

(Re)creating a Living Memorial: Urban Gardening as a More-than-human Co-creating Practice

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Abstract

This essay explores what happened when I recreated an allotment in the style of the year 1918. The plot was located on a charity allotment site in the city of Oxford in the United Kingdom and cultivated during the growing season of 2020 to 2021. There have been people growing on the site for over a century. I planted open pollinated non-hybrid heritage seeds from the era. Reflecting on the use of landscape as an archive, I use both academic and creative responses to the soil as a repository of memory. The plot itself became a living memorial that diverse members of the public visited, to share food and engage with the plot and the themes it generated. These themes were the current COVID-19 pandemic, the 1918/1919 flu pandemic, and the First World War in Africa and Europe. In contrast to contested public memorials, the allotment garden space facilitated restoration. This essay therefore examines what can be enabled through a co-creating a multispecies gardening practice. It discusses whether the inclusion of nature enables a different engagement with challenging histories. By working with a store of memory within the natural world, the case study of the 1918 allotment demonstrates the ways in which it is possible to transcend both time and space, to open up counter narratives of key periods in global history. The 1918 allotment also offers up a methodological approach that works with the practice of decolonisation as “convivial” (Nyamnjoh). A meeting place for varied peoples and more-than-human others to come together in transformation, through urban gardening and working alongside and with more-than-human gardeners.

Keywords: Poetry, gardens, war, memorialization, more-than-human.

Resumen

Este ensayo híbrido explora lo que sucedió cuando recreé una parcela al estilo del año 1918. La parcela estaba ubicada en un sitio de adjudicación benéfica en la ciudad de Oxford en el Reino Unido, y se cultivó durante la temporada de cultivo de 2020 a 2021. La gente ha plantado cultivos en ese lugar durante más de un siglo. Yo planté semillas patrimoniales no híbridas de polinización abierta de la época. Reflexionando sobre el uso del paisaje como archivo, utilizo respuestas tanto académicas como creativas al suelo como depósito de la memoria. La parcela misma se convirtió en un monumento viviente que diversos miembros del público visitaron para compartir comida y relacionarse con la parcela y los temas que generó. Estos temas fueron la pandemia actual de COVID-19, la pandemia de gripe de 1918/1919 y la Primera Guerra Mundial en África y Europa. A diferencia de los memoriales públicos en disputa, el espacio del huerto facilitó la restauración. Por lo tanto, este ensayo examina lo que se puede conseguir a través de una práctica de jardinería multiespecies de co-creación. Discute si la inclusión de la naturaleza permite un compromiso diferente con historias desafiantes. Al trabajar con una reserva de memoria dentro del mundo natural, el estudio de caso de la parcela de 1918 demuestra las formas en que es posible trascender tanto el tiempo como el espacio, para abrir contra-narrativas de períodos clave en la historia global. La parcela de de 1918

también ofrece un enfoque metodológico que trabaja con la práctica de la descolonización como "agradable" (Nyamnjoh). Un lugar de encuentro para que pueblos variados se unan en la transformación, a través de la jardinería urbana y trabajando junto a y con jardineros más que humanos.

Palabras clave: Poesía, jardines, guerra, memorialización, más que humano.

"What does it mean to remember a previous pandemic as we struggle to heal in the current one?" (Niala 10). We ask a lot of gardens, both practically and in our imaginations. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the eponymous hero seeks immortality in the sumptuous garden of the sun god. This was a garden where leaves were gemstones and wisdom abounded. In the Christian tradition, the Garden of Eden calls to mind the "lost paradise" of the past (Milton), and in Islam the divine gardens await the virtuous after their death. What these mythological gardens remind us of is a sense of harmony and balance which, in the Anthropocene, we are acutely aware of having profoundly damaged. Amid the challenges of a world that many consider ruined, it is the garden that can offer a space of hope.

