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Volunteer Environmental Stewardship and Affective Labour in Philadelphia

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Abstract

Recent research has critically evaluated the rapid growth of volunteer urban environmental stewardship. Framings of this phenomenon have largely focused upon environmentality and/or neoliberal environments, unfortunately often presenting a totalising picture of the state and/or market utilising power from above to create environmental subjects with limited agency available to local citizens. Based upon qualitative research with volunteer urban environmental stewards in Philadelphia, affective labour is proposed as an alternative explanation for participation. Stewards volunteered their time and labour due to the intense emotional attachments they formed with their neighbourhoods, neighbours, and nonhuman others in relationships of affective labour. Volunteer urban environmental stewardship as affective labour provides room for agency on the part of individuals and groups involved in volunteer urban environmental reproduction and opens up new ways of relating to and being with human and nonhuman others.

Keywords: Environmental Identities, Affective Labour, Environmentality, Neoliberalism, Volunteerism, Philadelphia

INTRODUCTION

Recent research has suggested that volunteerism is on the rise in the United States, with over a quarter of the population volunteering at least once a year for a charitable organization (Fisher et al. 2011). The phenomena is not limited to the U.S., as similar or higher rates of volunteer participation have been found in Australia, Canada, the UK, and Germany (Measham and Barnett 2007). These volunteers include growing numbers of urban and rural stewards maintaining and improving local environmental conditions. While there are many possible interpretations of this sort of volunteerism, the two dominant in the critical geographic literature on urban (and rural) environmental volunteerism are environmentality

and neoliberalism, sometimes combined in discussions of neoliberal governmentalities/environmentalities. Despite the utility of these two approaches, critics have argued that they lack room for local agency against the power of the state and the market (Larner 2003; Barnett 2005; Ferguson 2010; Brownlow 2011; Singh 2013).

Qualitative research with urban environmental volunteer stewards in Philadelphia who planted and pruned trees, worked in urban gardens, and participated in neighborhood cleanups produced results that serve to contest the hegemony of environmentality and neoliberal environmental governance in the understanding of urban environmental volunteerism. Participants were found to be performing affective labour, labour “that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion (Hardt and Negri 2004: 108)”, “even a sense of connectedness or community (Hardt 1999: 96)”, caring for and developing relationships with nonhuman others along with their fellow participants in local neighborhood environmental stewardship. The intense attachments (Ahmed 2004) they formed to their neighbourhood, neighbours, and nonhuman others (both specific (such as individual trees) and in general (such as neighbourhood environments)) motivated their participation.

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Finally, participation in affective labor opened participants up to new subjectivities and socialities, new ways of being in and of the world, through the joy associated with their increased ability to effect material environmental improvements in their neighborhoods (Ruddick 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmentality approaches to urban environmental volunteerism and environmental identities draw upon Foucault's (1991) theory of governmentality, which understands the goal(s) of the state as "to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved (Foucault 1991: 95)." Working towards an arrangement or disposition of things, where things are understood as humans in their relations is contrasted by Foucault to previous regimes of sovereignty that were concerned with imposing laws, and shifting from laws to tactics is also associated with the move from a punitive approach towards past transgressions to influencing and guiding future behavior (Foucault 1991). Understanding governmentality as a bricolage of modes of managing relationships between men and things, especially things such as "the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc. (Foucault 1991: 93)", makes human-environment relations a facet of governmentality, although Foucault was never much of an environmentalist (Darier 1999). Agrawal's *Environmentality* (2005) led to many more studies of environmental governmentalities (Hanson 2007; Li 2007; Birkenholtz 2008; Dowling 2009; Mawdsley 2009; Seki 2009; Fletcher 2010; Gabriel 2011; Jepson et al. 2012; Leffers and Ballamingie 2013; Ward 2013).

Much of the critique of environmentality and governmentality focusses upon how the concepts often have been applied in an overly structural and totalizing manner (Rutherford 2007; Cepek 2011; Singh 2013). Unfortunately, many environmentality approaches do not fully take into account some of Foucault's later works (1988, 1990, 1993) that look at the positive construction of the self along with the domination of the self by others:

"he has to take into account the interaction between those two types of techniques—techniques of domination and techniques of the self. He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself ... governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself (Foucault 1993: 3–4)."

Indeed, this interplay between techniques of domination and techniques of the self reflects Foucault's understanding of power as productive (1990) rather than simply repressive: "The analyses I have been trying to make have to do essentially with relationships of power. I understand by that something other than the state of domination (Foucault et al. 1987: 114)." This idea of power presupposes agency, only acting upon those who

can respond (Gordon 1991). An incorporation of techniques of the self, alongside technologies of domination would improve environmentality studies' understanding of the formation of subjects, recognising the constant negotiations between outside structural forces and individual and/or group agency.

