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## **Human-landscape relations and the occupation of space:**

### **Experiencing and expressing domestic gardens**

**Paul Stenner, Mark Bhatti, Andrew Church**

#### Abstract

A consideration of occupation and space is outlined to advance non-representational thinking about human-landscape relation. Empirical findings are presented from a research project based on data from the Mass Observation Archive (1) relevant to gardens and gardening. This data is analysed to explore how ‘ordinary’ people (who have contributed to this Archive) express and experience issues concerning their home gardens. Our analysis suggests four distinct *modes of occupation* relevant to the ways in which these lay writers describe their garden and gardening experiences and activities. The naturalistic mode is occupied with the garden as expressive of ‘nature’; the nostalgic mode is occupied with memory and self-reflection; the pragmatic mode concerns tasks/activities that constitute the routine practices of gardening; and the mimetic mode is occupied with the interpersonal dynamics and processes of human social activity. The analysis is situated in the theoretical context of some recent developments in non-representational theory. We suggest that our approach and data are compatible with the process-orientation of non-representational thinkers, and that – contrary to certain objectivist tendencies within non-representational theorizing – this approach need not neglect the importance of issues of subjectivity and experience, and the relevance of

textual data. We aim to lend empirical substance to recent theoretical and philosophical discussions on space, and speculations about why the home garden appears to be so important to many people.

## **Introduction**

This paper provides a worked example of what might be called a process-oriented ‘psychosocial geography’ of ordinary landscapes, and of the home garden in particular. Our two chief objectives are, first, to introduce the concept of *modes of occupation* to enhance theoretical reflection on the relations between human existence and its wider spatial contexts; second, to present an analysis of qualitative data on everyday experiences of British home gardens to illustrate these ideas. In so doing, the aim is to contribute to the development of a ‘non-representationalist’ approach to human-landscape relations (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Macpherson, 2010; Lorimer 2005, Thrift, 2008; Wylie 2007), and to ground these theoretical discussions empirically with narrative data that sheds light on ordinary people’s experiences of gardening, as well as their expressions and interests. There is now extensive academic literature on the private or domestic garden ranging from geography (for example, Hitchings 2007; Longhurst, 2006; Head and Muir, 2007) sociology (Bhatti 2006), psychology (Gross and Lane, 2007), to art and social history (for example, Alfrey et al, 2004; Harrison 2008). Building on our previous work (Bhatti and Church 2004; Bhatti et al, 2009), we wish to suggest that domestic gardens can, perhaps unexpectedly, be considered something of a privileged space for the articulation of non-representational and non-foundational theory. Our primary data source is written material gathered by the Mass Observation Archive

(MO) in the form of ‘life writing’ about the everyday gardening activities of ‘ordinary people’ (see Sheridan et al, 2000). Thanks to MO we now have access to a range of ‘lay’ responses to everyday activities such as shopping, holidays, use of the internet etc, as well as views on national and global issues (for more information: [www.massobs.org.uk](http://www.massobs.org.uk)).

Following this introduction, the paper is structured into four sections: the first discusses non-representational theory and introduces our concept of occupation; the second focuses on methodological issues and gives an account of our data set; the third presents extracts of data in form of everyday ‘life stories’ (ie garden narratives), illustrating our four modes of occupation; and the conclusion integrates the data with theory whilst reflecting on how these modes inter-relate. Since it deals with some of the philosophical issues that typically characterise non-representational theory, the first section is necessarily pitched at a rather abstract level of generality. Whilst there is an important place for such philosophical speculation (non-representational theory, after all, is not just about data, but proposes a radically transformed view of the world), our interests in sections two and three are more empirical and ‘ordinary’. This discursive ‘gear change’ generates something of a contrast between the two broad parts of the paper, since any move from the general to the specific requires the dilution of much of the potentiality promised ‘in theory’. Nevertheless, our theoretical moves are designed to justify our empirical interest in subjectivity, even if that empirical focus remains *de facto* at the level of written accounts of human experience. In focussing resolutely on experiences communicated via discourse, we seek in this paper to extend non-representational theory into territory

associated with subjectivity. Here, however, subjectivity corresponds not to the autonomous individual of liberal humanism, but to something closer to what Thrift calls 'geographies of concern' in which persons are conceived as "much looser allocentric formations with porous boundaries over which they have only limited control" (Thrift, 2008, page 85). In short, both 'gears' are needed: without empirical detail, speculation is groundless; without theoretical development, empirical details of everyday life appear banal. In stressing the centrality of *process* to non-representational theory (henceforth NRT, see Thrift, 2008), our project builds upon a body of work stressing the ultimate inseparability and mutual constitution of landscape and human experience (Soja, 1989; MacKian, 2004; Rose, 2002; Massey, 2006; Crouch 2010). As Macpherson (2010) suggests in her recent overview of NRT, 'the non-representational sense we have of our embodiment is understood as a process that always comes into being in conjunction with the landscape around us' (page 4). Rose and Wylie (2006) argue that landscape 'animates' us and Crouch (2010, page 116) suggests that feeling landscape "is a way to imagine one's place in the world". This suggests the relevance of conceptualising affective 'ecologies of place' (Thrift, 1999), and of engaging with "the felt dimensions of a person's encounter with a landscape" (Conradson, 2007, page 106).

