



NARRATING LANDSCAPES

“The conversation stops when the hawks screech past, fighting over something in mid-air. Life has intervened, changing our discussion topic. What are these birds? What do they like about being here? Will these birds help the farm folks argue for the preservation of the forest? How do all the different elements of this land work together to make a system that must not be disrupted?” (from “Mental Farmscapes” by Alisma Perry)

This summer, we participated in Dr. Felice Wyndham’s Anthropology 462 course to understand human interactions with our landscape; particularly, the rapidly changing landscape of UBC. The course took a unique approach by centering on a collaborative website - a “wiki” at www.narratinglandscapes.net - created specifically for the class and supported by a Dean of Arts Instructional Technology Grant.

By making our writing and research projects public, the wiki fosters a culture of engaged learning and rigorous scholarship. It also contributes to a multigenerational project, with each subsequent class cohort adding to and improving the site.

The following excerpts are from essays in which we reflected on a class visit to the UBC Farm in late July. The farm Outreach and Education Coordinator, Gavin Wright, toured the farm with us and outlined the history of the farm in the UBC landscape over the last hundred years. The essays also draw concepts and contrasts from the life history narratives of two women: Delfina Cuero (Diegueño or Kumeyaay), who lived through the drastic transformations of her family’s traditional landscapes from gathering and hunting lands to urban San Diego in California in the early 1900s, and Buffalo Bird Woman (Hidatsa), who was an expert knowledge holder of the mid-1800s traditional agricultural life of her people in what is now North Dakota.

Pervading our work is a personal tone reflecting our perception of landscape change as a result of global shifts in food production, and the very intimate, local impacts of development on UBC’s South Campus and proposed development on the UBC Farm. Keeping Delfina Cuero and Buffalo Bird Woman’s daily experiences of land and food production in mind, we try to grapple with our own relationships to landscape in a highly urbanized context.

Through these essays, we invite you to engage your senses and explore your changing landscape. Remember, however, that these essays are only a small window into the world of human-plant relationships. Real learning takes place when you close this magazine, turn off your computer, open the door, and step outside. The UBC campus – particularly the UBC Farm – is an ideal place for this exploration to take place.

FURTHER READING...

Shipek, Florence Connolly. 1991(1968). “Delphina Cuero: her autobiography, an account of her last years, and her ethnobotanic contributions.” Menlo Park: Ballena Press.

Wilson, Gilbert L. 1987(1917). “Buffalo Bird Woman’s Garden: The classic account of Hidatsa American Indian gardening techniques.” Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press.

“While standing at the farm, I was reminded of a story from a few years ago. I had been babysitting a five-year-old boy who had recently become a somewhat picky eater. Inevitably, the two of us ended up in a conversation about the food he was eating for dinner.

Pointing to his cup of milk, I asked him where milk came from. Without hesitation, he replied, “From the store.” Later that evening, when his mother came home, I related this conversation to her. To my complete surprise, this little anecdote about her son did not bring laughter. In a rather annoyed tone, she said, ‘I really wish you hadn’t told him milk came from cows... now he probably won’t drink it anymore!’

Until now, I’ve always reflected on the “Milk Comes From the Store” story as an example of how disconnected we have become from our food. As I reevaluate this story today, in the context of this course and of the plight of the UBC Farm, it has me wondering: just how much of this disconnect happens intentionally? The reason for the disconnect is likely more complex than a simple lack of awareness. Maybe we don’t always want to know what’s going on out there.”

(From “Connected to our Food” by Sarah Turnbull)



“In many ways, I feel that understanding how human-nature relationships develop and change is also the challenge of education, especially the area of environmental education. Interestingly, the knowledge I possess of plants that is intimate and alive did not come from school (where we learned about the cambium, xylem, and phloem without loving, touching, eating, growing a single plant ourselves). I’ve come to realize that my growing body of plant knowledge is something I have cultivated largely out of personal interest and desire and not through schooling. In fact, according to my mother, this is an interest that started as soon as I could walk, when I began entertaining my parents with slow, stumbling botanical tours of every plant in the neighbourhood.”

(From “Edible Landscapes: Time, Memory, Learning” by Julia Ostertag)

“As I followed the rest of my class through the fields of the UBC farm I thought about the fact that the greens I use to make my salads come in a plastic box. I can see the contents of that box in the fields around me. I realize (somewhat ashamedly) as we discuss the idea that society has become disconnected from the sources of their food that me and my boxed greens are very much a part of that disconnect. This has not always been the case with me. As I breathe deeply I can smell the smells of the farm: that good smell of freshly turned dirt; the crisp smell of all the greenery and the sweetish, clean smell of the blackberry bushes all around. It smells like home to me. My family is from rural Alberta and although I have grown up in BC, I spent nearly every summer of my youth at my mother’s family farm. It is many summers now since I have been there but the ‘bouquet’ of this farm strikes a chord in my heart.” *(From “Rural Landscapes” by Joanna Hayman)*

“[A]s I listened to stories of ceremonies performed by other cultures at the start of a growing season, traditions of thanking Mother Nature for what she is giving us and what we are taking from her, I realized something else. Food doesn’t come from a farm. It comes from the Earth. What a strange disconnect we have developed with something so important to our own survival.

