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Developing an Ecology of Seeing: Teaching with Participant Observation for Urban Environments

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Abstract

As a central method of ethnographic research, participant observation is often utilized in college-level courses to prompt the development of applied and anthropological thinking. This article examines the possibilities of participant observation as a mode of experiential environmental learning that can encourage reflection upon understandings of urban nature. We draw from the writing of, and interviews with, undergraduate and graduate university students enrolled in an environmental anthropology course to explore these possibilities. Specifically, we ask: How does participant observation serve to engage students in thinking relationally about urban environments? We conclude with pedagogical suggestions.

Keywords: *participant observation; urban environment; experiential learning; ontology*

Introduction

...it became more clear to me that the environment is more than just the pristine, or the pretty parts of nature, you know, that the environment is also urban landscape, ... that we're interacting with nature much more than we realize we are, you know, it's not just when we're deliberately going out to experience nature, ... we're just disconnected from the fact that we're connected. (Alice, interview)

Though we have removed ourselves from nature willingly in pursuit of prosperity and material gain, do we still feel more connected to nature than the artificial world we have created? (Simon, fieldnotes)

...everything, to some extent, is part of the built environment, especially now, because humans have gone in and touched everything and messed it up. (Aiden, interview)

How do we learn, within particular cultural contexts, to identify the shape of a concept we call the “environment” or “nature”? How might experiential learning elucidate such understandings? As reflected in the preceding three quotes from students enrolled in the same course, experiential practices can produce wide variation in interpretations of human-environment connectivity. As instructors, we often begin classes with little information about the prior experiences or frames of reference that our students bring to the classroom. In teaching environmental anthropology, cultural variation in our interpretations of concepts like nature are likely to be key topics engaged in class and reflected in readings, but such discussions are not necessarily grounded within the immediate environment or experiences of students. This article explores how faculty can learn more about the ways in which students conceive of the environment as a site for interaction and interpretation and how students can explore anthropological concepts by focusing on familiar spaces.

We examine the use of participant observation within a university-level environmental anthropology course, discussing the assignment format and examining resulting texts written by students alongside interviews conducted with students following completion of the course. We consider participant observation as a mode of experiential learning about the environment – a way of “knowing from the inside” (Ingold 2013, 5) – and explore how its use by undergraduate and graduate students helped articulate their interpretation of human connection and relatedness within the urban environment. By focusing on relationality, we examine how being is central to knowing (Gatt 2017) and explore what it means in teaching environmental anthropology to put this into play beyond the walls of the classroom. Here we follow Ingold’s (2021) call to see and know our anthropologies by learning from the world around us and to consider the outdoors as a place to think.

What happens when we ask students to expand their “arts of noticing” (Tsing 2015, 37) as a way to understand their position within urban environments? The quotes that open this article demonstrate the diversity of student experiences that can emerge from the use of participant observation to this end, showcasing how students interpret experiential approaches and how this method can reveal the ways in which students see the environment. Although varied in outcome, we found that participant observation encouraged students to reflect upon relationality and connection within the urban environment and, for some, prompted a re-imagining of human-nature interactions. To understand the scope of resulting student experiences, we identify and discuss three ontologies – or philosophies of being – about human-nature interactions articulated by students through their use of participant observation. Naming such approaches can help faculty to understand differences in student experience and inform the design of experiential assignments and related coursework. We conclude with pedagogical and practical suggestions for utilizing participant observation as a tool through which to expand conceptual and methodological work within environmental anthropology courses.

Assignment

This article is based on an analysis of class work completed by students in a combined undergraduate and graduate environmental anthropology course offered in Fall 2017 at the University of Louisville, located in Louisville, Kentucky, US. The eighteen students who completed the course represented an array of degree programs, with the largest groupings from Anthropology and Sustainability. Although the course was not introductory in nature, students without a background in anthropology were able to enroll, and thus students arrived to class with significant variation in their knowledge about the discipline.