### **Non-representational human-landscape relations**

"When we are conscious of nature, what is it that we really observe? The obvious answer is that we perceive various material bodies, such as chairs, bricks, trees. We can touch them, see them and hear them. As I write I can hear the birds

singing in a Berkshire garden in early spring. In conformity with this answer, it is now fashionable and indeed almost universal to say that our notions of space merely arise from our endeavours to express the relations of these bodies to each other. I am sorry to appear pigheaded; but, though I am nearly in a minority of one, I believe this answer to be entirely wrong". (Whitehead 1922 / 1997 page 53)

This quotation is taken from a book in which Whitehead critiques and reframes relativity theory just a few years after Einstein had proposed it. The kind of radical rethinking of space offered by Whitehead nearly a century ago was long ignored and is only now gaining the recognition it deserves, albeit in faltering steps (Thrift 2008). Whatmore (2002 page 118) draws on Whitehead's discussion of the body to argue 'that taking embodiment as the nexus of our situatedness in the world is to foreground relationality, rather than individuality, as the axiom of social'. Here we can only sketch Whitehead's relevance in abstract outline.

Whitehead's rethinking of space is just one aspect of his effort to systematize some of the groundbreaking ideas of figures such as William James, Henri Bergson and indeed Albert Einstein into a philosophically defensible non-representational *process ontology*. As Stenner (2008) argues, this ontology is poorly understood if characterized as somehow refusing the troublesome distinction between 'subject' and 'object'. Rather, relations between subject and object are multiplied, and what is refused is their polarization into a realm of high-level conscious human subjective experience (existing in pristine abstraction from the materiality of the physical world) and a realm of brute objectivity (in

which subjectivity plays no part). The world, insists Whitehead, is not a collection of merely objective 'material bodies' (chairs, bricks, trees and birds in a Berkshire garden) that are 'observed' by the subjectivity of perceiving consciousness. If this were the case, then human/landscape relations would be subject/object relations (i.e. relations in which subjects form representations of objects). From Whitehead's non-representational perspective, human experience is as much a *part of* nature as is a bird, a tree or a stone, and, symmetrically, birds, trees and stones are composed of *events* that, in the final analysis, can be thought of as involving rudimentary forms of subjectivity (e.g. Whitehead, 1938/1966). From this position of radical immanence, rather than misrecognise human/landscape relations as human 'subjects' relating to material 'objects', Whitehead rethinks both human and 'environment' as complexes of ongoing processes, each of which entails numerous chains of unfolding events in which 'subjects' (experiences) organize the data of their 'objects' (expressions), before themselves 'concreting' as objects (expressions) for the experience of the next 'subject' in the process. As Crouch (2003 page 1951) suggests in relation to spatial performativity "This may be significant in terms of lay geographical knowledge and sense of self and its identities, as components of an ongoing and fluid practical ontology"

Recent NRT in geography correctly challenges the 'humanism' implicit in conflating human/landscape relations with subject/object relations (Thrift, 2008). However, NRT - and here we would also include the actor network theory of Latour and his colleagues (e.g. Latour, 2005) - has hitherto been preoccupied with what Macpherson (2010) calls 'pre-cognitive' dynamics, and has tended to take a rather flatly *objectivist* stance. An

objectivist stance, at an ontological level, stresses the mutual modification of bodies in relational compositions. With respect to epistemology, it warns against analyses that orient towards experience and subjectivity. By extension to methodology, one finds criticism of those that rely upon self-reported data. The resulting 'flat' objectivism has led some advocates of NRT to distance their work from cultural and discursive forms of social science (Macpherson, 2010; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002). This in turn has sometimes led, within geography at least, to a certain polarization of positions. In the journal *Area* (2005, 37/4), for example, Deborah Thien accused Nigel Thrift and Derek McCormack of adopting an objectivist perspective associated with a concept of affect that she described as 'technocratic' and 'distancing'. Anderson and Harrison (2006) replied by effectively accusing her of accepting an uncritically humanistic perspective centred on personal experiences of emotions. Although a useful corrective to tacit humanisms, we would suggest that NRT can be taken too far in a direction that neglects the interplay of experience and expression so central to Whitehead. Indeed, as Lorimer (2005 page 88) argued in developing relational thinking "care must be taken that, in pointing up diverse assemblages of objects, technologies and practices, what emerges is not simply a smear of equivalence. Claims made for the flattened and radically symmetrical ontologies of actor-network theory have recently met with calls for closer attention to conditions of ontological dissonance and ethical redistribution".

As should be clear from our previous discussion, rather than polarizing the 'objective' and the 'subjective', we take the view that integration is more appropriate. Cultural geographers such as Daniels and Cosgrove (1993), for example, are far from mistaken in



stressing how experiences of landscape are informed by ideological 'ways of seeing' shaped by discursive practices. Such findings are important. Problems would result, however, were such an approach to *reduce* the complexity of human-landscape relations to discursive mediation in political context. To avoid this we follow NRT in recognising the practical, embodied, affective and perceptual aspects of experience that are often difficult to articulate discursively, especially when recognised as interconnected processes that exceed 'individuals'. Equally problematic, however, is the tendency amongst some advocates of NRT to elide questions of subjectivity and experience in favour of a new form of self-consciously 'inhuman' objectivism concerned only with assemblages of bodies and objects (Harman, 2005). The shift in emphasis from 'discourse' to 'materiality' at play here involves a leap from the high-level ideology of the cultural geographers to the mutual affections of mindless ('pre-cognitive') *bodies*. Our point is that affirmation of the relevance of 'pre-cognitive' modes of experience need not entail rejection of the relevance of supposedly 'post' cognitive modalities (Stenner, 2011; see also Pile, 2009).