In practice, gardens offer more than a space of hope. Many of us turn to gardens for sustenance whether mental, physical, or spiritual in a quest to regain our own balance, and increasingly a balance that includes the more-than-humans with whom we share our gardens. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with its accompanying widespread lockdowns triggered a "global gardening boom" (Ossola). Researchers found that "gardening was overwhelmingly important for nature connection, individual stress release, outdoor physical activity and food provision" (Egerer et al. 127).

Concurrently, there were calls for the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic (and also the 1918-1919, so-called Spanish Flu, pandemic) to be memorialised. "Memorials are a vehicle that can assist in the transition from collective trauma to recovery" (Fox 69). Some people also began to ask why there were "almost no memorials of the flu of 1918" (Segal). Given the 1918-1919 pandemic coincided with the end of the First World War, its opportunity for memorialisation was, perhaps, subsumed by the concerns of an already exhausted world. The spread of the flu of 1918 has been linked to returning demobbed soldiers, leading the 1918-1919 pandemic to be "analysed as an effect of the war" (Gibbs 126). This entanglement of war and disease was re-examined in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic when publics, trying to make sense of the devastation and tragic loss of life, began to look to history for answers.

Around the start of the pandemic, in 2020, I had already been researching allotment gardening in the United Kingdom for nearly two years when a community horticulture and art project called "Fig" approached me. Sam, who runs the project, told me that Fig had a plot on Elder Stubbs Charity Allotment Site (hereafter referred to as Elder Stubbs) in Oxford. He offered it to me for a growing season to do whatever I wanted with it. Before Sam had a chance to take his next breath, I replied that I wanted to grow an allotment site in the style of the year 1918. I wanted to do so because numerous parallels were being drawn in the media between the COVID-19 pandemic and the 1918/1919 pandemic. 1918 was also the year that the First World War ended. Thus, the 1918 Allotment was born.

We used open pollinated, non-hybrid seeds of heritage plant varieties from the years around 1918, planting staples from the time including beetroot, carrot, spring onions, King Edward potatoes, cabbage, broccoli, onion, peas, radish, runner bean, kale, and turnip. There was already rhubarb and a patch of strawberries growing on the plot that we continued to cultivate. We used T.W. Sanders' book *Kitchen Garden and Allotment: A Simple Practical Guide to Home Food Production*, first published in 1918, in order to work with the growing methods that were used at the time.

Once the plants had begun growing and it was clear that there was going to be a harvest (though it turned out to be even larger than we imagined) we used Eventbrite to issue an invitation for people to come and engage with the plot as they saw fit. We provided food from the plot and some visitors also carried out some gardening. People from all across the UK and even a group of students from the US who were attending summer school in Oxford came to visit the plot. As well as the food and drink, I shared the poetry that I wrote as a part of the project and visitors spoke with each other, although some also spent time at the plot in silence. I also explained the practicalities of the project and that I was working with seeds from the era and gardening in the way that would have been practised around the time of the First World War.

As the project wore on and the number of visitors to the plot grew, some people began to ask about the extent to which the more-than-human participants in the project were facilitating the process of memorialisation across time. Visitors to the plot commented and wrote in the visitors' book that their experience was "multi-sensory," "embodied," and "hands on." They noted that they were engaging in a "relationship w/ [ith] the land." It was interesting to note that the visitors book itself bore traces of the plot by way of soil transferred from visitors' hands that stained at least one of the pages in the book.



1918 Allotment



Beans supported using methods from around 1918

Given the lack of memorialisation of the 1918-1919 pandemic, it seemed important to members of the public such as Mr. Zechinelli who lost his grandfather in the 1918-1919 pandemic to memorialise those who had lost their lives in both pandemics (Segal). However, the First World War was so intimately linked with the 1918-1919 pandemic that it could not be excluded from the memorialisation process. Gardens have a long association with war memorials across the UK (and indeed in many parts of the world). In Oxford, there is Christ Church War Memorial garden established in 1926 to memorialise the First World War. Further, allotment gardens such as the one I was cultivating are intimately entwined with British war history, having provided food for the nation during both World Wars (Way). Even so, gardens that are wartime memorials are not “stable containers of meaning but need to be actively (re)interpreted” (Callahan 360). As the 1918 Allotment was conceived as a living memorial, visitors to the garden also inscribed their own meaning on the site. One woman who brought her teenage son to the allotment visited on the date of her father’s birthday to remember him: he had been a child wartime allotmenteer.