The assignment that we focus on in this article formed a semester-long project completed in sections, with some portions conducted individually and others collaboratively. For the project, each student completed four individual participant observation sessions of one hour in length, distributed across three months. As the assignment prompt noted: “The focus of these observations will be to consider the variable, shifting, and perspective-dependent ways in which we think about interactions between humans and nature – two terms that we should also consider as definitional categories that themselves deserve significant critique and exploration.” The sites for participant observation were determined collectively by the students and were based on a class brainstorming session. We began with a list of all public spaces that students thought might be sites in which they could – broadly speaking, and in self-defined ways – see interactions between people and nature. The students whittled the list down based on accessibility, interest, and shared knowledge of sites. Students were ultimately asked to select places that they were familiar with and would feel comfortable visiting multiple times.

Students self-sorted into four groups following the selection of a final list of areas for participant observation. Two groups were bound to a specific site: one to the main university campus and another to the city zoo. The other two groups identified site categories that allowed for individual variation: one group chose public parks and the other group selected cemeteries. Students were not limited in how they might visit sites, and some went in groups, some went with friends or family, and others went with companion animals or on their own. Although students were not directed on their mode of interaction with the site, they were encouraged to focus on how they were participants in the site and not only observers. For some this included speaking with others present or engaging in common activities at the site, like jogging, feeding ducks, or walking a dog. For other students this included more solitary or reflective activities, like walks or lunch breaks, which reflected their previous use of those sites, as well as other common uses of these spaces. Students received introductory information about the method and an example of thick description to guide their actions, but, as the class was not explicitly a methodology course, the material provided was introductory. As this data collection was only for purposes of learning to utilize methods through practicum, student participant observation did not require human subjects research approval.

Students wrote narrative fieldnotes following each participant observation session and submitted these as graded assignments. Fieldnotes were graded to emphasize detail, reflection, and completion, with tone, style, and other aspects of writing approach open to student interpretation. Before being graded, students read and commented on each other's fieldnotes during class meetings, and the entire group collectively processed the experiences of observing, participating, and writing. A short reading form (Appendix A) guided students to focus on the detail within observations and any initial gestures towards analysis or interpretation, as well as to identify what parts of the fieldnotes they found most engaging and what they would have liked to see more about. All-class discussions emphasized what students learned, found surprising, and what was most impactful from each other's fieldnotes and experiences. At the end of the semester students worked in their site-specific groups to analyze their collective fieldnotes, link the findings to class readings, and present an academic poster about their shared work.

Background

Participant observation forms the backbone of ethnography, cohering around the importance of a researcher both attending to everyday cultural practices and immersing themselves within those practices and spaces (Agar 1985; Bernard 2006). It relies upon a systematic application of the behaviors that we use every day to make sense of the world around us: looking, acting, reflecting, being in, and analyzing sites and experience. In this method, knowledge is produced in the transition from lived experience to written fieldnotes, and, subsequently, to ethnographic writing (Astuti 2017). This is a central tension at the critical core of ethnographic work: between the active and sensory experience of participant observation, the primary recording of fieldnotes, and later analysis.

Participant observation is often at the center of courses focused on qualitative methodology, but its pedagogical relevance extends beyond this use. Although long-term immersion in a field site is not often possible within a single semester, abbreviated use of participant observation can introduce students to its possibilities and challenges, both in methods-focused courses and in wider, topical classes. It can be utilized to explore interconnections between research processes, data analysis, and theory (cf. Bedwell & Banks 2013; Daas & McBride 2014); to produce socially transformative experiences (Medeiros & Guzmán 2016; Wies 2018); or, more broadly, to teach a form of thinking we might call an "anthropological imagination" (Segal 1990). Central to teaching participant observation is the necessity of student experience, including the possibility of confusion or failure, as important to learning to think and practice as an anthropologist (Levine et al. 1980).