Aside from the occasional adoption of insights from phenomenology, psychoanalysis and neuroscience, this weakness of non-representational geography arguably relates to the lack of a complementary account of the *psychological* (Pile 2009, and see Thift's 2008 suggestions). A theoretical basis for this kind of integration is, however, available in the form of an emerging 'non-foundational' psychology (Brown and Stenner, 2009). Drawing upon a range of process thinkers including James, Whitehead, Bergson, Serres, Luhmann and Deleuze, Brown and Stenner (2009) have proposed a psychology rooted in

'deep empiricism'. Experience is central to this account, but experience is emphatically not limited to the modes of conscious subjective experience associated with human beings, and it is never separated from its 'objects'. Indeed, following Whitehead, they define experience as the process of assembling and patterning objects (what Whitehead calls *prehension*).

Experience, in this account, is a process that is never ultimately abstractable from its embodied and social circumstances, and that is composed of successive integrations of multiple interconnected layers of 'prehensive' activity. These layers include a dimension of power (in which bodies affect and are affected by one another in various activity streams); a dimension of sensory perception (and related motor activity); a dimension of conceptual propositions (including memory and imagination) and a discursive dimension of culturally situated practices of language. In the context of human-environment relations, these dimensions are inseparably interwoven in everyday social practices, since entry into language transforms concepts, percepts and affects alike. Nevertheless, any chain of discursive events (a conversation over a garden fence, for instance) *implicates* an experiential mosaic of conceptual, perceptual and affective modes of order that cannot without violence be 'flattened' into a homogenous materiality.

A decisive feature of Brown and Stenner's non-representational psychology is thus the refusal to bifurcate the universe into the two irreconcilable categories of brute objective reality and subjective experience. As they argue, such a bifurcation commits one to a position in which an experiencing subject 'represents' an experienced object in the same

way that a knower 'represents' what it is they know. Subjectivity is in this way problematically excluded from the concept of nature since the natural world 'contains' nothing that might be called 'experience'. From a representationalist perspective, experience is never a part of reality, but merely a stage-show *about* it. From a non-representationalist perspective, by contrast, a given event or occasion of experience is not just a part of reality but literally the *decisive* part: the part in which possibilities are actualised as concrete fact (see Stenner 2011, for a more developed account - rooted in William James' thought - of subjectivity as the *becoming* of objectivity). This position is effectively what Deleuze (1993 page 79) arrives at, using explicitly Whiteheadian terminology, with his core concept of *the event*: 'the event is inseparably the objectification of one prehension and the subjectification of another; it is at once public and private, potential and real, participating in the becoming of another event and the subject of its own becoming'. This position which focuses on experience also entails a rethinking of the relationship between a 'system' (an organism capable of perception, for example) and its 'environment' according to which the environment enters into the nature of each system at each moment of its existence. Through this process, the system, in turn, transforms its environment. Each *event* or occasion of experience, in other words, reiterates its macrocosmic world, albeit in a *limited* way. Affects, percepts, concepts and utterances are, in this sense, limited *creations* of reality, or activities of realization. This rethinking of the system/environment relation corresponds neatly to contemporary systems theoretical science, according to which the notion of an environment is always relative to a system (cf. chapter 2 of Brown and Stenner, 2009; Luhmann, 1995).

A given system, in short, constructs a boundary through which it excludes only itself, meaning that the 'environment' is different for each system, since 'environment' receives its unity only through a system having excluded itself from it. Again, for Brown and Stenner (2009) such processes must be grasped in terms of the synthesis of multiple simultaneous strata of process or activity. The conscious experience of a human being (qua system of consciousness), from this perspective, is *part of* broader nature, and expresses that broader nature in limited form. The organic processes that constitute the brain of the one having the experience constitute the closest *environment* of that experience, and the system of organs and tissues comprising the body beyond the brain constitute the environment of that brain. The body as a whole can itself be construed as a system in relation to its immediate socio-geographical environment. Despite these relative distinctions, there is no *absolute* distinction to be made between a 'mind', a 'brain', a 'body' and a 'landscape'. The body, for instance, is perpetually losing and gaining molecules from its physical environment and in one sense is continuous with that physical environment.

Embodied psychosocial existence is ultimately continuous with a wider nature itself characterisable in terms of coordinated events or 'societies' of actual occasions (Whatmore, 2002). Thus there is no passive universal space but a multiplicity of mixed spaces, contingent upon massed relational activities of multiply coordinated occasions of experience and expression. In place of an ensemble of objects in a common, singular and geometrical universal space we must envisage hybrid geographies composed of a mosaic of local emergent spatialities, none of which is self-contained (or perhaps what Thrift,

(2008 page 85) refers to as 'lines or fields of concernful and affecting interaction'). Each event in this complex of emergents relates in some manner to each other event.

