More-than-Representational Knowledge/s of the Countryside: How We Think as Bodies

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Abstract

The empirical hypothesis that is explored in this article is: if we think with our bodies then we must think about the countryside with our bodies too. Working toward this end, the article begins by briefly reviewing the literature on embodied knowledge. From here, attention turns to the rough, empirical ground of everyday life. Before doing this, however, discussion centres briefly on methods, where the methodological implications of studying the 'more-than-representational' are discussed. The remainder of the article is devoted to examining the findings of fieldwork conducted in rural Iowa. In this discussion, attention centres specifically on how understanding the countryside is an embodied, lived event.

Introduction

Conceptions of the countryside are frequently treated as mere discursive constructs; products of a mind devoid of corporality. Often such treatments are seen as social constructions (Greider and Garkovich 1994; Frouws 1998; Hovardas and Stamou 2006). Following this, 'countryside' is a reflection of non-physical symbols, tethered only to the values, beliefs and culturally inscribed mental constructs of those speaking the term into existence. As one frequently cited article on social construction explains: 'These symbolic meanings and definitions are sociocultural phenomena, not physical phenomena, and they transform the open field into symbolic landscape' (Greider and Garkovich 1994, p. 1).

This article places at its crosshairs strong forms of social construction (Sismondo 1993), where the said constructions are analytically shed of their materiality. The idea that conceptions of the countryside are purely sociocultural phenomena is untenable for one reason: we think, and thus we socially construct, with our bodies. This article provides the following reminder: we cannot divorce mind from body when talking about knowledge/s, understanding/s and perception/s of the world (in truth, this marriage has long since been annulled and Descartes was the presiding judge who

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signed the divorce articles). Rather, as I argue, mind is body; consciousness is corporeal; thinking is sensuous. In short, our understanding of space is more-than-representational. It is a lived process. To ignore how understandings of the countryside are embodied is to cut from our analysis a major (indeed the main) source of understanding.

This argument is informed by a variety of works. The voice of Merleau-Ponty is heard repeatedly, intermixed with a chorus of anthropologists, geographers and sociologists. I begin by providing a brief review of this literature (directed specifically at those who are unacquainted with the idea that we think as bodies). From here, attention turns to the rough, empirical ground of everyday life. Before doing this, however, I briefly review the methods I employed in the field. It is at this point that I also discuss some of the methodological implications of studying what I call the 'more-than-representational' (and why I have chosen to speak of the 'more-than-representational' instead of the more conventional 'non-representational'). The intent of the fieldwork is not to engage in popular empiricist posturing to prove that embodied knowledge is real; what others have called 'death and furniture' demonstrations (Edwards *et al*. 1995). The reason for weaving the empirical with the conceptual is to create an enlivened argument; a work that purports to reveal how understandings of the countryside are effects of lived experience cannot be divorced from the corporeal poetics of everyday life. To place flesh on this argument I look to fieldwork conducted in rural Iowa in the USA. The goal of this research is to better understand how conceptions of the countryside are effects, at least in part, of material doings in this space.

Embodiment and more-than-representational knowledge

Nietzsche (1969) was critical of the west's quest for eternals that had for centuries directed attention away from life's quotidian encounters due to their perceived banality. One such mundane encounter that had long been ignored in western thought: embodiment; where the flesh of our bodies meets the pavement of the world. A number of scholars in recent years have expressed similar dissatisfaction, particularly in terms of decontextualised social theories that leave the lived experience of everyday life untouched and unexamined. In response, a growing cadre of social theorists are directing their attention towards issues of sensuous, embodied knowledge (Harrison 2000; Ingold 2000; Thrift 2000, 2004; Hetherington 2003; Castree and Macmillian 2004; Laurier and Philo 2006; Spinney 2006; Carolan 2007, 2008; Waitt and Lane 2007). As Wylie (2002 p. 441) notes, while movement in this direction is slow, 'recognition of the constitutive roles of embodiment, practice and performance in the shaping of subjectivity is increasingly coming to the forefront of the theoretical agendas'.