The use of participant observation within classes often entails three linked actions, performed iteratively: a move outside of a classroom, immersion in sites in which attention to interaction is a priority, and designated ways to reflect upon and process experience. In

this way, participant observation mirrors the core intentions of experiential education, “through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and value from direct experience” (Luckmann 1996, 7). Indeed, the incorporation of participant observation assignments and projects within courses has been overtly framed as a mode of experiential learning, allowing for short-term, hands-on linkages between theoretical and methodological work within varied disciplines (Jackson 2011; Wright 1990). As with participant observation, experiential learning includes the necessity of reflection and critical analysis on the part of the learner, as well as the unpredictability of outcomes. As Springgay and Truman remind us, “(y)ou are not there to report on what you find or what you seek, but to activate thought” (2018, 4). Participant observation can thus be understood as a method of experiential learning in which both the primacy of experience and the processing of that experience are critical.

The method requires concurrent attention to both details of situated interaction and wider socio-cultural, political, economic, and environmental dynamics. In this way, participant observation can be utilized to showcase how individual lives and places are shaped by – and also shape – wider social worlds, including those beyond the human. As Ingold writes, “Only because we are already *of* the world, only because we are fellow travellers along with the beings and things that command our attention, can we observe them. There is no contradiction, then, between participation and observation; rather, the one depends on the other” (2013, 5). Some have argued that participant observation extends beyond methodology, framing it as a potentially “revolutionary praxis” that can highlight knowledge and experiences that have been silenced (Shah 2017). To this end, participant observation can encourage the realization of a perspective where humans are not the sole actors but are “members of interconnected and interdependent multispecies common worlds” (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2015, 511; cf. Ruck and Mannion 2019).

The ontological turn within anthropology has opened the discipline to an exploration of multiple modes of being within and of the world. Instead of cultures being variables set against a static, singular idea of nature, an ontological approach emphasizes the variability of being itself and, within that, a wider understanding of what constitutes the environment. Ontological work requires us to think relationally, an approach that scholars have drawn particularly from the feminist work of Strathern (cf. 1980) and Haraway (cf. 1991), and which fits in interesting ways with the methodology of participant observation, which includes the unexpectedness of lived connections within everyday worlds as a focus of its praxis. Linking questions of methodology and practice, de la Cadena suggests the importance of identifying “ontological openings” (2017, 6) by slowing down our analytical habits in order to consider realms beyond the human. Tsing refers to a similar practice as “arts of noticing” (2015, 37), arguing for their importance in a world thoroughly overrun by human presence, where nonhuman actors are too often considered unimportant or subject to the whims and wills of the human. Such approaches suggest that how we observe and interact with the world around us might help us name the modes of relation that entwine us in socio-natures. The ontological turn has also influenced work in environmental and experiential education,

with scholars highlighting the challenges of holding in tension methodological and theoretical approaches that encourage rethinking lines of connection and causality within situated sets of relationships (Ruck and Mannion 2019).

In this research, we explore how students think relationally about place and experience through the completion of participant observation assignments. We bring together these literatures to ask what possibilities exist to expand “arts of noticing” through the use of this experiential method in environmental teaching practice.

Methodology

This research utilized data collected from undergraduate and graduate students who were enrolled in the 2017 course, including fieldnote papers written by students during the class and interview data collected following completion of the course.¹

In the semester following this course, under approval by the Human Subjects Program at the University of Louisville (Project #18.0058), all students who had completed the course with a registered final grade were asked to participate in this research project by submitting their narrative fieldnote assignments for text analysis. Fourteen of the eighteen students who completed the class chose to submit their fieldnotes for the project, with 54 fieldnote items submitted for analysis. Students who submitted fieldnotes were then asked to participate in an in-person, semi-structured interview about their experience conducting participant observations and their reflections on ideas of nature and urban environments. Eight students elected to participate in interviews, which were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed alongside submitted fieldnotes using an iterative approach to text analysis.

A limitation of this study is the narrowness of participant demographics. Of the eight interviewed students, all identified as white, and all but one were within a narrow age range of 19-24 years. Demographic data was not collected for students who only submitted fieldnote write-ups for analysis. As this study drew from a small pool of potential participants, the findings should be framed within this limitation. The authors of this study also both identify as white.