The concept of *occupation* becomes particularly useful once we replace the notion of objects in universal space with a concept of hybrid psycho-social-geographies composed of a mosaic of emergent spatialities. That is to say, the processes of a given system (whether that be a cell, a plant, an organism or a criminal justice system) can be said to *occupy* the broader processes that come to constitute its environment. In turn, that environment is conceivable as a mode of occupation in relation to a broader region of activity. To occupy a region and to be likewise occupied is not to be in a relation of 'representation' to 'reality', but to be an active constitutive and transformative part of the actual universe. As will be clarified and empirically fleshed out below, 'occupation' thus conveys at least four senses relevant to non-representational theory. First, it conveys the sense of a containing place or environment (one occupies a territory or a building in the sense of being 'contained' by it, for instance), but it also retains the sense that the territory or environment is simultaneously implicated or enfolded into the system that is its occupant (each event of experience 'signifies' the whole structure that constitutes its environment). A territory thus occupies us as much as we occupy it (the habits of inhabitants express the habitat). Third, occupation conveys the sense of the inevitable power struggles at play in the taking and holding of a territory (as with a military occupation). Finally, consistent with an even-centred ontology of process, each of these senses resonates with the basic sense of occupation as an *activity* (we 'occupy' ourselves with tasks, for instance, and, if we are lucky, we follow an 'occupation'). Ultimately it is the interplay between these senses that makes occupation a fecund concept.

### **Methodological issues**

Empirical details come in multiple forms, making drastic selectivity inevitable. We are here interested in what people find ‘important’ about their garden experiences, and we tackle this question by examining how ordinary people write about gardens of relevance to them. Hence, in the present study, we are dealing with how our respondents *narrate* their experiences. We are thus operating empirically at Brown and Stenner’s (2009) *discursive* level. This of course leaves us vulnerable to standard critiques of author’s self-reports ‘telling more than they can know’ (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977), and the development of these critiques by non-representational theorists such as Massumi (2002). Our theoretical discussion should have clarified that our use of discursive data is not naïve to such NRT criticisms. We suggest that a sufficiently *sensitive* approach to such writing can provide at least some access to other relevant modes of experience, even when these are ‘translated’ discursively (Stenner 1993). Discursive communication is never self-contained and – despite being a complex form of life with its own radically specific mode of process - always bears an intimate relation to a layered complex of extra-discursive activities (material, practical, affective, perceptual, institutional and so forth). We are always using language to express what is not in language by way of language. We thus approached the discursive data by *decomposing* it into themes that attend to distinguishable ‘modes of occupation’ that, taken together, might yield insight into any ‘importance’ this particular human-landscape relation might have to participants. The method, known as ‘thematic decomposition’ (for more details see Stenner, 1993; Bower et al, 2002) – does not treat language as ‘representing’ the extra-discursive, but as

a distinct stratum of reality construction that territorializes and transforms other such strata.

#### The data set: Mass observation

The primary research for the project that generated this paper was carried out at the Mass Observation Archive (MO), held at the University of Sussex in the UK . The aim of MO is to record the thoughts, feelings, memories, and activities of people whose records would not otherwise be left: 'ordinary' people, and it currently operates as a life writing venture with a volunteer panel of 'ordinary' people recruited through local and national press. The panel of volunteer writers tends to contain more older than younger people, more middle class than working class; with very few from black and ethnic minorities (race is not indicated unless respondents self-identify), and although it is a nationwide archive there are evident clusters of respondents in the Midlands and the south east of England. As the panel of respondents is self-selecting, the MO material cannot therefore be understood as 'representative' in the traditional positivist sense, but the writers do 'represent' a range of views on key contemporary topics, as well as 'representing' a variety of 'slices' of everyday life. Our data set was responses to the Spring 1998 directive gardens and gardening, which received over 244 replies (two-thirds were from women), ranging from a page to some over 30 pages, along with numerous photographs, and drawings of garden designs . The Directive took the form of a series of open-ended questions and prompts, and because respondents are free to express themselves anonymously. The resulting 'garden stories' tend to be everyday experiences of the activity of gardening, expressions of emotional responses, and personal views.

Respondents were asked to write about significant personal themes that related to gardens, including what their memories are of gardens, whether there were particular plants with special significance, how they came to gardening, what they like and disliked about it, what plant knowledge they possessed.

As is typical with Mass Observation directives, over half of the respondents were aged over 50, and three-quarters were women. This is not a significant concern since UK based gardening surveys (Mintel, 2007) indicate that the majority of regular gardeners are women aged over 40; men and younger people being significantly less likely to identify gardening as a leisure activity. Moreover it is precisely older women that are under represented in public discourses, so using their garden stories highlight the 'democratic' nature of MO (Sheridan et al 2000).

Since the MO does not aim to recruit representative samples from which we can generalise, we have used the data to extract a number of themes with comparable content. The Project is set up in such a way that the writers remain anonymous; thus the quotes below are followed by a number indicating their file from which the narratives are extracted, then their gender, and finally age. The present paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the full complexity of this analysis, but concentrates on a data-grounded typology designed to shed light on the variety of ways the respondents narrate their experiences of gardens.