This is not to suggest that today's generation of social theorists were the first to highlight the significance of corporeal knowledge. Wittgenstein, for example, knew all too well the importance of embodiment for making sense of the world. In his words:

> I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he [sic] says again and again 'I know that's a tree', pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: 'This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy'. (Wittgenstein 1969 no. 467)

What Wittgenstein's philosopher friend failed to grasp is how their active embodiment in the world – a world with trees – plays into their knowing of trees (Harrison 2000, p. 507). He missed the fact that our understanding of trees is wrapped up in more-than-representational forms of knowledge that come about through our doings with all things wooden, such as taking walks in the forest, climbing trees, laying hardwood floors and erecting wooden fences.

Contrast this with treatments of social constructionism that render the material realm analytically insignificant (for examples, see Carolan 2005, pp. 4–5). Such theorising rigidly separates mind from matter, subject from object and form from substance (Pons 2003). Accordingly, individuals impose meaning onto a passive physical terrain (Frouws 1998). Indeed, socio-environmental theory in general often posits a material world that exists as either a precondition (naive realism) or as a product of an external cultural construction (strong social constructionism). This has led Ingold (1995, p. 58) to comment that something 'must be wrong somewhere, if the only way to understand our own creative involvement in the world is by taking ourselves out of it'.

Admittedly, the social sciences are not entirely to blame for creating these separations. Western thought has a history of divorcing selves from the world, long ago erecting ridged lines around the self, thereby creating an introspective being-for-itself detached from the surrounding environment (Whitehead 1978[1929]). This separation is shown no clearer than in Descartes' mind/body distinction. In five words Descartes provides the litmus test of existence: 'I think, therefore I am'. Descartes' ontology consists of two substances: *res cogitan* and *res extensia*. Following this, the mental and the physical are independent, which means we can understand each phenomenon without recourse to the other. The self, according to Descartes, is thereby reduced to a ghost in the body; a soul without material substance and this separation went largely unquestioned, or at least uncorrected, until the twentieth century.

Enter the work of Merleau-Ponty. In addition to 'correcting' the aforementioned Cartesian dualism, Merleau-Ponty also rejected the phenomenology of Husserl, who continued the tradition of separating mind from body when he spoke of 'stepping back' from the world to observe it. Speaking to the ghost of Descartes, Merleau-Ponty (1969) writes of the *incarnate cogito*, which places mind, body and world in a state of perpetual coproduction. In this non-dualistic ontology it is incorrect to speak of bodies having consciousness. Instead, bodies are consciousness. In short, Merleau-Ponty seeks to shatter one of the west's most fundamental philosophical assumptions: that we are independent agents (*res cogitans*) ontologically independent from a world we work in (*res extensia*). As Merleau-Ponty notes, consciousness is always already situated and intentional, for to be conscious is to be conscious of something. Consciousness is therefore not something that can be introspectively discovered (as Descartes' five little words attempt to do), but instead it is an emergent property of lived experience. As Merleau-Ponty (1992 p. 82) argues, 'I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body. ... I am conscious of my body via the world'. Merleau-Ponty's ontology is therefore not about absolutes or pre-givens but about potentials that emerge out of the folds of embodied activity: 'I am not, therefore, in Hegel's phrase, "a hole in being" but a hollow, a fold, which has been made and can be unmade' (1992 p. 215).[1]

So thinking 'lies in the body, understood not as a fixed residence for "mind" but as a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of' (Thrift 2004 p. 90; see also Williams 1977 p. 131; Deleuze 1988 p. 97; Varela 1992 p. 336; Bourdieu 1995 p. 91; Norretranders 1998 p. 127; Lakoff and Johnson 1999 p. 13; Thrift 2000 p. 36). And if we think as bodies we must think about the countryside as bodies too. In the next section I explore the link between embodiment and conceptions of the countryside, while continuing to weave additional works into the discussion.

Setting the stage: representing the more-than-representational

This article represents an example of inductive theorising. Its thesis emerged out of research to examine how understandings of nature, the countryside and the like differ among rural residents and how these divergent understandings play into conflicts over agricultural odours. The initial stages of data collection were not directly concerned with issues tied to embodied knowledge. Over time, however, I began to piece together an understanding of perception/s as lived events, which enticed me to explore further the link between embodiments and conceptions of the countryside.

The site of this research was a a rural county in Iowa that contained a mix of farming and non-farming residents. Upon selecting the site I began calling households (from May to July 2004). In each household contacted, all available and willing adults were interviewed. Twenty-one individuals from 14 households were interviewed during this phase of data collection: 12 from farmer households, nine from non-farmer households. Each interview, which was tape-recorded and later transcribed, lasted approximately 30 minutes. The tapes and transcriptions were then coded and analysed for emergent themes from December 2004 to April 2005.