Results: Nature, “I know it’s more complicated than that”

In submitted participant observation write-ups and in interviews, students discussed their perceptions of urban environments as variously bounded sets of relations. In this section, we examine three emergent ontologies that, collectively, we call ecologies of seeing. These define distinctive modes in which experiential learning interacts with preconceived notions, creating perspectives upon states of being that enroll humans and more-than-human entities in myriad relationships. In this we draw from the work of Bateson in naming “ecologies of the mind” (1973) and Ingold’s reworking to “ecologies of life”

¹ The course was taught by co-author Storey; co-author Day was a graduate student enrolled in the course.

(Ingold 2011), which emphasizes organisms and their environment as “one indivisible totality” (Ingold 2011, 19). By focusing on participant observation, we articulate “ecologies of seeing” as a way to describe and name perception within this framework. We articulate these three ontologies as categorical, middling, and holistic, and address each in turn.

Categorical

The first group of students articulated an interpretation of the realm of the human as markedly separate, envisioning a distinct nature made up of ostensibly “natural” elements. This produced a strict set of relations that could be difficult for students to explicate, but which persisted.

Existing scholarship identifies a widespread interpretation within hegemonic Western cultures of humans and nature as oppositional – an essentializing Cartesian dualism extensively critiqued by feminist scholars (Haraway 2016; Jaggar and Bordo 1989; MacCormack 1980; Ortner 1974) and more widely (cf. Abram and Lien 2011; Ellen and Fukui 1996). Notably, all students in our study – not only those within this group – were able to produce and name this mode of thinking in which nature and culture are set apart as clear, separate categories, and this framework served as a starting point for most students. The participant observation assignment explicitly pushed students to reconsider their own understandings. Class readings and discussions on topics including urban political ecology, conservation, environmental justice, and eco-feminism also encouraged students to identify their existing definitions as a way to articulate that such concepts result not from universal norms but from specific cultural practices and their wider epistemological and ontological underpinnings (MacCormack 1980). Although class work was intended to push students to critique dichotomous assumptions, they persisted as a dominant framing for experience within this subset of the class.

Some students in this group evinced views strongly based in the logic of resource management. Dana², for example, often evoked in write-ups and echoed in their interview an approach that cemented notions of a human/nature divide. In their interview, Dana emphasized the importance of holistic sustainability practices, but ones based on the idea of human stewardship of nature, stating that “the difference between a natural environment and a built environment is how humans manage it.” In discussing the ideas of nature and culture in their interview, Dana stated:

Ultimately you can't have one without the other. Like, if you had a society without nature then we wouldn't have the resources we need to continue. ... If you had nature without society, ... it wouldn't be the same because it would lack, like, some of the management that we do. So, yeah. I would say it's complicated.

Here Dana's approach fits with wider managerial logics in which the clear relationship between humans and an externalized nature is one of variable modes of control. As

² All names used are pseudonyms.

Kopnina (2013) asserts, education for sustainable development often emphasizes a human/nature divide within the focus on short-term views of natural resource management. In this perspective, students are presented with an anthropogenic view of the natural world, where its elements are framed as “resources” in the service of humanity. Deeply dedicated to the protection of the environment, Dana illustrates Western mainstream explanations of what constitutes nature, while also acknowledging that human wellbeing is inextricably intertwined with the natural world.

Several other students exhibited a similar attitude, identifying discrete interactions with nature, although with less overtly managerial framings. As Ruth succinctly wrote:

The boy and his dad fishing are connected with nature because they are retrieving fish. ... The lake is also used to interact with creatures from nature like dogs and the ducks and swans who beg for people food. (Ruth, fieldnotes)

For this student, “natural” interactions were elided into a single category containing both a boy fishing and a duck begging for food; in this view, humans interact with a specific nature signified by non-human animals. Dana also utilized a similar framing in their fieldnotes, writing that children’s interactions with nature at the zoo included camel rides and playing with vegetation in planters. By containing within their definition of nature domesticated dogs, planter boxes, and camels in a zoo exhibit, students within this category construct a dichotomy in which managed and contained species become emblems of nature. Such interactions highlight human control over the management of individual species and environments, decontextualizing individual animals and plants while also submerging the processes of human management that produced such domesticated, controlled spaces of interaction.