The 1918 Allotment and this essay are also a response to the call for more ‘other-than-human’ ethnographies [that] draw attention to dimensions of life that have allegedly been overlooked or marginalised in anthropological writings... A singular focus on meaning, symbolism or utility has often side-lined other relational practices” (Lien and Pálsson 3). In this way the 1918 Allotment saw the allotment site as an assemblage of people, plants, insects. It was a gardening of things amongst others in order to ask, “How do gatherings sometimes become ‘Happenings,’ that is greater than the sum of their parts? If history without progress is indeterminate and multidirectional, might assemblages show us its possibilities” (Tsing 23)? Or, leaning specifically into the 1918 Allotment, might an assorted collection of humans, more-than-humans and non-humans lead us to understand how living memorials can be co-created? What might this co-creation actually memorialise?

In this remainder of this essay, I draw on academic research and poetry to make sense of the events that occurred, and the themes that arose, during the growing season

of 2020-2021 as I was co-creating the 1918 Allotment. The essay drew inspiration from Donna Haraway, who advocates a speculative methodology:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway 12)

In considering how to describe the landscape I work with the complexities of the one in which I was working. I use a Barthes-like textual analysis, which allows for the ideologies embedded within the landscape to be revealed (Barthes); I also include, in my analysis, social processes such as the relationships I was engaged with in observing the more-than-human worlds of the garden (Duncan and Duncan). Given the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the work was underpinned by an ethics of care, for example in the soils with which I was working that can be “perceived as endangered ecologies in need of urgent care” (Puig de la Bellacasa 23). As I worked to re-read the co-created landscape through poetry, it also became apparent that the form of text I chose was just as important as the descriptions it would contain. In this context, poetry proved apt because of its links with landscape memorialisation, gardens and war. The iconic poem “In Flanders Fields” by Canadian surgeon John McCrae, for example, led to the popular use of poppies as a flower of remembrance. The use of poppies is particularly poignant as they are a classic example of a landscape’s expression of ruderal ecology, their growth stimulated by the effects of shelling (Stoetzer). Replacing the after-effects of bombs with flowers is a poetic gesture, and poetry was an important element in the project.

Poetry has been noted for its “potential to transform ways of thinking and being in the world” (Weeber and Wright). It also allows for a method with which to witness the world. This witnessing and transformation are key features of memorialisation. The public call that took place in the UK for a memorialisation of those lost to the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the questioning of why there wasn’t a similar memorial for those who died in the 1918-1919 pandemic, spoke to the need “for a place for the bereaved to communicate not only with the deceased but also with the outside world” (Klaassens et al. 187).

I worked with poetry as a tool to engage with the project’s themes by reading, writing and sharing poetry with visitors to the site throughout the project. There were the links with the First World War as poetry in this and other wars around the world has been used to act “as a witness” (Eswaran 68). During the 1918 Allotment project, poetry was used to create temporal connections: to witness what happened before, record what is going on in the present, and suggest possible futures. Poetry also allows for speculation, a recognition of what is known but also a route to delve into what remains unknown.

María Puig de la Bellacasa has written compellingly about the way touch can bypass the visual sense. Touch is an inevitable part of the gardening practice on allotments and, when the first visitors to the 1918 Allotment put their hands in the soil, they commented on the sensation of touching the more-than-human soil. Even more, the sensation of being touched, something that so many were deprived of during lockdowns and sheltering in place, was a powerful part of visitors’ experience. Poetry provided a language and form for these speculations. What does it mean to be touched by soil? How do we know the soil has been touched?