### **Analysis: Four modes of occupation in the domestic garden**



In analysing our data it became evident that different forms of experience were associated with different ways of using the garden or of ‘occupying oneself’ with gardens. We thus developed the four overlapping meanings of the word ‘occupation’ sketched above, which together provide a rough typology for making sense of our data. These include:

a) *A naturalistic mode of occupation.* This mode corresponds to the simple sense in which when someone is ‘in’ the garden they ‘occupy’ the garden. The garden, as a place, is a more or less enclosed space that contains us when we are in it and that we can experience as such. It is a spatial nexus of entities for experience and contemplation. In the naturalistic mode there is a kind of ‘simultaneity’ between our experiences and the garden we occupy that can be grasped by the phrase ‘being-there’.

b) *A nostalgic mode of occupation.* In this mode, it is not just that we occupy the garden, but that the garden *occupies us*. The garden is an environment for and ingredient in moments of remembering and personal reflection. Feelings towards self and others are here ‘gathered’ and contemplated. Childhood gardens, for example, can become an integral and often cherished part of our embodied psyches. Together, a) and b) compose the twofold unity: “We are in the world [garden] and the world [garden] is in us” (Whitehead 1938 / 1968, page 165).

c) *A pragmatic mode of occupation.* Here the garden features as a workable space and material for practical tasks. Gardeners engage activities such as digging, weeding,

planting, picking, fertilizing, and so on. 'Occupation' here conveys the sense of a job, a profession or some other integrated sphere of activity.

d) *A mimetic mode of occupation.* 'Occupation' here conveys the sense of taking possession of a territory, as with the 'military occupation' of a city. Here the garden is an *arena* for social life and a focal point of interpersonal dynamics, social displays, conflicts and relations of power and status. It might be 'owned' and 'contested' or serve as the stage for more or less hospitable and hostile social interactions. Our use of the word 'mimetic' relates to Girard's theory of mimetic desire where the desirability of objects and territories is held to be socially mediated because copied from a model / rival (Girard, 1976).

#### ***A naturalistic mode of occupation***

Although not all respondents found gardens and gardening a highly valuable experience, many of those who did narrated the garden in quasi-spiritual terms as a place of enormous importance to them. In this first mode of occupation the garden features as a natural object or spatial nexus of entities for experience and contemplation, and this despite full recognition of the labour and design involved in the process. Instead of reiterating the usual social constructionist critiques of the concept-of-nature as a rhetorical function-of-discourse, we wish instead to look in a little more detail at some of the less obvious experiential aspects involved in this mode of occupation. First we will unpack the notion of gardens as offering 'quasi-spiritual' experiences. *Contrasts* are central to these experiences. For example, they are routinely contrasted with a stressful and

conflictual human world of technology and bureaucracy. Consider the following quotation from a 71 year old woman respondent from Leeds, who contrasts the ‘miracle’ of ‘nature’ with worldly ‘awfulness’:

“I can’t imagine a world without flowers and plants and beautiful trees, nature is a miracle, and even at times when I am feeling a bit low, I have only to see a lovely view of pretty flowers, it makes me smile and feel better, in spite of the awfulness going on in the world”. (Z53)

A second related contrast distinguishes the garden as naturalistic object of experience from spaces populated by people. As one respondent put it, “I love my garden, it means pleasure and solitude if I need it” (A1733, woman aged 71). This mode of occupation is precisely *not* to do with the interpersonal dynamics we will shortly find in the mimetic mode, and in fact typically requires what could be called a ‘de-populating’ of the garden. A 74 year old woman writes of this kind of experience being had by way of ‘a gentle walk around the garden in my dressing gown before anyone is up’ (Z583).

In this mode, the garden is a source of deep pleasure and wellbeing. The pleasure involved, however, is considered somewhat mysterious and is very much about gaining intuitive access to a bigger picture of the universe. Note the capitalisation of the word Nature in the following comments from about such pleasures:

“Two pleasures from Nature which I cannot explain: the sound of rain falling on a summer garden; and the breeze making shot-silk of a tall green field of barley”.

(F2218 man aged 65)

“[Gardens and Flowers and Trees] How wonderful they are. My sense of smell isn’t what it used to be. Hearing deteriorates, one must appreciate these pleasures – seeing, hearing, smelling, listening, tasting – all are important in a garden seeing, the colour, the shapes, the patterns, of all the different flowers... I wonder at Nature’s creation, and diversity, and abundance... I listen and watch the diversity of birds, think about bird migration. Birds are often in gardens, they NEED gardens”. (W2151 woman aged 60).

What is very striking about such extracts is the heavy emphasis placed upon sensory perception. Such experiences are first and foremost sensual experiences of an externality named ‘Nature’ that require the mediation of fallible and failing sense organs. The remarks about vision above, for example, are quite notable for their description of the pure presentational immediacy of visual sensa: colour, shape, pattern. But other components of experience are also described. The sensations are described as unexplained, and as provoking ‘wonder at Nature’s creation’ and *thinking* about matters such as bird migration and the reciprocal relations of fauna and habitat. In addition to these conceptual components there is an underlying affective sense of the vital *importance* of these often unnoticed experiences. The sensory experiences of colour, shape and so on symbolise not just ‘all the different flowers’ but the ‘miracle’ of

participating in a universal interconnected totality. These conceptual and affective dimensions ‘unfold’, as it were, from the sensory perceptions:

“...to think how lucky I am to live in such surroundings, and allied to that is to watch the seeds I planted slowly grow into a healthy plant. I never cease to marvel at the miracle of life, be it in the human body or in the tiniest insect crawling over a leaf” . (F212, man aged 80)

This extract illustrates the sense of *importance* given to factors that might otherwise be considered to be mundane and ‘everyday’. A plant growing gives access to the marvel of the miracle of life and the extraordinary is discovered within the ordinary. These moments of pleasurable experience thus seem to express a profound *connection* between the mundane ‘tiniest insect crawling over a leaf’ and the universal. The sense of union or participation with a wider whole is thus felt in an embodied fashion, permitting the body itself to ‘show up’ as itself a part of nature. It could be said that the core issue in the naturalistic mode of occupation is to *be there* or to be *co-present* with one’s surroundings. This explains the contrasts described above, since the hustle and bustle of everyday life rarely permits the simultaneity of simply *being-there*.