Middling

A middling set of beliefs about human-nature interactions captured both student feelings of ambivalence and of reflection upon their relatedness with the wider environment. These students maintain an understanding of what they variably call a nature that is “raw” or “classic,” to describe spaces they believe to be set apart from human influence, while also expressing a set of profound human connections to nature.

Simon expressed this complicated ontology of togetherness-and-apartness in a fieldnote, writing: “Though we have removed ourselves from nature willingly in pursuit of prosperity and material gain, do we still feel more connected to nature than the artificial world we have created?” Here, this student grappled with wider philosophical questions of relationality and emphasized what he saw as a tension between modes of choice and being.

In his interview, Simon continued to navigate what he expressed as a neither-nor ontology, one in which relatedness is incomplete. As he stated:

...we're still animals. This is just the environment we've created and it's an environment, yes, that is not "organic." ... Everything that we have ... is still technically a part of nature because that's where the pieces of it come from. ... It might be urban environments. They are still a kind of environment. And animals live in them just as well as we do.

This approach begins to question separation while attempting to retain a distinctiveness for humans and human spaces. This can be seen in the bookended pieces of this interview excerpt, where the student initially indicated that "we're still animals" but, a few moments later, distinguished humans by noting that in urban spaces "animals live in them just as well as we do," emphasizing the "we" of humans as apart from other animals. This seamless transition, in which the contradiction of his own statements were unrecognized, notes the duality of this midline approach.

Aiden, another student who evinced this positionality, explained his understanding of human-nature interaction in his interview with this statement:

I'm not sure nature is everything that's natural, and I think, to some extent, part of the built environment is part of nature now. ... And even, like, cities have a type of nature. I don't know if I would call it, like, *classic* nature, but it's, like, definitely, like, the new nature ... the urban nature, which is, like, making sure that there are parts of the natural world in the built environment.

Having conducted observations in public parks, Aiden grappled in his fieldnotes with the ways in which a pristine nature was at tension with the physical and sensorial experience of the parks in an urban environment. As he wrote of one site: "I couldn't imagine coming to a place like this to encounter nature because you can hear the highway so vividly that it is hard to hear the birds chirp and the wind blow in the trees." Indeed, a significant portion of this student's difficulty – and that of others – in reconciling humans with nature is in the degradation that he saw resulting from human action. This attitude reflects notions of the idealized "feeling of nature" put forth by students in a study by Haluza-Delay (2011, 46). Within this set of feelings, nature is "different from civilization," "relaxing," "free," and "unfamiliar" – not a place in proximity to loud traffic sounds; this correlated to an understanding that what has been "wrecked" (Haluza-Delay 2011, 46) by human presence cannot possibly be nature. Aiden further wrote of visitor disregard for the site, demonstrated through trash located around the area and an absence of care: "The trees provided shade for much of the nearby area and gave people some nature, despite their vandalization." Though the participant observation experience appeared to inspire Aiden to develop an expanded notion of the place of humans within nature ("the new nature ... the urban nature"), he and other students in this middling category walked a line between modes of relations, seeing the cultural context and limitations of dichotomous notions of the environment but retaining elements within their own views.

Holistic

A final group evoked an approach in which humans and nature co-exist in complex relations across spaces and sites. Although the purpose of the assignment was to encourage students to identify and reflect upon their own perceptions, some students here hint that the experiential aspect of the class – in conjunction with readings and discussions – impacted the way in which they see and name the world around them. Alex demonstrated a point of transition when we compare early fieldnote write-ups to later reflection in an interview. In writing about her second of four observations at a park, she noted a group of visitors taking staged photos: "...I speculate that they only intend to interact with the 'natural' features of the park for pictures." Likewise, in her third write-up, Alex focused upon the infrastructures of the park and the presence of maintenance workers and surveillance, writing:

All of the people and animals at the park engage with human made infrastructures like the parking lot, pavilion, road, and trails. Even the most natural sections of the park, like the field and tree line leading to the woods, are meticulously planned and manicured. The park, while offering a public space to enjoy an autumn afternoon, is also heavily patrolled by police.