Finally, poetry supported both a personal experience of being “the product of a single consciousness” (Minogue and Palmer 110) and a larger engagement with the multiple resonances of the poem for individual participants. Kodwo Eshun proposes human beings as “sensors” who reciprocally respond to the stimuli that we experience (Eshun). By sharing poetry on the 1918 Allotment and also using it to document and analyse the themes within it, the poetry aimed to track the sensory responses and transformation that the memorialisation afforded.

On the surface, all that occurred was that an urban gardener cultivated an allotment plot. Allotment gardening is something ordinary that has taken place on plots up and down the United Kingdom, growing season after growing season, for centuries. However, during the project it quickly became apparent that gardening is not neutral. *Where* people garden, *who* is doing the gardening, *how* they garden, *why* they garden and *what* they are gardening all matter. Further, even though the act of gardening may seem individual, happening in one place at a particular time, the presence of more-than-human gardeners (seeds, plants, weather, soil) shatters those spatial and temporal illusions. It makes memorialisation an active process both recalls and re-enacts. Recalling by remembering the people through the practices that have gone before and re-enacting by engaging in those same practices in the present day. There have been people cultivating on the Elder Stubbs site for over 100 years, but there are no elder trees on the site. To ask why involves a journey beyond the boundaries of the current site. We tend to think of gardens as static but, like people, they move. In the case of Elder Stubbs, the allotment site was moved over three miles, from where it is believed there likely was elder to its current location:

On the brow of limestone hills, a spring emerges. Wandering down toward the Thames, the water becomes Boundary Brook – named for its former role as outer boundary of Oxford city. Along the course of this brook alluvial green spaces hang like beads, among them Elder Stubbs allotments. This flood prone area, left out of medieval field systems, was dedicated at the time of enclosure for allotments when local people were turfed off common land further up the hill. (Greenhalgh 5)

Thus the 1918 Allotment, alongside the other allotments on Elder Stubbs, carried within it the presence of this geographic loss. The loss of common lands in the UK also carries legal, economic and emotional legacies in which both grief and anger are enmeshed. The latter is typified in the following anonymous poem which deftly summarises the loss of the commons:

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common,
But lets the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose. (Boyle 13)

Living in an age where there is only one village in the whole of England (Laxton) that still has living memory of common lands before enclosure, there is limited public space for an acknowledgement of the grief associated with this loss. The visitors to the 1918 Allotment both recognized what they thought it felt like to step into “paradise” and were nevertheless acutely aware that when they found themselves outside the allotment gates following their visit, they would no longer have direct access to this place that exposed hidden griefs.

English allotments are a curious piece of material cultural heritage. They are, “individual parcels of land allocated to individuals or households for personal use; while contiguous, the parcels are worked independently by each household and the land is made available through either government action or private entities. The participating individual households are organized into a self-governing association” (Drescher et al., 318). However, the relocation of the Elder Stubbs site is typical of how allotments across England began. Allotments are part of the result of the deracination of the landless poor. Rural allotments, the ancestors to urban allotments, are one of the results of the acts of enclosure across England (Burchardt). “Enclosure was the process that ended traditional rights, such as grazing livestock on common land, or cultivating arable crops on strips in open fields. Once enclosed the uses of the land became restricted to the owner” (Willes 51). This practice, which became enshrined in law through enclosure acts, had a profound impact on agricultural labourers as their independent access to fuel and food was restricted. Coupled with this restriction, they were already poorly paid. Allotments began to appear in enclosure acts in the seventeenth century, recognizing the need to make “some land provision for the poor” (Willes 115). The legal status of allotments saw a major shift in law in 1908 with the Small Holdings and Allotment Act. It is an act which underwent further strengthening until the 1925 Allotments Act, “which established statutory allotments which local authorities could not sell off or convert without Ministerial consent, known as Section 8 Orders” (The National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardens).

Until recently, academic discourse on allotments was centred on the idea that their history is inextricably linked to services provided/not provided by the government. Before the welfare state, allotments were a way for financially poor families to feed themselves. During times of war or austerity, such as the measures brought in by the current English Conservative government, their popularity increased. Wartime allotments from the Second World War remain salient in the popular imagination through the “Dig for Victory” campaign that encouraged the public to turn every piece of land they could, including public parks and even Buckingham Palace gardens, into allotments to feed the nation. Fewer people are left to remember the “Dig for DORA” (Defence of the Realm Act) that made the same call during the First World War.