Green neoliberalism or neoliberal environmental governance (Heynen et al. 2007; Perkins 2009a, 2011) theorise a reliance on volunteers to produce urban natures as in line with larger structural shifts that have hollowed out the state and its provision of public services. Brand (2007) provides a generalised interpretation of neoliberal urban environmental management's goals in fostering environmental citizenship and identities. He sees urban regimes' dependence upon volunteerism as a shift in responsibility for urban environmental management, dependent upon citizen's enrollment as environmental stewards: "urban environmental agendas increasingly depend on and actively promote changes in collective and individual behavior in a diversity of spatial scales and settings, in turn producing a new frame of reference for personal decision-making and conduct in everyday life (Brand 2007: 624)." Speaking generally regarding volunteering and neoliberalism, Griffiths (2014) argues that: "it seems impossible nowadays to consider volunteering without attending to neoliberalism and its expansion into all parts of our lives (Griffiths 2014: 206)." Dean (2015) traces the increase in individualised volunteering as a replacement for state services and cautions against the appropriation by capital "of those human activities which seek to reproduce the caring social relationships that make our lives liveable (Dean 2015: 146)." With regards to conservation tourism, where customers are actually paying large sums of money to volunteer as conservationists, Cousins et al. (2009) are more pragmatic, arguing that "the progressive commodification of conservation will need to be tempered by some form of regulation (np)."

Another important critique of the neoliberal dependence on volunteerism for social reproduction instead of the state is that it can maintain and even increase uneven development due to correspondences between uneven development and uneven voluntary sector capacity (Fyfe and Milligan 2003; Pincetl 2003; Perkins 2009a,b). Given the neoliberal reliance on localized and individualized environmental responsibility (Perkins 2009a,b; Harris 2011), areas that are unable to respond to calls to take charge of their own urban environments are increasingly marginalised. This marginalisation is explained away as a failure of residents to take interest in and responsibility for their neighborhoods (Brownlow 2006, 2011). Given that many studies have found that unequal access to urban forests, parks, and other types of greenspaces is present based upon racialised and class based socioeconomic markers (Iverson and Cook 2000; Heynen and Lindsey 2003; Pedlowski et al. 2003; Jensen et al. 2004; Landry and Chakraborty 2009; Pham et al. 2012), the uneven ability of neighborhood based voluntary sector organisations to improve these uneven urban environmental conditions is a major concern. However, Brownlow (2011) reveals that urban environmental volunteerism is not necessarily undertaken at lower levels in unevenly developed and socioeconomically marginalised areas.

Alongside the insights developed through many fruitful environmental and neoliberal natures studies, there are two major concerns raised by them as well, both regarding their totalising aspects—1) environmental and neoliberal natures often present a totalising picture of the state and/or neoliberal capitalism constructing subjects, leaving little space for resistance and agency (Larner 2003; Barnett 2005; Ferguson 2010; Brownlow 2011; Singh 2013). 2) the two theoretical approaches have become almost hegemonic in critical geographical research on volunteer environmental stewardship, making it difficult for other understandings of these processes to be developed and shared. The first concern is slightly answered by some recent less structurally determinative approaches to environmental and neoliberal natures. Li (2007) provides a strong example of a non-totalising and conjunctural approach to environmentalism, recognising two major limits to governmentality 1) the difficulty of managing people and 2) the limits in the form of available knowledges and techniques. Her work in Indonesia found that attempts to create environmental subjects inadvertently but inherently created groups with connections that could mobilise in a situated and contingent manner to contest the state's conservation logic to suit their own ends (Li 2007). Perkins' work (2009a), while highly critical of the neoliberalisation of Milwaukee's park system, still acknowledges that neoliberalisation of the environment can and does result in positive outcomes. Similarly, his analysis of citizen and nonprofit led reforestation efforts in the same city admits that "these kinds of governances do *much* good (Perkins 2009b: 403, emphasis in original)" through making residents feel empowered to improve their neighborhood environments. However, Perkins (2009b) ultimately argues that this feeling of empowerment serves to "absolve the government from direct intervention in social and environmental service provision for society's poorest citizens (Perkins 2009b: 403)." Similarly, Rosol (2012) finds space for volunteer community gardening groups to insert their own agendas into neoliberal state plans for the activation of responsible citizenship, arguing that "the outcome of this kind of self-organization is still open (Rosol 2012: 250)." Despite the value of more nuanced approaches to environmentalism (Sletto 2005; Li 2007; Bose et al. 2012; Jepson 2012) and neoliberal natures (Perkins 2009a,b; Rosol 2012), there is still something that I find missing. Even if urban residents are trapped between a neoliberalised rock and a hard place, how does that make them feel? How do their emotions and affects influence their responses to the removal of state support for urban environmental and social reproduction? Why do they choose to volunteer to take over the labor of urban environmental and social reproduction from the state?