### ***A nostalgic mode of occupation***

We refer to this mode as ‘nostalgic’ because the experiences that constitute it relate more to absence than to presence. It has two related aspects. On the one hand, the gardens of our respondents are often full of memories, and on the other, their memories are often full

of gardens. We saw that in the naturalistic mode, perception is directed outwards towards the unity of nature, one's body included. In nostalgic mode of occupation, by contrast, attention is directed inwards towards a self-reflection absorbed in memories. The meaning and importance of the garden thus becomes tightly bound up with images and impressions of *absent* friends, family and loved ones (including pets). The garden thus 'occupies' *us*, but - again contrary to the naturalistic mode - it occupies us qua *mediator* of personal relationships. The nostalgic mode is thus highly 'populated', albeit with ghosts.

Illustrating our first aspect, many respondents describe their gardens as being full of living memories. Trees, flowers and shrubs symbolise loved ones from the past and present such that the process of gardening is akin to keeping memories and relationships alive. One respondent, for example, writes of the flower beds planted by his wife before she died:

"It is over five years since she departed and I have not changed the layout of her flowers and shrubs. It is quite hard to keep it like it is but somehow I cannot find the heart to alter it". (H1806, man aged 72)

Those memorialized in gardens are not necessarily dead. The garden of the man cited above (H1806), for instance, contains a flowering cherry that was a present from his eldest son in 1966 and a horse chestnut that had been moved from his old council house and transplanted in his new garden. The following extract discusses both birth and death

in this context, and evokes a homology between a beautifully flowering rose bush and a flourishing granddaughter:

“When my husband was alive he used to look after the plants and flowers in the house – now I treasure the plants he grew and look after them like the apple of my eye! Most of my ‘gardening’ is done on my husband’s grave where I really do take a great deal of trouble to keep it looking lovely all the year round. My pride are some rose bushes I planted on the occasion of each of my granddaughter’s birth and they flower beautifully each year”. (W2276, woman aged 72)

In these ways, particular flowers, trees or shrubs come to symbolize particular people, whose memory is evoked and kept alive via the garden. Turning to our second aspect of the nostalgic mode of occupation, we find that the memories that are evoked in this way by gardens are themselves often memories *of* gardens or, better, memories of people-in-gardens:

“I think back quite often to my days spent in that garden. Certain flowers do evoke memories – michalmas daisies remind me of the many hours spent making daisy chains at my grandparents house... blue bells remind me of long walk with my mother though some bluebell woods... we would pick some to take home... - when my grandpa died in early March 1947, I picked some snow drops to put on his grave, and still think of that each time the snowdrops come out”. (W571 woman aged 60).

As well as plants, particular sensory experiences can likewise – in Proustian style – connect one instantly back to the gardens past: ‘I have quite deep memories of my grandparent’s garden, but I don’t know why, I wasn’t particularly close to them. But the smell of the warm potting shed full of plants and compost takes me straight back there’. (A1706, woman aged 51). A 76 year old housewife from Belfast, for example, indicates how she remembers her grandfather *through* the garden (C2570):

“One of my best memories is the time I spent in my grandparent’s garden. I remember my grandfather through the garden, he loved the soil and growing things.... It was a real haven as far as I was concerned, and he told me the names of all the flowers”.

And some respondents thematise this relationship between gardens and memories quite explicitly: “My granny grew potatoes and I remember the excitement of her digging them up ready for a meal later.... Gardens can be a focus for people’s memories”. (L1691 woman aged 54)

It seems clear that the gardens we grew up with and that grew up with us can become an emotionally significant part of our embodied psychic existence. These ‘gardens past’ are inextricably bound up with the people, plants and animals that occupied those gardens with us. In turn, this affective symbolism of gardens past is carried forward into gardens



present, sometimes in the literal sense that a tree or sculpture or garden bench might be transferred from one garden to another, and sometimes in the sense that a comparable flower or vegetable patch might reconnect to the past via the evocation of its images. Being in the garden in this nostalgic mode, is thus less a *being there* than a mediated and reflective *being with*. This in turn opens the possibility of literally occupying ourselves (remembering gardens past whilst sitting in a garden deck-chair in the present, for instance) with these ways in which the garden occupies us.

### ***A pragmatic mode of occupation***

The third mode we shall consider corresponds to the definition of occupation as an activity. The *action* orientation of this mode, with its emphasis on practice and performance, sharply contrasts with the *inner contemplations* of the nostalgic mode and the *outer sensory observations* of the naturalistic mode. The pragmatic mode of occupation is concerned with the pleasures and pains associated with intense experiences with tasks such as weeding, planting, digging, mowing, building, garden landscaping, and so on. It thus points to a third distinct way (related to ‘healthy pleasures’) in which the garden and gardening might become highly valued. For some, the mere physical activity of ‘mixing with the earth’ provides a source of joy: “(I)... enjoy getting down to ground level on hands and knees, crawling under bushes and up trees and ending up with myself needing a hot bath” (T2543 woman aged 60). Rather than being construed negatively, such hard labour is an experience that many report looking forward to:

“I hope for a dry spell in February when I have a blitz on weeding and turning the soil... our daughter has a small estate house. I organised her garden for her –

sowed a lawn and filled up the herbaceous border – and when we visit I do a bit of weeding... My sadness is the thought of old age and not being able to climb trees and cut back the annual growth”. (B1509 man aged 69)

For others, this very bodily physical engagement with the garden has therapeutic connotations,

“...there’s something very satisfying in turning over old planting beds and pulling out weeds! Whenever I feel stressed or angry, I still go out into the garden and pull up weeds to work it out of my system”. (W1813, woman aged 47)

A 64 year old man (C110) also ponders on this matter, reflecting on his reasons for enduring a sustained period of particularly hard physical labour:

“ did all the work manually, using no mechanical appliances... it took over two year[s]. I threw myself into this labour of love with great gusto, suspending many of my usual leisure activities... looking back I can hardly believe that I found the energy to do it all... In fact, I now can see that it was precisely because this was a very stressful period in my business life, that I found such peace in the physical effort of heavy sweaty labour”

For these respondents it is clear that the *process* of gardening is as important as any product of such labour. Indeed, a notable feature of gardens is that the process is literally

never ending. These writers do not ‘consume’ their gardens like a product taken off the shelf, rather they *accompany* their gardens through the seasons and the years such that – much as with intimate relationships - their own biographies become bound up with the ‘story’ of their gardens.

### *A mimetic mode of occupation*

The final mode we shall consider is less distinct than the previous modes, and in some respects it functions as their ‘other’. It involves the kind of ‘populated’ garden from which the naturalistic mode withdraws and it can include the stresses and conflicts from which the pragmatic mode offers relief. In being ‘populated’ it overlaps to some extent with the nostalgic mode, but differs in that it concerns present social interaction rather than memories. In the *mimetic* mode of occupation the garden figures as an *arena* of social intercourse and, more specifically, as a *territory* that is the stake in a range of communicational and interpersonal dynamics, or as a trophy that might symbolise such dynamics. These social dynamics – including conflicts and relations of power – become the chief focus of experience, and the other modes of occupation recede into the background. A 62 year old woman from the Wirral (W853), for instance, writes of her garden in the following terms:

“The front garden is ‘mine’, the rear, my husband’s. This arrangement to solve the arguments over gardening and who does what and how. His methods appal me, and vice versa”.

In this mode, the experience of the garden is thus tightly bound up in a real-time web of relations with other people. It is not the garden as such, but these other people that occupy us for the most part. An extreme statement of this is provided by a 30 year old female respondent to the pleasure and enjoyment directive who states that: “take great pleasure in anything which my mother dislikes or is hurt by” (M1201, woman aged 36). If this woman’s mother were to dislike a particular style of garden, then this respondent would desire precisely that style. The garden itself is thus not what is directly relevant in such dynamics. The object in question could be a new relationship, a dress, a bicycle or anything else. The object, in other words, is merely a pretext which serves as a vehicle for the playing out of interpersonal issues.

We call this a ‘mimetic’ mode because it relates to Rene Girard’s theory of the mimetic nature of desire. For Girard, desire rarely flows ‘authentically’ from the one who desires (the subject) and nor is it provoked ‘naturalistically’ by way of the inherently desirable nature of the object. Rather, he argues, we tend to *imitate* the desire of another (the model or mediator), and this tends towards conflict when the same object cannot be secured by both subject and model. The model can thus turn into a rival. Mimetic desire can, therefore, take convoluted forms such as wanting precisely what a model-turned-rival appears *not* to desire. In the mimetic mode, then, the pleasures and pains of the garden are *refracted*, as it were, through the perceived feelings, desires and experiences of other people.

Because any actual experiences are already in the past at time of narration, there is at best a fuzzy boundary between mimetic and nostalgic modes. Examples of the mimetic mode can thus also be found embedded, as it were, in 'nostalgic' extracts. Consider the following account from a 72 year old male retired typesetter (H1806).:

“...my father was a townie who, in my opinion, did the garden because it was there. Being a tidy minded man his garden had to be weedless and uniform and he would spend most of his time in achieving this result. Like most of the prewar householders, he allocated the majority of the plot to vegetables which were planted with meticulous accuracy with his many gauges for the variety of vegetables grown. His results were not by any measure satisfactory for he did not study the art of gardening at all and relied solely on the instructions on the seed packets for information”.

In this account of a memory, a particular 'sociological' type of gardening practice and hence garden *desire* is associated with the writer's father, who is described as a typical pre-war 'tidy minded' 'townie'. This gardening style is frowned upon for its rather artless preoccupation with weedless order, and our writer goes on to distance his own desires from those of his father:

“... he planted the vegetables in the same place year after year and [my sister and I] can both remember the order of them as we used to have to help 'harvest' them when the time was due.... I did sometimes help to plant the garden out but never

had a plot of my own to manage. It was not an enjoyable task to help as my father was too fussy and made it seem boring to a child”.

The same writer gives the following interesting description of the ‘gardening dynamics’ that obtained between his ex-wife and himself:

“My first project ... was to lay the front and back lawns and level the rest of the land for my wife to have her flower beds. She loved flowers and longed to have an ‘old world garden’ so I always left it to her to manage. I used to intervene frequently as she would not destroy any growing plant and the flowers would get choked by the weeds, she did not complain too much but I was never allowed to thin out plants that had obviously grown too thick and were not able to grow to their full potential. I really did not like her efforts but she somehow saw beauty in it and as she was at home many more hours than me she had more time to appreciate it”

Although this extract clearly has memorial qualities proper to the nostalgic mode, it fits the mimetic mode to the extent that our writer vividly describes the garden as a social territory, in this case characterised by interpersonal compromise. Her desire for unchecked life is balanced against his desire for order, and these dynamics are somehow fixed and objectified in the material form of an old-world flower bed.