Although I knew that I would be reaching back to recover histories of cultivation, in recreating an allotment in the style of the year 1918, what I had not anticipated was the way the histories would be unearthed through the soil. One of the reasons that we expect so much from gardening is, perhaps, that the earth still has a routine and generous response despite the way we have treated the earth that has led to the Anthropocene.

The Practice: Using Poetry to Cultivate Thinking with the 1918 Allotment¹

Gardens begin in the imagination and so when Sam issued his invitation, by the time I had hung up from the Zoom call the 1918 Allotment already existed in my mind. There were the knowns such as my desire to use T.W. Sanders’ book as a guide, but there were the unknowns such as the weather: a more-than-human co-creator of gardens. What could I learn by being attentive to the effects of the more-than-human gardeners?

¹ My poems in the section below were published in *Portal: 1918 Allotment*.

Gardeners across the UK pay attention to the frost: the last frost marks the active start of the growing season. My body was indeed as sensor, as (Eshun) proposes, in responding to the messages, the strongest of which was learning to understand was within my control and what was not.

Waiting for the Last Frost

Snow has come again,
reminding us, whatever names,
seasons will be

I pour warm water
on the plants. An earthy
smell hits my cold nose

Gardening involves working with a constellation of more-than-human gardeners who each bring their own variables to the process, both welcome and unwelcome. It is a curious if obvious contradiction that although we speak of human beings as doing the gardening, we can't actually make plants grow. We can plant seeds and nurture them, but it is the plants who have to do the growing. Some gardeners such as Jason Kay see their role as trying to "influence" what it is the plants do. He feels that gardens where the gardener tries to exert their "control" are rendered cold and sterile (Kay). Working with heritage seeds felt like a homage to time. Planting King Edward potatoes not only linked the plot back to a 1902 coronation but also raised questions about what would have been a contemporary and popular potato in 1918. I was curious about who would have been roasting the potato, well known for its taste in 1918, and this in turn led me to think about the women who, even though not traditionally associated with allotment plots, kept them going when their husbands were at war. The poem that follows bears witness for a woman who might have been, offering a voice for the women whose voices were not routinely recorded.

Allotment Site Blues

After Robin Robertson

You'd know her plot
by the tidy trenches
piles of soil waiting
for King Edward's burial
eyes lined up to the amber sky.
You'd recognise the flimsy poppy
Marking hope for an un-blighted summer
soil lined with discarded daisy chains
made for her gurgling child.

Hers is a service the men won't notice
as they grumble about her beet
stained hands.

T'aint women's work to drive
a spade through the dirt,
who'll watch the baby?
Women's work's not on the land.

No normal lass would lift a sack of spuds
tie up the beans and spit on the ground.
T'aint right - the men say, they'll be sure to keep her pension

Here's the proof her behaviour's unsound.
They don't know the letters have stopped coming.
Her tears – not spit – bind and form the clay.
In the still of a clammy summer's evening
when she reaches for fruit from the highest bough
I'll wait ready to catch her should she fall.

Regardless of the extent to which gardeners feel that they are able to affect the plants that they interact with, we all acknowledge the plants' own agencies. While studying gardeners in the north of England, Cathrine Degnen found that the gardeners she worked with remarked on their plants' behaviour in various ways. Plants could be "quite well behaved," go "berserk," or be "confused." All of this suggests that plants, even those that have been specially selected and sown by human gardeners, also have a role in deciding where and how they are going to grow. Given this "reciprocal referencing" between plants and human beings, as Degnen points out, "the mechanistic model of self and body came to dominate all other ways of thinking about them in Western cultural settings ... when evidence to the contrary is all around us" (Degnen 164).