Thankfully, several new approaches to understanding environmental volunteerism have been developed recently and are beginning to broaden the sphere of academic discourse on the subject. I find the literatures on affective labour (Hardt 1999; Hardt and Negri 2004; Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009; Singh 2013; Moore et al. 2015) the most fruitful to explain the interplay between local neighborhood environmental stewardship and environmental identity processes examined

in the three qualitative methodologies performed in this study. Research on affective labor and affects in general is often inspired by an engagement with Spinoza and Deleuze's (1988) reading of his philosophy. Here, affects are seen as "affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained ... (Spinoza, Ethics II, def. 3, quoted in Deleuze 1988: 49)." Importantly, bodies are understood in the widest possible sense, extending far beyond the human, and their characteristics are emergent rather than innate (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Thus, affective labour can be understood as labour "that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion (Hardt and Negri 2004: 108)", "even a sense of connectedness or community (Hardt 1999: 96)", although unfortunately Hardt and Negri subsume affective labour under the larger category of immaterial labour. Singh (2013) expands their concept of affective labour to include both material (forests) and immaterial (affects) products and relationships with both human and non-human others that can open the possibilities for the formation of new ways of being and becoming. Furthermore, it is the desire for the joy that comes with an increase in affects that often drives affective labour. "We experience *joy* when a body encounters ours and enters into composition with it (Deleuze 1988: 19, emphasis in original)." Thus, "the motive for collaboration arises from a desire to reproduce the joy that accompanies our enhanced capacity to act (Ruddick 2010: 30)."

The argument is not that affect is immune to power. Indeed, scholars such as Anderson (2011, 2016), Lordon (2014), Mears (2015), and Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009) have shown how power can work through affect, and Lorimer (2015) has shown how neoliberal environmentalism targets affect to recruit volunteers. Affective labour has also been argued to be closely linked to neoliberalism (Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009) and more broadly with the capture of surplus value (Lordon 2014; Mears 2015). If we follow Hardt and Negri (2004) in locating a great deal of surplus value in the commons, then the material products of affective labour (increased urban environmental quality) in my case study has been kept as common surplus value for all neighbourhood residents rather than extracted for private gain. The distinction in Spinozan frameworks that distinguish between power as *potestas* and *potentia*, a power to direct the acts of others as opposed to a power to act (Ruddick 2008, 2010) and Negri's distinction between biopower as biopotere (power creating the *bios*) and biopotenza (*bios* creating power (Casarino and Negri 2004)) is also useful here. While acknowledging that *potestas* can, and often does operate upon and through affect (and affective labour), I argue that my results instead demonstrate *potentia*, that they were creating power in their neighbourhoods rather than under its sway (although I would certainly agree that both *potestas* and *potentia* can be and often are present simultaneously). In this respect, I am following Griffiths (2014) in trying to show how affect can be autonomous and able to subvert neoliberal doctrines.

Participants were found to be performing affective labour, caring for and developing relationships with nonhuman others

along with their fellow participants in local neighborhood environmental stewardship. The intense attachments (Ahmed 2004) they formed to their neighbourhood, neighbours, and nonhuman others (both specific (such as individual trees) and in general (such as neighbourhood environments)) motivated their participation. These results are similar to those of Rosol's (2012) work with volunteer community gardeners in Berlin, where the main motivations for participation were found to be: the enjoyment of gardening itself, the ability to be part of a group and socialise, the wish to beautify their neighbourhoods, and to have a space for their children outside that was safe and enjoyable.

METHODS

Study Area

The City of Philadelphia is the setting for this study. Philadelphia is the largest city in Pennsylvania, with an estimated population of approximately 1.5 million in 2011 (US Census 2011). The city (41% white) is more ethnically diverse than both the United States (78.1% white) and Pennsylvania (81.9% white). The city is also poorer, with 25.6% of residents below the poverty line between 2007-2011, compared to 14.3% and 12.6% in the United States and Pennsylvania, respectively. This poverty is unequally distributed, as evidenced by Philadelphia having the fourth highest Gini Coefficient, a standard measure of inequality, among the top twenty-five most populous counties in the United States (U.S. Census 2012).

The City published a sustainability plan in 2009, in which Mayor Michael Nutter expressed his wish to make Philadelphia the greenest city in America (City of Philadelphia 2009). The City's Green Cities, Clean Waters stormwater management plan is also innovative, seeking to manage stormwater through green infrastructure rather than grey (underground pipes) (Philadelphia Water Department 2011). Environmentalism also has a strong presence in local media outlets, as Dilworth and Stokes (2013) found hundreds of articles present in the major local outlets between 2002 and 2009, which is reflective of the widespread grassroots environmental activism present in Philadelphia, ranging from urban agriculture (Vitiello 2012), to student groups, to sustainable business networks, to environmental justice movements (Sicotte 2012). Tree planting to increase the canopy coverage of Philadelphia's urban forest is a major element of the current sustainability plan. Target 11 of the City's sustainability plan is to increase tree coverage toward thirty percent in all neighbourhoods by 2025 (City of Philadelphia 2009), and many of the initiatives to achieve other targets (such as rainwater diversion and reduction of atmospheric air pollution) in the sustainability plan also rely upon extensive tree planting. The city recognises that it does not have the funds to complete these ambitious objectives alone, necessitating the significant involvement of private citizens in tree planting and the aggressive pursuit of public-private partnerships with neighbourhood, civic, and business groups.

