

URBAN CULTIVATORS

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Watch the film online at <http://anthropologyireland.org/ija-2019-hellwig/>.

Urban Cultivators is a product of my master's Visual Anthropology that I concluded this year in 2019. Complementing my research with film made sense, considering that my initial idea was to explore the presence and nuances of nostalgia towards nature among migrants who cultivate community gardens in urban areas. From conversations with people I had volunteered with before, I gathered that the appreciation of the gardening we were doing was being related to the cultivation they had done growing up. This made me wonder if there was a relationship between 'putting roots down' in a new country and being nostalgic to what they left behind. Cultivation was a potentially unifying factor between the two, as a way of connecting to an environment by making it one's own. Film adds a valuable sensorial dimension to my research, relaying both the variety of the environments I encountered and the complex relationships that migrants form and nurture within them.

When a few months later I found myself in the field, at the community growing space of Loughborough Farm in South London, I had my camera ready. I hoped that the volunteers, who came from so many different countries, might start to nostalgically bring up memories of their former homes. The atmosphere at the farm was always very welcoming, which made me feel included but also unintentionally excluded the conversations I was after about identity, integration, homesickness, and other topics that would better reveal the differences between volunteers. Instead we talked about foxes, the weather, favourite cakes, and whatever chit-chat topics were available. After a few sessions, I started to ask if anyone had other natural environments that they liked and could take me to. This led me to my three main characters: Lincoln, Heather, and Homan, who showed me a park, an allotment, and a mountain, respectively.

This concept of doing a 'tour' put the presence of the camera in perspective as being an object to perform the tour to, rather than it being a tool for distant observing. This expressive performativity led me to deeper and clearer conversations about what cultivation and natural environments mean to a person than I was getting as a fellow volunteer. What I found out was that often it was not only nostalgia that moved people to start cultivating, but also a desire to escape city life. It was the search for a balance between being in an environment that cannot be controlled (a brick in the wall so to speak) and being in an environment that you can control, in the case of the allotment, or is so far from controllable that it is not even designed for humans, in the case of the mountain. What counted as nature was different for everyone. I met an Italian woman who had an olive tree on her balcony, which instigated her telling me stories about home. Juxtaposing this tree against the mountain on which Homan looks for isolation from anything and anyone helped me realize that there are many instances of nature that people relate to.

Another form of dealing with one's relationship to urban life was adopting it in poetry. I met many people at Loughborough Farm that had a relationship to poetry, and I started thinking of it as using words to cultivate the surroundings, connecting to them and giving them meaning. I invited my fellow volunteers for a poetry event on one of my last filming days there as a thank you. It was a great success and very inspiring day.

When I got back to Amsterdam and started going through my footage, I saw so many reasons for having a relationship to different environments that it would be impossible to work towards a coherent conclusion. We must not be constrained by having to work towards a conclusion just to make the research feel final. Thankfully, film lends itself quite well to open endings, which I also saw as an opportunity to remind the audience that conclusions are nice, but not always realistic. If anything, film reminds us how much our researches are capturing a moment rather than a timeless truth. Therefore, it was important to me that viewers would at times remember that they are looking at the subjective reality of the researcher. By using editorial tricks that take you out of the film, such as omitting visuals or implementing a superimposition, the viewer gets reminded that there is someone behind the scenes pulling strings.

I have tried for this film to be reflective of what research is and is not, and what the medium of film has to offer to it. Of course, film has its own restrictions and is not suitable for every research. Overall, in the case of my research, I think it has captured the experience of being in a natural environment quite well, and it is able to make the audience aware of the presence of a researcher conducting all these stories together.