It is not only the dualistic ways in which we think that can be misleading. A key element when humans garden, is deciding which plants do or do not belong. These decisions can obscure the messages that plant gardeners are sending. Weeds (plants that sow themselves) are the name that human gardeners give to unwanted plant gardeners. They can be perceived as a threat by both human gardeners and domesticated plants, and yet from an archaeobotanical perspective, weeds are part of the clues that tell us how we came to plant domestication in the first place:

a large deposit of weeds may indicate instances of cultivation... We know that humans were modifying their immediate environments well before the Neolithic revolution by clearing land for local cultivation, creating spaces for refuse, and hunting and trapping. These activities created disrupted spaces that were suited to synanthropic plants (weeds). (D'Costa)

As D'Costa describes, the presence of plants, whether we are cognizant of it are not, communicates something to human gardeners. Communication can be to indicate the presence of human activity or, in some cases, it can be to demonstrate how the human activity occurred. I went on to harvest enough of the strawberries that were already growing on the plot to make jam for visitors to the plot. The strawberry patch indicated the presence (and taste – pun intended) of the human gardener who was there before me. The plants were also healthy despite the gap between two different gardeners' interventions, thus indicating they could also tend to themselves.

Other critical more-than-human gardeners on allotment plots are insects. Insects are the gardeners least likely to adhere to human boundaries. They are able to travel through the soil and the air, which means that they cover great distances and the most likely human barriers they face are usually fatal. Human beings' reactions to insects tend to be strong, polarised and regularly contradictory (Raffles). Insects are either recognised as friends, like the bees who are seen as indicator species and viewed in terms of their sociality, or foes, like wasps. Even bees are generally viewed positively when they are physically far away from humans, doing their pollinating job, but are far less welcome as solitary creatures who may decide to share a sugary drink with a human in the same garden. Despite the crucial role that many insects play in gardening, humans have been

responsible for the decimation of millions of insects (Carson). Mass crop spraying has led to a crisis in the populations of certain facilitators of pollination, with drastic action now being taken by human beings to try to protect certain species.

Human interactions with insects are revealing and the 1918 Allotment was no different. It is one thing to create a memorial by planting heritage seeds and eschewing the use of plastic. It is quite another to create a memorial by contributing to the death of living creatures. The metaphor of battle that can characterize human interactions with nature is unhappily real when it comes to some of the substances that we have used on our plants and ourselves. At the end of the First World War, pesticides were liberally applied across allotment sites across the country. Elder Stubbs would have been no different. There were films made for example by *The Smallholder Magazine* such as *Allotment Holders Enemies* to show allotmenters how to exterminate their “foes” in language that directly echoed that which had been used during the war.

In contrast, contemporary allotmenters mourn the devastating loss of these insects. Though interestingly some specifically grow poppies, in general allotmenters grow pollinator friendly plants in order to attract and support insects’ wellbeing. Thus over a couple of generations a loss has been recognised, and ornamental plants serve as mini living memorials to the insects lost in the wake of First World War technologies.

War poets like Wilfred Owen, who survived World War One, wrote about the horrific effects of the different types of nerve gasses that were used against human enemies. The words of the Belgian poet-soldier Daan Boens from his 1918 poem simply entitled *Gas* are especially moving:

The stench is unbearable, while death mocks back.
The masks around the cheeks cut the look of bestial snouts,
the masks with wild eyes, crazy or absurd,
their bodies drift on until they stumble upon steel.
The men know nothing, they breathe in fear.
Their hands clench on weapons like a buoy for the drowning.
They do not see the enemy, who, also masked, loom forth,
And storm them, hidden in the rings of gas.
Thus in the dirty mist, the biggest murder happens. (Feigenbaum 225)

Many commercial insecticides are chemical neurotoxins: substances designed to destroy pests through their nervous system and tailored to specific targets, human or insect. The connection between wars against people and wars against other species is one that has already been drawn by historians. Edmund P. Russell says that the two histories are impossible to separate and the human ability to destroy muddles distinctions between human and insect enemies (Russell). We are all part of the same wider nature and war is war. It is perhaps not surprising that ex-soldiers who turned to allotments on their return home were not squeamish about the use of arsenic to poison caterpillar grubs on fruit trees as demonstrated in the film *Allotment Holders Enemies* (1918). And yet I find it difficult to judge people who were gardening on allotments in 1918 harshly. The levels of poverty and hunger at the time were staggering and many people were thus involved in a life and death struggle with the insects on their plots. Engaging with the First World War also brought to light the histories of more-than-human gardeners who at times saved humans from themselves.