"Greenworks Philadelphia recommends that Philadelphia build upon the tremendous contributions already being made by such organizations as the PHS and UC Green to develop a large-scale public tree-planting campaign. The effort would rely upon nonprofits, corporations, individuals and community organizations, as well as Fairmount Park and other departments, and use technology to harness the power of those groups. (City of Philadelphia 2009: 60)"

The growing interest in and policies toward environmental sustainability in Philadelphia have the potential to both increase environmental sustainability and social inequities, as research in Philadelphia (Vitiello 2012) and other cities (Jonas and While 2007; Gibbs and Kreuger 2007) has revealed linkages between urban sustainability initiatives such as urban gardening (Qastel 2009; Rosol 2012; Vitiello 2012; Reynolds 2015), urban forestry (Heynen et al. 2006) and brownfield redevelopment (Pearsall 2010) and increased marginalisation. Concerns of sustainability producing greater uneven development are exacerbated when urban greening is conducted based upon neoliberal models relying on public/private partnerships, nonprofit groups, and volunteers rather than state provision of public services (Fyfe and Milligan 2003; Pincetl 2003; Perkins 2009a,b). Philadelphia's Fairmount Park System is a prime example of neoliberal urban environmental governance (Gabriel 2016), as it is one of the most poorly funded large urban park systems in the United States, relying upon over one hundred friends of park groups to perform volunteer urban environmental reproduction, estimated at hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteered labour in 2000 (Brownlow 2011). Furthermore, the limited municipal funding allocated to parks in the city is increasingly directed towards parks in whiter and more affluent neighbourhoods (Brownlow 2011). Similarly, urban agriculture in Philadelphia receives limited municipal funding (Vitiello 2012), instead relying on nonprofits and private donations of capital and labour. Finally, the reliance of the city on public private partnerships and volunteer labour to reach its goal of increasing urban forest canopy has been discussed above.

Methods

Three qualitative methodological procedures were conducted for this study: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and neighborhood walking tours. The first procedure employed in this study was thirty in-depth qualitative interviews of at least an hour in length. These interviews were mostly open ended, encouraging individuals to tell stories about their environmental concerns and practices, constructing narratives together that explain their identifications, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and emotions (Prokkola 2014). The open nature and extended length of these interviews allowed for participants to provide a much more nuanced and rich portrait of their environmental identities and the complex processes that they continually arise from than that which would be the result of traditional survey procedures.

The participatory observation consisted of engaging in neighborhood based environmental stewardship events, including tree plantings, urban gardening celebrations, and neighborhood cleanups alongside research participants, working together to co-create knowledge and use our bodies as research instruments (Elden 2007; Hayes-Conroy 2010). In total, ten events were engaged in, involving approximately 240 participants and lasting over 30 hours. By digging, planting, watering, and collecting trash, I attempted to uncover the embodied emotions that these activities create, along with the motivations that stem from them. Furthermore, the shovels, dirt, and trees themselves involved in these research events affected our bodies and were affected by them, drawing attention to how these various entities participate in the continuous construction of bodies and identities (Latour 2004). This form of participatory observation was also chosen in an attempt to helpfully reduce some of the unequal power relationships between me as a researcher and the research participants (Ross 2013) through working alongside them as a co-participant in stewardship rather than just asking them questions as a researcher about their involvement in stewardship, along with developing a richer understanding than that stemming from detached observation (Tiwari 2010).

The final research method employed was ten neighborhood walking tours with participants (Kusenbach 2003; Pink 2008; Carpiano 2009; Duff 2010; Evans and Jones 2011; Bendiner-Viani 2013), which furthered understanding of how participants make sense of their urban environments and their identities. Participants also defined their own neighborhoods, as perceived neighborhood boundaries may differ from those defined by City agencies or nonprofits (Carpiano 2009). Crucially, individuals are seen to both make these places and be made by them in a continuous, set of co-constitutive, relational processes (Edensor 2000; Wylie 2005; Ingold 2007, 2011; Duff 2010; Bendiner-Viani 2013). Furthermore, walking tours address the embodied nature of place, space, and identity construction, as the physical negotiation of the everyday by bodies is addressed by this method (Bendiner-Viani 2013); this embodied negotiation of space brings in all the senses, as it is tactile, aural, and olfactory as well as visual (Lefebvre 2004; Ingold 2007, 2010; Edensor 2008; Pinder, 2001). Specifically, with regard to walking, Ingold (2007, 2010) develops strong arguments for understanding walking as a way of knowing “Walking along, then, is not the behavioral output of a mind encased within a pedestrian body. It is rather, in itself, a way of thinking and knowing Like the dancer, the walker is *thinking in movement* (Ingold 2010: 135, emphasis in original).” Finally, these tours also helped to understand the affective and emotional nature of place and identity making. Following Duff: “to experience place is to be *affected by place* (Ingold 2010: emphasis in original).” Discussions with participants on the walking tours increased understanding of the deep layers of emotion involved in everyday places.