In an interview conducted a few months later, Alex reflected upon these four visits to the park in wider purview, challenging her earlier framing. In discussing the difficulty of determining what to observe, she explained it by focusing on the actions of birds:

I was really interested in all my observations about how, like, an animal's environment is shaped by the human environment and how those two things, like, kind of co-occur in a space like a park. 'Cause the birds would hang out around the pavilion, because that's where all the food was, like all the food was dropped and stuff, and that's also where I would hang out, so, I don't know, I guess I thought about that a lot.

Here, the bird and human environments and actions overlap to the point of total concurrence. In thinking further about the birds and their navigation of the infrastructure in the interview, Alex stated: "I don't think human-built environments are any less natural, after taking the class." Here, multi-species uses of the park challenge earlier distinctions in role and space, prompting redefinition.

Some students readily saw urban and peri-urban spaces as occupied by a nature that contained complex relations, even reflecting upon contradictory viewpoints. As two students wrote:

I wasn't alone today; the cemetery was a bustling place. Birds, cows, visitors, passerby's and workers were spread about and around the grounds. (Shannon, fieldnotes)

The people I observed probably would not, if asked, classify the ducks and geese at Cave Hill Cemetery as persons. Yet, they spoke to and even yelled at the birds not only as if they could understand ('Sorry, I don't have anything') but as if they would act upon a command ('Go! Move!')... Why do people treat some animals as persons and others not? (Gregg, fieldnotes)

Here, both students engaged with multi-species sets of relations and actions as constitutive of their experiences and of the spaces themselves.

For other students, a clear progression of thought was visible between write-ups and post-course interviews. Alice articulated in their interview how conducting participant observation compounded a perspective on nature that they located through class readings and discussions:

...it became more clear to me that the environment is more than just the pristine, or the pretty parts of nature, you know, that the environment is also urban landscape, ... that we're interacting with nature much more than we realize we are, you know, it's not just when we're deliberately going out to experience nature, ... we're just disconnected from the fact that we're connected.

This contrasted interestingly with the student's earlier writing, where they discussed how children playing on a groomed sports field and in a sandbox were "choosing" to interact with nature.

Students within this group located not only humans as part of a wider nature, but also framed urban environments as intimately human. Nature moves towards the unclassifiable: a set of unbounded and shifting relations that draw human and non-human actors alike into acts of collaboration (Tsing 2015). In contrast to students in the *middling* group, individuals in this final group acknowledged, and even embraced, the messier or less "pristine" multi-species linkages that they experienced. Ecosystems require collaboration for survival, including modes of connection that challenge easy distinctions between purportedly "good" and "bad" actions, or savory and unsavory experiences, which we saw students struggle with. Indeed, ideas of purity or contamination fit within wider cultural purviews that, in the West, often carry the potential for discomfort (Douglass 1966). But, as Tsing argues, we are shaped by each of our interactions, and to re-imagine them as generative offers a new way to experience connection (Tsing 2015, 28). Even within urban settings humans live alongside bugs, birds, mice, trees, weeds, grass, and countless beings seen and unseen, all of whom attempt to share resources of the built environment – and many of whom humans attempt to control or eradicate. In this holistic category, students begin to see differently the collaborations which take place within assemblages of plants and animals.