When I shared this poem in readings that took place on the 1918 Allotment the visitors’ responses often included a remark about the hidden losses that were a common

thread across both pandemics and the First World War. One visitor wrote in the visitors' book how the poem's hidden griefs "resonated with my experience during lockdown' but also the importance to make 'connections to other times."

Battle of Tanga, 3-5 November 1914

It matters where you place a war
But no white man cared to trace African soils
so enclosed in trenches of tropical heat

Askaris fought Wahindi
As outnumbered German troops
were not outgunned.

Sleepless bees descended like vuli rains

Stinging cornered foreign forces
caught between sword and sea.

Who knew that bees could win a battle?
Their lives a routine sacrifice
for honey we find so sweet.

Working with the Landscape as an Archive – Soil, People, Memory

T.W. Sanders' book was both a guide on how to cultivate the 1918 Allotment as well as an insightful journey through gardening history. Chapter Two on "Manure and Fertilisers," for example, shows the continuations of, and breaks from, particular gardening practices. Animal dung, bone meal and seaweed are still commonly used on allotment sites. What is less common is the use of oyster shell and leather parings. One fertiliser that he proposes that drew my attention was blood meal, including his detailed description on how to prepare the blood.

Blood meal is a nitrogen-rich fertiliser. It is also linked to deterring deer and rabbits and so is a gentler way to deal with "vegetable foes," as Sanders calls them (Sanders). However, too much blood can burn plants, so Sanders gives careful and detailed instructions about how to use it. As I continued to work with Sanders' book, thoughts of World War One swirling around in my head, I began to see the words on the pages differently. I "found" this poem amongst the lines about how to cultivate beetroot:

thrust
the blade down deeply
press back the handle,
Twist

Although the poem startled me and reminded me of the use of bayonets, it also spoke to me of the response that the earth can have to the violence that human beings enact. Even gardening, which we think of as a peaceful activity, has within it practices of aggression against the more-than-humans with whom we garden. I am thinking, here, of the worms I have accidentally split in half while digging the ground. Sometimes, these acts are more deliberate, and yet the earth often still chooses to return us to a place of hope. During World War One we blew up the ground, spilling blood, and the earth replied with a burst of astonishingly beautiful flowers.

As my thoughts and the plot continued to grow, they both began to draw people. As I began to prepare for visitors to the site, I started to look at it differently. I thought about a local archaeologist Dr Olaf Bayer and when he dug a test pit on another of Fig's plots on the same site. He found what he thought was the transition line where people would have been cultivating their allotment plots in previous decades. It turns out that the line was only eight inches away (Greenhalgh). In less than a foot, I could reach out and touch the same soil that fed the people who lost their access to the commons three miles away. Particles of that soil could have been feeding my guests. I wondered on this piece of land what memories were now rising to the fore?

It could be argued that allotment sites and their imagination work in what Pierre Nora describes as "lieux de memoire" or places of memory: places that fulfil a specific purpose in the "play of memory and history," which is "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial—just as if gold were the only memory of money—all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs" (Nora 19). Allotment sites are much beloved by the English public. In the two years carrying out my research prior to the 1918 Allotment project, I noticed people referred to allotment sites with something almost like reverence. The public are hugely appreciative of their existence whether they had ever had or ever intended to have an allotment plot themselves. This approval has only been heightened since the widespread public uptick in environmental concerns: allotments are green spaces in cities and as such recognised for the potential benefits they hold, for example, in terms of biodiversity. Their strong association with the Second World War also means that allotments as a whole are recognised as more-than-human actors in the British war effort. This is critical as

