more interest in doing stuff, more people join Friends groups... (Public health official)*

Such rhetoric serves to valorise the 'natural' by emphasising its supporting qualities for human wellbeing. They legitimise investment by stressing desirable qualities – aesthetic pleasure, increased confidence, economic activity and civic engagement. However, participants also engaged in discourses – or reported discourses that they encountered – that devalued and delegitimised investment in 'natural' spaces. Even enthusiasts for green spaces, for example, reported that residents in some neighbourhoods did not value them and used them as dumping grounds:

*We've been clearing sites up in Gleadless woodland, ancient woodland, and as we've been cleaning it, they've been throwing the rubbish out of the flats. (Parks officer)*

Others commented that evidence of the benefits of natural spaces was insufficient or not politically acceptable:

*You can put a really strong case together and it's stacked up in terms of international evidence but if it's not politically the thing that is acceptable, it doesn't happen. (Health academic)*

Discourses of political acceptability ultimately concern the choices of public bodies and the values attached to those choices. By rationalising problems in particular terms, actors choose whose values they will adopt or recognise whose values hold sway.

> *In a climate of financial austerity imposed in line with a neoliberal agenda that places higher values on the role of markets and adheres to a 'small state' ethos, the role of public services is deemed to be one of dealing with emergencies where the market cannot respond – and the state of natural spaces is not yet regarded as an emergency.*

The clinching argument that legitimises or delegitimises the spaces within which humans meet the more-than-human is most frequently expressed in terms of cost

and investment priorities. Clear hierarchies of action and expertise emerge, as this exchange between two local authority planners in a focus group discussion indicate:

*Ethan: It's the economy so it's, let's get it going and everything else can come second, and it really tries to come second because there isn't space for third...*

*Finn: Often the green stuff is in the third category, just either doesn't happen or it's so watered down that it's meaningless.*

Such discourses not only marginalise care and investment in green and natural spaces, but limit what does occur.

> *In a self-reinforcing cycle, the concept of a good green space is framed around popularity and footfall. While this supports some human connections with the natural world, it also sidelines the spaces and activities that are perceived as less conventional or less legitimate.*

## So 'whose green' is it?

What emerges in the historical moment of neoliberal austerity and in the situated practice of 'street level bureaucrats' – the administrators and officials whose job it is to make sense of public policy and local pressures – is a more or less orderly retreat from engagement with the natural environment.

> *Where previous human/more-than-human relationships might have been characterised as exploitative (to serve the needs of capital) or controlling (to serve the needs of bureaucracy), discourses of green spaces – or particular activities or facilities in those spaces – as 'nice to have' or unaffordable signal a process of disengagement.*

For public organisations seeking to survive in a climate of austerity, the answer to

the question 'whose green?' may ultimately be 'anyone's but ours'. And yet for the most vulnerable members of the public whose access to restorative and relaxing environments may depend on long term care for green spaces, an austerity climate produces the response, 'Not ours either'. At its worst this can lead to a state of 'nobody's green', spaces that are neglected and unused, where the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world is minimised because humans have lost the capacity to manage them and no longer perceive them as safe.

Another answer, and one that may already be observed, is 'green for some'. In this case the 'some' are not only the better-off, although they are usually included. They are those who, by virtue of pre-existing engagement with the natural world, means of access, and resources of time and energy, choose to visit green spaces and participate in their care and maintenance. Those who might struggle in green spaces because of a lack of confidence, mental illness, physical disability, or because they need care and support are more likely to remain excluded.

*Where engagement by the public and by public bodies declines, the consequence for the more-than-human world is not one of 'rewilding' but a different set of human/more-than-human relationships: green spaces used as dumps and as refuges for those deemed antisocial or undesirable.*

But such people need and value natural spaces as much as family picnic parties do; rats and mice are as 'natural' as squirrels and robins.

The human and more-than-human continue to co-evolve, but their entanglements and trajectories may become less predictable. Whatever the complexities of these relationships, they call for attention — and attention, in times of urban austerity, tends to be an early casualty.

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