Of course, all of these methods were performative, but this was even more so the case with the walking tours. It often took some time to move beyond participants leading me on a tour

of trees they had pruned or planted in their neighbourhood, or to draw forth more than a descriptive narrative of the pruning and planting events. Furthermore, the tours themselves produced some of the emotions discussed below, given that the processual understanding of emotions and affects discussed above means that they are always being produced, altered, and rearranged. Care was taken in attempting to make the walking tours as informal as possible to reduce the power dynamics between researcher and researched and make the generative source of emotions participants’ emotional responses to their urban environments rather than the research experience.

Participating in these local neighborhood environmental stewardship activities exposed bodies to affective atmospheres (Anderson 2012; Simpson 2013). Indeed, I would argue that people are always exposed to affective atmospheres, if they are thought of as the precognitive sensations derived from (and with) one’s surroundings. However, the concept might be of particular salience here, given that bodies were working together in the streets and parks of Philadelphia. The differing temperatures, light levels, shade, precipitation, presence of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, condition of sidewalks, and many other factors, that participants continually negotiate, work together to create these affective atmospheres that help to shape how they experienced the events. The three methodologies were chosen in an attempt to capture participants’ interaction with these affective atmospheres and understand how they influenced their actions and experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attending to emotions and affects in local everyday urban environmental stewardship and its influences upon environmental identifications recognises their power in the mutual constitution of practices and identities. Following Ahmed (2004), “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments (Ahmed 2004: 119, emphasis in original).” Although Ahmed uses the term emotions, the same argument can be made for affects doing things, as increasing the capacity of individuals and bodies, thereby creating intense attachments. For me, this affective intensity of attachment, to participants’ neighbourhoods, between participants, and between participants and the nonhuman others that they were planting or caring for, provides the explanation for their participation and environmental identification processes that is lacking in environmentality and neoliberal natures approaches. Volunteers were assisting in urban environmental reproduction through taking part in affective labour because they *cared* intensely, emotionally, and affectively about their neighbourhoods, their neighbours, and trees as nonhuman others, entering into becomings with other humans and nonhuman others, to multiply the effects (and affects) that they can have on their neighbourhoods. Importantly, I am following Lorimer (2015) in offering a “relational account of affect in which shared structures of feeling bubble up within particular constellations of people,

technologies, and other nonhumans. These have differing durations, from singular events to persistent and embedded attachments, anxieties, and affections (Lorimer 2015: 45).”

Affective Neighbourhood Attachments

Participants often invoked concepts of community to explain why they were involved in everyday local urban environmental stewardship, and what they got out of it. I am using the concept here in terms of affective attachments to neighbours and neighbourhoods resulting in urban environmental stewardship and urban environmental identity formation. Explaining her reasons for joining a community gardening group, one participant said “I never got...like my mom would garden when I was little but I never really got into it. I don’t know I just really wanted to support the cause because the neighbourhood looked like shit and we tried to make it look nicer”, and later on, the same participant framed her working in the garden as an attempt to spread the new sense of hopefulness that she felt in her life for the first time:

“Honestly, no I was always ahh, I mean like, most of my life I went through this really nihilistic, I had this really nihilistic ideology where everything was pointless and blah, blah, blah, and then I realised that like no, it’s not, and there’s a way to make your life matter and I started being involved in the garden because I wanted to do something good, I wanted to help people, to show people that there’s hope. I wanted other people to feel the hope that I feel now.”

This attempt to spread hope can be understood as an attempt to increase the capacity of the self and others through the sense of joy that accompanies an increase in affects (Ruddick 2010). Importantly, working in the garden was for this participant a way to “*do something good*”; something which she felt was not possible before in a world that had seemed pointless. This shift in understanding of capabilities displays the ability of affective labor to open up new understandings of self and ways of relating to the world (Singh 2013), specifically in an active and engaged rather than passive manner. However, is not the goal of neoliberal state policies for citizens to develop new understandings of themselves as active and engaged, as responsible for urban environmental upkeep? Am I just documenting processes of neoliberal subjectivation and the successful neoliberal targeting of affect? Here I agree with Brownlow (2011) and Rosol (2012) that urban environmental volunteers can insert their own goals and intents into neoliberal state policies, that they can become active and engaged citizens in a progressive rather than a neoliberal manner. With regard to this specific gardener and her desire to spread hope, the garden she was involved in was organised by a local socialist organisation as an attempt to highlight the neglectful practices of city government and the potential for other forms of organisation:

“Essentially, we went in there, in a sense we were trying to agitate the people into thinking about how the city is not taking care of them, but we can go in there and do this for free. We were also kind of hoping the city would come out

and shut us down because we got such a positive response from the neighbourhood because that would just help agitate.”

Participation in local neighbourhood environmental stewardship activities often produced a strong sense of pride or accomplishment in many of the participants, feeling that their caring for neighborhood trees, urban gardening, or cleaning up their neighbourhoods were resulting in immediately noticeable improvements in their communities that benefitted all. Indeed, one participant stated that the tree care performed by her group, had an “everyday, immediate impact”, through shade, beauty, and pollution removal. A participant conducting me on a walking tour in South Passyunk stated:

“with these trees that I’m going to show you around Capitolo Park where it was like a point of pride, like we’re going to get these trees and I’m going to go out and water them once a week, and that is, I feel like the three that are still alive, that’s how they can be alive.”