The Second World War remains central to contemporary understandings of Britain and British national identity. In particular, the epochal events of 1940—Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz—are said to have heightened a sense of British national consciousness. Churchill contemporaneously proclaimed this period as Britain's "Finest Hour." (Ugolini)

Allotments serve as both an important part of British national identity a physical location where people can interact with a wider landscape in a collective space and yet individually make their *own* place on the land that they cultivate. This is a unique space where, "the politics of land and landscape are part of...[an] everyday experience" (Crouch 266). In this delicate dance between individual practice and collective identity, the memories held by and associated with allotment sites are particularly potent. In the Euro-American context, "memory ... is most commonly thought of as an individual faculty – the diverse processes which shape how individuals recollect, transform and erase the past" (Cole 1). Yet, allotment sites also hold a collective memory which allows both for an active reproduction of amongst other things identity but also a memorialisation of a time that has passed.

In my work with allotment landscapes as an archive, a critical place to read was the soil. It is now established within soil science that the soil has a memory (Janzen). To apprehend this begins with the understanding that soil is alive. It is a mixture of organic and inorganic matter that actively participates with the organisms that dwell in it. It is in constant communication with the plants that grow in it and provides a home and structure for the various species that operate from it.

From the perspective of soil science, the memory in the soil works in four different ways. The soil remembers the environmental factors that affected its formation and continuing development (Phillips and Lorz). It is a repository for historical artefacts (Pietsch) such as the clay pipes and pottery sherds that are ubiquitous across allotments sites in Oxford. It also captures the evidence of changes that take place within it, for example, an event causing erosion even after the erosion is no longer evident (Daněk et al.). Finally, there is also another kind of memory that is held in the soil, a memory that bears the traces of the actions that we have carried out on and with it. This memory has been recognised for far longer and is of great importance during the Anthropocene. “There exists ... in external material nature, an ineffaceable, imperishable record ... of every act done, every word uttered, nay, of every wish and purpose and thought conceived by mortal man, from the birth of our first parent to the final extinction of our race” (Marsh 248-9). This record is directly traceable in the soil: “In a very real sense the land does not lie; it bears a record of what [humans] write on it” (Lowdermilk 1).

What was written into the soils in Elder Stubbs? The answer in part came from my sister project carried out simultaneously on another of Fig’s sites. While I was planting into the ground, the artist Nor Greenhalgh was digging it up and finding out what clays and colours lay within the earth at Elder Stubbs. It was not an extractive practice: once her project was done, she returned the soils along with natural offerings made by participants in her workshops, “secret prayer[s] written in vegetable ink and concealed in clay” (Greenhalgh 32). The answer she found was so obvious it was almost startling. It was the diversity. An abundance of colours from which Nor made inks bled through the soil—pinky red beets, immortal ochres and elder blues. Fragments of pottery revealed at least twelve designs, both below and above ground; there was more than one of everything, a plurality of plants, people and practices.

When I combined this understanding with the experience that I had had on the 1918 Allotment and reflected on visitors’ responses to the plot, I concluded that what was also unearthed was the need for communal spaces where people could together and acknowledge hidden losses. There was the contemporary loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, but there was also a lack of memorialisation of the large numbers of people who lost their lives as a result of the 1918-1919 pandemic, leaving people without a physical memorial space for this historical link. Allotments had come about in part because of the loss of the commons and the end of the First World War had unleashed another type of warfare, this time chemical, on the landscape resulting in a loss of biodiversity. The visitors’ book had more than one response that referred to the visceral engagement of the senses and the benefits of gardening being “all encompassing.” What I found was that like the soil memorialisation has many layers: the theme of loss draws into itself many forms of remembrance regardless of what caused the individual losses in the first place. The themes raised and their joining with the plot and eating its produce highlighted that a multi-species space had been co-created more-than-humans which allowed visitors to remember. It was more than a space of remembrance, the woman who wrote in the visitor’s book that she “came on my late father’s birthday” surmised it was “a truly healing experience.”

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