Discussion

So, what *did* happen when we asked students to consider their lenses of perception and expand their “arts of noticing” (Tsing 2015, 37)? Even for students who ultimately framed a more dichotomous relationship between humans and the environment, participant observation encouraged reflection on connection: as Dana from the Categorical group said of humans and the environment, “you can’t have one without the other.” For others, the method prompted seeing the human as inextricably bound to the more-than-human. Indeed, all three of these approaches bring multiple species, places, actions, and technologies into unique assemblages. What varies, however, is the way in which students named and cohered these situated sets. Across this set of outcomes, participant observation emerges as a way to highlight relational perspectives on human-environment interaction. In naming these approaches as differing modes of relationality, we identify the possibilities of experiential learning methods that focus on seeing and being.

Encouraging such reflection can, for some students, overrun previously clear distinctions within categories of being within the world. While humans tend to lay exclusive claim to the status of personhood, Aaltola suggests an “interactive approach” to defining this term, wherein it “derives from having a role in relation to others. We are a somebody in relation to somebody” (2008, 187). This is why ethnography beyond the human is essential, for, says Kohn, a focus on how humans relate to the nonhuman “breaks open the circular closure that otherwise confines us” (2013, 6). The fact that one being cannot understand another’s point of view in the same way does not mean that either view is wrong; instances of radical difference left unexplored result in the loss of potential knowledge (de la Cadena 2015, 100). In order to see beyond the human, approaches such as ethnography and participant observation can bring together disparate worldviews, informing each other and creating new knowledge.

For other students, a more categorical or dichotomous framing of nature persisted. This appeared to shape behavior, as students identified human impacts on nature or natural resources as reasons to disengage from a space. For example, the emphasis by students on city parks as unappealing spaces due to their proximity to other constant urban constructions such as highways, or the presence of waste, suggests impacts on both enjoyment and agency. While this reflects the sense of futility asserted by students in Haluza-Delay’s (2001) research, who defined nature as elements untouched by humans, other studies have examined the ways in which students might re-frame urban ecologies outside of perceived “natural” areas.

As scholars and practitioners emphasize, a focus upon nature as a ubiquitous state of being, which necessarily encompasses humans and human-crafted spaces, may reshape student perspectives on both nature and upon their own actions. As Henderson and Zarger (2017) point out, utilizing experiential learning and working against a backdrop of socio-cultural assemblages has the potential to break down this conceptual divide and to bridge

the gap between environmental education and behavior change. For example, a project in which students visited a seawall in South Devon, United Kingdom, where both the wall and the town itself had suffered damage by storms and sea rise, prompted student reflections on their disconnection from the effects of anthropogenic climate change (Winks 2018). In visiting an unfamiliar environment, students were able to identify a complex interplay of cause and effect within a deeply entwined human and more-than-human landscape. In another project, students were taken to the woods to identify and observe invertebrates. Familiar mostly with bugs through killing those found in their homes, students on this field trip expressed an expanded understanding of the human-built environment, where other creatures, now visible as functioning bodies and independent agents, were recognized as less alien, even as being “a bit like us. ... They are alive” (Winks 2018, 396). Haluza-Delay identifies an oppositional understanding of nature/culture as a “fundamental environmental problem” of our time (2001, 48); experiential opportunities can offer a way to encourage students to see the limitations of such an approach, reshaped by first-hand experience emphasizing the power of “relational understandings of place” (Winks 2018, 5). These disparate projects indicate the utility of experiential education in highlighting the fact that humans are not separate from our environment – that everything is connected through processes at once ecological, social, and physical.

Reframing definitions of the environment through experiential methods can extend ways of thinking about environmental impacts and, critically, emphasize the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation faced by marginalized urban communities based on structural inequalities rooted in race and class (Bullard 2005). For example, a project in Holyoke, Massachusetts, brought students to an urban area of predominantly Latinx residents of lower socio-economic status experiencing the impacts of proximity to brownfields sites, dumps, and power plants (Di Chiro 2006). With this experience and corollary discussions, students were able to see that environmental concerns are not divorced from the social. Impacted by the experience, participating students were then eager to engage in action projects within the community. The impact of primary experience thus shapes not only perception but also action.