This pride of accomplishment in planting and sustaining trees in the neighbourhood reflects beliefs on the value of trees and their contribution to local neighbourhoods, a sense of improving one’s community through local neighborhood environmental stewardship. Nightingale (2011b) found similar commitments to place and a discourse of community among her work with Scottish fishermen. Furthermore, recognizing the pride of accomplishment in producing positive material effects in participants’ neighborhoods is accompanied by positive immaterial affects of joy through the increase of their capacity to act (Ruddick 2010), helping to understand how urban environmental volunteerism can be understood as affective labour.

Affective Interpersonal Attachments

The interactions between the participants in local urban environmental stewardship events provide further understanding of the emotional attachments formed and their influence on participation. A sense of community was also present in the positive emotions generated through interactions with other participants in stewardship activities, with many participants mentioning friends they had made and interactions through the years working together in environmental stewardship resulting in other joint activities together. Neves (2009) found this to be true in her study of urban gardening practices in Montreal, arguing that “it is paramount to consider that the human-nature connections that people develop in the garden are to a great extent made possible, and sustained by, social relations with family and friends (Neves 2009: 150)”, and that this socialising with other individuals is essential in her participants’ commitment to environmental goals and values. Speaking about her time spent working in a community garden, one of my participants said, “so you just go all out and the time spent with my comrades was really fun, you know, all working together, it was kind of beautiful in a way”, working together as beautiful speaks to the joy of encountering other bodies, entering into composition with them in affective laboring relations, and increasing individual and collective capacities

to act (Deleuze 1988). Increasing collective capacities to act through the forming of a multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), serves to resist neoliberal discourses and policies of individualisation and personal responsibility. Similarly, surveys of volunteer tree stewards in New York City found that personal ties played a large part in participation (Fisher et al. 2011), Measham and Barnett (2007) find from a review of volunteering literature that social contact is one of the main motivations for volunteering, and Sommer (2003) argues that tree planting is used “as a means to build local identity, turning a street of strangers into a community (Sommer 2003: 182).” One interviewee speaking on the friendships and relationships between participation in a tree care group highlighted the ability of participating in environmental stewardship activities to build friendships and even end interpersonal conflicts, speaking to the ability of affect to create a sea change in relationships:

“tree tenders is also because of its positive nature, there’s a friendship among people. One of the founding guys, Dan Berger, had a neighbour at his back, Alex, and the two of them are both World War II vets, and Alex and Dan were enemies across their back. One or the other pushed leaves one way or the other, I can’t remember how it was. But then, they both joined tree tenders and really gradually they’re bosom buddies now.”

All of the participatory observation events that I attended involved some form of sharing food together, ranging from coffee and donuts to a full buffet, sometimes before the event, sometimes after, and sometimes both. This speaks to both the embodied physical labor involved in volunteer environmental stewardship consuming calories and the connections developed through the embodied, spatial practice of sharing food (Hayes-Conroy 2010; Nightingale 2011a). In terms of affects, while providing positive affects, and producing joy among the participants, the affective labour of volunteer urban environmental stewardship also reduced the capacity of their bodies to act, which was replenished through consuming food together.

The participatory observation events not only inserted me as a researcher among the participants in neighborhood environmental stewardship activities (effectively making me a participant as well), they also allowed for interaction with non-participants. Included here are the visceral emotional and affective responses to witnessing trees being taken care of and planted or trash being removed. Just as importantly (and probably more so), being able to interact positively with neighbourhood residents and visitors provided an affirmation of participants’ environmental identifications and an affective reward for their volunteered time and effort, speaking once again to the positive sense of community invoked by many of the participants.

At most events, several non-participants briefly thanked participants for pruning trees, planting trees, or picking up trash, often commenting on how nice the results looked. Other non-participants asked how they could get the tree in front of their house pruned or a planting in front of their house. Often the longer conversations with non-participants took place with

residents where trees were being pruned or planted. These interactions started with residents thanking participants for their volunteer stewardship and continued with participants instructing residents on how to care for their trees and increase their health and chances of survival. The intense affective attachment formed with specific trees among non-participants was demonstrated by one female non-participant who came running up to us, asking loudly and agitatedly “what are you doing to my brother’s tree?” After the tree tenders group explained who they were and that they were there to perform necessary pruning maintenance on the tree that would increase its health and prolong its life, the interaction became positive, with the woman thanking us and soliciting information on how her brother could help to care for the tree in the future. This sudden, abrupt shift in the tone of the interaction speaks to the rapid processual nature of affects.