## Conclusion

“... have a small plot of land at all times”

(Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari 1992 page 161)

Our fourfold concept of occupation reveals the complexity involved in everyday human/landscape relations within British home gardens. It has enabled us to probe some of the reasons why many of our participants find gardens important. We conclude by linking these modes to features of the broader literature.

First, through the naturalistic mode, enjoying the garden is associated with a sense of being or becoming part of something bigger via a *being-there* with(in) ‘nature’. The value here relates to an aesthetically driven grasp of an interconnected totality in which one finds one’s ‘place’. Arguably, it is this feature that is stressed by Richardson (2005) and Cooper (2006). Both seem prone to rather metaphysical statements, such as Richardson’s (2005, page 143) claim that, in gardens, “we formalize our relationship with the cosmos”, or Cooper’s (2006, page 161) assertion that gardening “embodies more saliently than any other practice ... the truth of the relation between human beings, their world, and the “ground” from which the “gift” of this world comes”. Ordinary people’s accounts of gardens in the naturalistic mode echo these sentiments (what Cooper calls a ‘serene life led in attunement to truth’) in interesting ways.

If nature is displayed as immanent unity in the naturalistic mode, in the pragmatic mode one participates practically in that whole. The value here is a quite literal *mixing with the earth*. The *action* orientation of this mode, with its emphasis on practice and performance, contrasts sharply with the sense-centred *observations* of the naturalistic mode. One can easily imagine the same person passing in seconds from pragmatic to naturalistic mode. Recall, for example, the respondent who wrote: “I enjoy ... to lean on my spade when I am on my allotment and gaze around at the lovely countryside”. It is not hard to imagine him - moments before and after this scene of naturalistic rapture - digging with this spade and hence transiting from occupation with a shovel to occupation with the universe and back again. The *value* of the pragmatic mode, of course, includes its health benefits but also the wellbeing associated – not with contemplating a finished product – but with participation in an unfinished process (Milligan et al. (2004). Gardeners are practical participants in gardens that are always, to borrow a phrase from Whitehead, ‘incompletions in process’. Richardson links Whitehead’s philosophy to gardening in this context: “If one takes Whitehead’s point [about process] seriously, the act of gardening can be viewed as a living paradigm of this philosophy of the never-ending process of experiencing” (Richardson 2005, page150-151).

Perhaps the key value of the nostalgic mode concerns the occupation of ‘gathering’ the personal, relational and intimate sources of one’s life story, and, through this, weaving the past, present and future into an integrated experience. The garden can provide an ideal meditative ‘other’ space for such symbolic work, and this is a theme we have pursued elsewhere in our own contributions (Bhatti et al. (2009). Foucault (1986 page 26)



indicated something similar when he described the garden as “the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world... [a] happy universalising heterotopia since the beginning of antiquity”.

The value of the garden in mimetic mode concerns its role as an arena for sociability, both in its positive and negative aspects. This mode also stresses the sociological, political and economic aspects of gardens and gardening, emphasising its classed and gendered dynamics, for instance, and attending to the cultural and historical specificities of its social construction. The value of this mode is, however, less obvious than the others, partly because the value of the naturalistic, pragmatic and nostalgic modes is sometimes specifically related to the *absence* of the mimetic mode of occupation. The ‘being-there’ of the naturalistic mode, as we have seen, requires a socially *de-populated* garden, and absorption in the nostalgic and pragmatic modes militates against the real-time ‘chatter’ of socially mediated desire.

Finally, we wish to point out that each mode of occupation tends to privilege and accentuate one particular modality of the multiple interconnected layers of activity implied in Brown and Stenner’s (2009) account of experience. The mimetic mode is dominated by Brown and Stenner’s (2009) discursive modality (talk, argumentation); the naturalistic mode by the perceptual modalities (vision, hearing, smell, touch, taste); the pragmatic mode is dominated by the experience of embodied action as it affects and is affected by other bodies in unfolding encounters; and the nostalgic mode by high level processes of memory, thought and reflection. Although our analysis emphasises the

distinctiveness of each mode, it should be clear that ultimately the boundaries are far from sharp and, furthermore, that the ‘importance’ of gardens in any concrete case flows from the fact that they potentially afford all of these modes of occupation. In doing this we use the four modes of occupation to explore in domestic gardens something similar to the process of flirting with space that Crouch (2003, 2010a, b) examines amongst allotment holders which enables people to negotiate their everyday lives and selves. Being in the ordinary domestic garden, in sum, appears to allow for a powerful synthesis of these four valued modes of occupation. The garden can thus be a privileged site for the cultivation, not just of vegetables and flowers, but of a wiser relation to the abstractions of human-landscape relations, and to the broader circumstances of existence. We give the last word to Voltaire:

“ ‘Human grandeur,’ said Pangloss, ‘is very dangerous, if we believe the testimonies of almost all philosophers’... ‘Excellently observed,’ answered Candide; ‘but let us cultivate our garden’ ”.

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