For the students in our class, like those in other programs discussed here, the use of experiential education made the separation between humans and nature less clear cut. Instead, what we *do* was seen to impact the environment, which, in turn, impacts us; this draws us into a state of being with nature that isn't obviously distinguishable within a dichotomous lens. Whereas participant observation may be conceived as inherently focused upon interactions with other humans, the land, too, “speaks” (Lee and Newfont 2017) and can reveal things about humans and the other beings which inhabit it. This assignment opened productive conversations about how students identified the environment and their place as humans within it. This does, at the least, some work to identify the performative and situational elements of these relationships and ideas (Abram and Lien 2011). Given the possibility of such openings, we conclude with pedagogical

recommendations which may serve to further expand these ideas through coursework and discussion.

Conclusion: Recommendations for Practice and Pedagogy

Several pedagogical and practical actions could be paired with participant observation to encourage further reflection upon relationality. The initial two recommendations are based upon successful approaches used in this class. First, even short-term participant observation can be an iterative process in which students observe and then reflect, individually and collectively. This includes opportunities to read and discuss each other's fieldnotes and write-ups in class. Space for constructive peer critique encouraged by a short reading form and in-class conversations helped expand methodological understanding and make connections to wider discussions. Through this, students were able to see how others had approached the assignment, used the method, and experienced specific spaces. Peer reviews have often been boisterous, engaging spaces that also connect students and deepen engagement. Second, students can collaboratively select spaces for observation. This opens the possibility of choosing sites of personal interest, importance, or familiarity. In addition to encouraging students to feel comfortable and safe, this allows new observations to layer onto existing knowledge, encouraging reflexivity. Seeing selected spaces as integral to the process of reimagining relationality is critical; "landscapes," writes Gruenewald, "are deeply pedagogical" (2003, 35), shaping our varied ideas of connection. In selecting sites together, students can open up discussions on the spaces even before observation begins and can also find stronger resonance in the processing of their write-ups.

Two further recommendations emerged from student reflections. First: to discuss overtly how various ideologies and norms shape uses of participant observation. This may be encouraged by locating points at which scholars reflect upon their own positionality in readings, and also by reflecting back to students more about the ways in which their perceptions shape their experiences. At a time in which knowledge production practices are under scrutiny, instilling an understanding of how social science methods take in complex experience, including that of the observer, might itself be a critical outcome of using this method. In addition to reading diverse scholarly work, another avenue for identifying varied interpretations of relationality might be to include readings from creative or philosophical nature writing, such as the work of Linda Hogan, Annie Dillard, Robin Wall Kimmerer, or Bill Devall. Drawing from a range of genres might encourage students to see various ways to approach relationality through observation.

Finally, we recommend asking students to be creative or playful in their use of the method. Students might envision the environment through the sense-perception of another species (Nagel 1974). Such an exercise can open up thinking to the idea that one's worldview – what Uexküll (2010) calls the *umwelt* or sense-environment – is but one perspective of many. When we pay attention to the world beyond the human, it is apparent

that “human intentional action” cannot be separated from “nonhuman forces” (Bowden 2015, 78) and that the human is not outside of nature (Ingold 2011; Ruck and Mannion 2019; Tsing 2015).

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Appendix A

A short form was utilized in class to guide students as they read and responded to fieldnotes written by peers. Here are the questions and guidance provided to students in the form now used in this course, based upon edits made during the 2019 class offering:

- 1) On your peer's paper, mark with a star the 1-2 places where you see the most detailed write-up of observed spaces and behaviors, and the 1-2 places where you'd like to see more detail about observations. Differentiate them by adding a quick comment on each about what you liked about the detail or what they could have added.
- 2) On your peer's paper, mark with an exclamation mark the 1-2 places where they have a thoughtful analysis that links direct observation to wider processes, structures, or questions, and the 1-2 places you'd have liked to see more analysis. Differentiate with short comments on each.
- 3) Provide a short reflection on what you found most interesting or engaging in this paper.
- 4) Provide a short reflection on what you would have liked to see in this paper.