Similarly, recognizing that we define ourselves through the other (Taylor 1989; Perinbanayagam 2000; Alcoff 2006), encounters with non-participants who were not supportive or even openly hostile provided an opposite figure for participants to emotionally define themselves against, helping to enforce typical stereotypes attached to environmental attitudes and behaviors (Clayton and Opatow 2003). Nightingale (2013) found similar results in her work with fishermen in Scotland, where they defined themselves against non-fishers. Speaking more generally about conservation campaigns, Milton finds that “a love or enjoyment of nature is often invoked to define a boundary ... establishing an emotionally united *community* of insiders (Milton 2002: 56, emphasis added).” Several residents and pedestrians asked us to completely remove trees that we were pruning, some who had issues with a particular tree, and some who disliked trees in general. Other negative reactions stemmed more from the presence of environmental stewards in the neighbourhood in general. At one tree pruning, the group was setting up tables for equipment, literature, signs, and food in the usual manner and a woman came out of her house and angrily told us to get off of her corner, resisting any explanations of whom the group was and why they were there until we began moving our materials across the street. Following Ruddick (2010) it is essential to interrogate these affective encounters with alterity, these destabilising moments that might shape a new subject, rather than simply celebrating joyful encounters. These uncomfortable encounters of difference are what cause us to challenge our ways of thinking and doing, to spontaneously and creatively respond to different types of human and nonhuman bodies. Specifically, regarding social movements, protests and activism, Chatterton (2006) refers to these encounters of difference as uncommon ground, finding it to be “a site brimming with affect, emotions and ethical interplay Chatterton 2006: 268)” that holds much potential for increasing counter-hegemonic power through the finding of commonalities between previously antagonistic others. Groups involved in local everyday urban environmental stewardship should stretch outside of their comfort zones and facilitate encounters with new spaces, places, and bodies.

Affective Interspecies Attachments

Finally, the interactions between participants and trees as nonhuman others displayed the emotional attachments they had formed both with specific trees and trees in general. Recognizing that nonhuman actors interact with each other and with human actors inside and outside these types of events allows for an exploration of the influences that they hold for the environmental identifications of participants while also serving to recognize that nonhumans such as trees have agency (Jones and Cloke 2002). The agency of trees and other nonhuman others is expressed in the examples below in which trees have an active role in the affective capacities of participants.

During the tree plantings and prunings, it was common to see and hear participants having strong negative reactions to trees in poor shape, feeling both sad that the trees were in such poor shape, but also sometimes mad that people were not taking care of them. One participant, talking about the emotional impact of seeing a tree in really bad shape said: "it's like seeing a hurt animal or small child." Another participant was extremely emotional about the invasive English Ivy in her neighbourhood, to the extent of documenting it with large photographs and using them in a presentation at the local library in an attempt to educate neighbours on the importance of its removal. Sommer (2003) revealed similar results in surveys of urban residents' attitudes towards city trees: "some of our respondents made us aware of the psychological outcomes of tree loss, which seemed similar in form to the grief accompanying the death of a family member (Sommer 2003: 180)", and Milton's (2002) research with environmental activists found that "the damage to and destruction of nature is experienced as a personal loss which provokes anger and sadness (Milton 2002: 56)." As the tree prunings were targeted to areas in poor condition that needed lots of tree care, it is not surprising that strong emotional responses to the poor conditions often arose, indeed several participants at different events remarked upon how frustrating it was to continuously go out to the parts of their neighborhoods that were in the worst conditions. Interviewees also mentioned the loss or poor condition of neighbourhood trees as emotionally traumatic events, with one respondent stating that when trees go down it is like "I lost one of my friends." During a walking tour, describing one of the participants in her neighbourhood tree care group, one participant said:

"he likes more interesting trees, he's a real gardening guy, and he'll get trees not approved by the city and get 'em on in there, which, if you don't know he's doing it you can't stop him. But there have been incidents where he's had to take out trees but the city will come around and say this not appropriate for this site and there have been tearful digging up sessions."

Later in the walking tour, describing the same individual, she said: "And then [people] like Peter who are so enthusiastic, who would tie himself to his tree." The first quote illustrates the emotional attachment to trees, how their loss can move individuals to tears. It also illustrates the ability to subtly

subvert neoliberal doctrines imposed by the state shown by others (Blomley 2007; Rosol 2012; Elwood 2015), even if it is only occasionally being able to successfully plant the desired species of trees rather than those imposed by the state. Attempting to circumvent governmental limitations on the types of trees planted can be seen as an attempt to plant the species that produces the most joy, that have the highest affective capacity. The second quote once again illustrates the intensities of emotional attachments, the enthusiasm and love felt for specific, individual trees. The emotional attachments to trees and their status as significant actors in the lives of participants found in this research is similar to the results of Pearce et al. (2015) in Australia: "residents most often articulated their experience of trees through the ways in which trees were encountered as participants in the fabric of their lives: that is, rather than talking about trees as passive background objects, trees were described as active in affecting the experiences and actions of the interviewees (Pearce et al. 2015: 3)." However, there is also a cause for concern here, generated by the angry feelings that participants had towards neighbourhoods and residents that were not taking care of their trees. These emotional responses certainly resonate with the discussion of attachments to trees discussed above. They also suggest an acceptance of neoliberal state ideology that emphasizes the importance of individualized responsibility for urban environmental maintenance and improvement (Brand 2007).