(From “Children and Veggies: A New Relationship Growing?” by Aisha Parkhill-Goyette)

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"This experience makes me think about our first day of class when Felice was talking about the relationship between self and landscape and the difference between learning with body and mind connected versus learning with our mind shut off from our body. As we drove through the UBC campus on our way to the farm everything meshed together into a bunch of buildings, some trees, grass. Then we got to the new development, where I noticed a feeling of repulsion in my stomach, especially when I saw the billboards of what the future development would look like and when Julia pointed out the irony of the green banner with a leaf hanging off one of the new buildings. When we arrived at the UBC farm and I saw the sign post with all the little signs pointing to the different areas and communities at the farm, my body and mind became aware of all the diversity and stimulus at the farm and I started noticing little things that I wouldn't normally pay attention to around the rest of the campus. This made me wonder how much time my body spends shut off from my mind when I walk through the UBC campus. My question was answered today when we walked around the ANSO building looking at the guerrilla gardening. As little nooks and crannies were being pointed out, I realized I really don't see much of what I walk past everyday!" (From "Connecting Through Landscape" by Heather McAnsh)



"Food has evolved through time in many ways. These evolutions include physical evolution of the plant or animal itself, as well as an evolution in how we interact with these plants. The people that I came from evolved from being a hunter-gatherer group, through personal and then onto communal agriculture. Now, my relationship with food extends to walking to the nearest grocery store and shelling out pieces of coloured paper in exchange for nourishment. I have little concept of where my food exactly comes from. The sticker - if there is one - provides a vague description of what country that particular piece of fruit or vegetable comes from. There is no mention of the farm it was grown on or the person who picked it and packaged it. I don't have to adapt to anything, if I want a particular piece of fruit, I can have it." (From "Food Evolutions" by Cian Zybutz)



"Living in a city, I find that it is hard to remember where our food comes from and easy to forget our biological connection to the land. Reading Delphina Cuero and Buffalo Bird Woman made me realize how easy, nowadays, it is to go and find food because it is stored in a concrete block called Superstore, Safeway, Save on Foods and many others. Most people do not need to wake up before sunrise and start planting, or taking care of the plants, or walking through the landscapes for hours to find something to eat. But, despite all the comfort that I get from buying at the stores, I think I lose an important part of myself, which is that spiritual connection with the land that produced the food and the food itself. I find that both Delphina Cuero and Buffalo Bird Woman were among soils, water, plants and animals units. These women and their people were, as Aldo Leopold suggests in his Land Ethic, members and citizens of the biotic community; we, on the other hand, act as conquerors of it."
(From "Edible Landscapes" by Natalia Garcia)

"I was really impressed by the lengths the UBC Farm has taken in order to get the community to reconnect with its food system and source, and realize that the produce selection and availability in grocery stores is not really reflective of what is available in our natural ecosystem. Living in an urban centre it is really easy to forget that those papayas you ate the other day were grown in another country, by another person. We have a tendency to take for granted our network of mono-cropped agricultural powerhouses, shipping all kinds of goods to all kinds of places, almost at a whim. The reality that Cuero describes is much more reflective of the natural world around us, rather than a man-made system of intensive land use. She describes people who identify primarily with the land in terms of plants, animals, and human interaction. I think it is safe to say that a good portion of people in Vancouver would not know where to begin if dropped in the wilderness and left to their own devices today, myself included."
(From "Reconnecting Through UBC Farm" by Kwaku Adu Poku)

"Looking out of my New Westminster apartment, I see and hear the skytrain pass by my window; I see a small produce store, surrounded by the neon glow of a Burger King, a Burger Heaven and a Boston pizza. I know the Fraser River flows nearby, but any view that I might have of it is obstructed by a row of matching condos. I can count the number of trees planted equidistant from each other to provide a 'scenic view' for all us residents. This view is in sharp contrast to the view I had from my window back home. I grew up in Newfoundland, and had never lived in a large city before I moved here about a year ago. I always felt a strong connection to the landscape there, fostered by the knowledge I obtained about it from simply growing up there. This background has tinted the lens with which I view the urban setting. As much as I enjoy being here, I often feel disconnected from the landscape around me. When I first arrived here, the first questions I asked were along the lines of: Where do we get berries? Can we light fires? What are these trees? Without knowing it, I was trying to connect to the landscape through gaining knowledge about it. Until visiting UBC Farm, I did not make this connection between knowledge and spiritual connection to landscape."
(From "Connections to Landscape: Our Trip to UBC Farm" by Kyla Hynes)



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"Visiting UBC Farm for the first time brought me back to my childhood days of planting and growing vegetables and fruits in the small garden in my backyard. Strolling through the children's garden, I was amazed at the varieties of fruits and vegetables planted by these youngsters. The Schools Program at the Farm, I think, is great for kids to connect with and learn about their surrounding environment and natural landscape here on the coast. They are able to plant organic crops, watch their seeds slowly turn into wonderful plants, which, when ripe, can be picked and eaten either raw or used for baking and cooking meals that they themselves can eat. I think this is very important in a child's life. It is so easy and far too common today to take food for granted. We have become so distant from our food supply that most of us can just walk into any grocery store, pick up whatever foods we need, any time of the year, and forget about where they actually came from and the labour that went into getting these foods from the ground to our homes. UBC Farm is a great place to reconnect with the land; to be grateful for everything we put into our mouths." (From "UBC Farm: An Urban Oasis" by Stephanie Rankine)



"How did the farm change my landscape? I always initially describe the farm in terms of physical beauty. There's the rolling slope of the hill from the entrance of the farm down to the trees at the south end that shield the farm from Southwest Marine Drive. There's the way the mist hangs over the farther fields in the early morning. But it's not just physical beauty; all the senses enter into it. The slightly salty smell of the air, from being so near the ocean. The way your hands smell if you've brushed against a tomato plant, and the wafting scent of basil as you cut off stalks of it to bundle up for the market on Saturday morning. There are the sounds of the birds, and the sound of the sheep across the road when they're riled up about something. There's the taste of a warm blackberry that you've just picked after it ripened in the sun all day, and the taste of a carrot you've just pulled up still lightly dusted in soil." (From "Mental Farmscapes" by Alisma Perry)