Yet, despite the emotional turmoil produced by repeatedly interacting with neglected and damaged trees, participants kept coming back. Some had been doing so since the 1990s. The intense emotional attachments to specific trees helps to explain why, along with the emotional importance of and sense of accomplishment participants associated with improving their communities through urban environmental reproduction. Participants often expressed feelings of happiness and fulfilment after taking care of existing trees or planting new ones, highlighting the transformative potential of affective labour. Indeed, we can see the material effects of improving urban environments as increasing the capacity of affective atmospheres (Anderson 2012; Simpson 2013), where residents feel more at ease in their communities, due to increased shade and aesthetics along with the sense of community, produced via the social interactions involved in volunteering together. Increasing the affective capacities of the individual participants and overall neighborhood produces a sense of joy that motivates further participation (Ruddick 2010). At the tree prunings, one of the most common comments towards the end of the events revolved around how much better everything looked in the area where they were, and the improved conditions of neighbourhood trees was a sense of pride and fulfillment for participants. At one tree planting event, the small group I was participating with blessed the first tree (in a spiritual rather than religious manner) that we planted and took a picture with it, discussing how it would beautify the street and hopefully have a long and happy life while making the lives of residents happier.

'TreePhilly', a Philadelphia tree planting program run by the city's department of Parks and Recreation in partnership with local nonprofits and businesses, ran a 'Trees of Philly' story contest for the first time in 2014, soliciting stories from individuals describing their relationships with trees that were significant to them. The winning entries (out of almost 120 submissions), revealed the intense attachments that individuals shared with specific trees. Furthermore, specific trees were related to significant times, places, and people in the lives of participants in the contests (see also Moskell et al. 2010 for a discussion of tree planting as marking significant life events). Pearce et al. (2015) documented this strong influence that trees can hold on people's sense of self and place in Australia: "loss of trees in people's lives signified a loss of a particular time, life stage or story that that the tree represented (Pearce et al. 2015: 4)." Elissa's tree story captures this relational unfolding associated with attachments between trees, people, places, and emotions: "Each new woody life takes on the story of the day it was planted – the sun, the laughter, the hope, the camaraderie (Treephilly.org)." Speaking of a long-established tree rather than planting new trees, Katherine's tree story illuminates how trees can create and represent intense emotional attachments to place: "when I left for college for the first time, I took one of my magnolia tree's blooms with me. My first night of college – when I was beginning to feel upset about being far from home – I had my magnolia bloom to help me feel better about the distance (Treephilly.org)." The results discussed above display emotional and affective connections with both individual trees and trees or nature in general. Future research should delve more deeply into distinctions between individuation in relationships with urban environments and its influence on environmental stewardship and identities.

CONCLUSION

The recent increased engagement with theories of the self and identity in critical nature-society research is to be commended and provides opportunities to enrich and expand the field. Unfortunately, these opportunities have been constrained as many explanations of environmental identity formation have applied overly structural and totalising theorisations of environmentality and neoliberal natures, especially when considering volunteer environmental stewardship. Thankfully, several other theoretical approaches have been developed which could provide a less totalising understanding of the rise of urban environmental volunteerism. Included among these ways of understanding are insurgent and performative citizenships (Holston 1998; Gilbert and Phillips 2003; Brownlow 2011), Henri Lefebvre's right to the city (Lefebvre 2007; see also Harvey 2003; Mitchell 2003; Marcuse 2009) and Autogestion (2009), and the diverse economies of J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006).

Along with insurgent and performative citizenships, Autogestion and the right to the city, and diverse economies, there remain other alternative explanations to urban

environmental volunteerism that should be considered for synthesis with affective labour. Chief among these is the rich feminist literature on emotional economies of care (Vaughan 1997; Singh 2013). Future research should seek to synthesise the new understanding developed here of urban environmental affective labour with previous feminist theories of emotional labour. Furthermore, indigenous ontologies have resulted in emotional economies and ecologies of care (Jackson and Palmer 2015), and care should be taken to engage with these rather than ignore this history, recognising that affective and emotional economies and ecologies have long been present in the cosmologies of the nonwestern world.

Here, affective labour is offered as an alternative explanation for everyday local urban environmental volunteer stewardship in Philadelphia. My research with volunteer urban environmental stewards revealed how emotional attachments to place and human and non-human others motivated their continued participation in these activities. Realising the influence of intense affective attachments, rather than the power of neoliberal environmentalities, allows for the agency of participants to be considered and serves to further blur the line between cooptation and resistance in struggles over material, affective, and discursive urban environments. Furthermore, embodied affective labour opens up possibilities for the fostering of new individual and collective subjectivities and new ways of being, becoming, and relating to others, the "sense of connectedness of community (Hardt 1999: 96)" that motivated continued participation in urban environmental volunteerism in my research. This connectedness to community is joined by the intense attachments to and circulation of affects with trees and other nonhuman others in providing an expanded understanding of the self that challenges modernist conceptions of individuality (Singh 2013). Rather than unified, coherent, and stable identities formed alone in a vacuum, the affective labour of urban environmental volunteers in Philadelphia reveals that environmental identities are emergent and influenced by embodied interaction with human and nonhuman others. Finally, despite the focus on urban volunteers in the Global North, results could serve to inform wider debates over motivations for participation in conservation globally.

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