I re-entered the field in the following spring (May 2005) and conducted further in-depth personal interviews with the same sample population. During this time, I attempted to re-interview those who had been interviewed earlier to explore certain themes that had emerged during the process of data analysis. I also used this opportunity to interview additional household members who were either unable or unwilling to be interviewed over the phone during the earlier stage of data collection. During this period, five additional individuals were interviewed (three from non-farmer households and two from farmer household) and nine individuals were re-interviewed (six from non-farmer households and three from farmer households). Again, all the interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed, and the tapes and transcriptions were coded and analysed for emergent themes.

It was during the second round of data analysis that I began to take notice of the significance of embodiment in peoples' understandings of the countryside. To explore this point in greater detail I re-entered the field in the summer of 2006. Whereas earlier interviews focused in a general sense on how nature, the countryside and so on were perceived by the respondents, the third round of the interviews specifically investigated how the participants' physical interactions shaped their understanding of their surrounding environment. Eleven additional individuals were interviewed during this final stage of data collection: six from farming households and five from

non-farming households. In total, 37 individuals were interviewed and 46 total interviews conducted for this research: 20 farmers and 17 non-farmers.

The question remains: how can one hope to study and report on that which is said to be more-than-representational? Is this possible? To answer this question, it is necessary to speak of the 'more-than-representational' knowledge instead of the conventional 'non-representational' knowledge. The concept of non-representational knowledge, which is becoming ubiquitous in the cultural geography literature (Thrift, 1996, 2004; Hetherington, 2003; Laurier and Philo 2003; Spinney 2006), does not attract me for the following methodological reason: how does one represent what is fundamentally non-representable? Or, as McCormack asks (2002 p. 470):

> how, when such movement is often below the cognitive threshold of representational awareness that defines what is admitted into serious research, does one give a word to a movement [or sensation, experience, and so on] without seeking to represent it?

Proponents of non-representational theory (like Thrift) will no doubt jump at me for conflating the non-representational with what is unrepresentable. I find the term non-representational problematic firstly, because it at least suggests that what is of analytic concern ultimately dies the moment we try to talk (and write) about it, and secondly, because I believe the world of embodied experience is better explained as being more-than-representational. It is not that we cannot represent sensuous, corporeal, lived experience but that the moment we do so we immediately lose something. Representations tell only part of the story, yet they still have a story to tell, however incomplete.

So I admit: we cannot literally feel in these pages what respondents truly experienced in their lived experience. But this does not mean that we cannot at least get a taste of their world through their words. As Latham (2003 p. 2000) colourfully argues on the subject of employing traditional research methods to get at the buzzing world of the more-than-representational: 'Pushed in the appropriate direction there is no reason why these methods cannot be made to dance a little'. With that said: let's dance.

The countryside in the flesh

As noted by others, understandings of space are influenced by embodied interactions with the environment over time (Tuan 1977; Ingold 2000; Thrift 2000; Cloke and Jones 2001). This was true for respondents' knowledge of the countryside. They all thought like a body when it came to making sense of this space. I now detail this inter-relationship between bodies, knowledges and environments as they pertain to respondents' understandings of the countryside.

Dwelling in the countryside

While the concept of dwelling is frequently associated with the writings of Heidegger, contemporary socio-environmental scholars have appropriated the term for their own use (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Cloke and Jones, 2001; Ingold, 2000). Heidegger's interest in dwelling was to emphasise how individuals are always already embedded

in the world. Heidegger set dwelling against the Cartesian split that renders consciousness ontologically distinct from an 'external' material world. For Heidegger (1971), dwelling requires a shift away from understanding how people impose objects onto the world (where dwelling is circumscribed in a building) to one where human activity is shaped by our always already being in the world (where the building is circumscribed within our dwelling).

Dwelling is thus rooted in practical, embodied activity, often below the level of discursive consciousness. As Certeau (2000 p. 12) explains, 'It is below "down" on the threshold where visibility ends, that the city's common practitioners dwell'. Thus, when we encounter and come to know things we do so, at least most of the time, through a readiness-at-hand (e.g., by physically encountering/using/manipulating them) rather than a present-at-hand (e.g., from a detached, intellectualised position: see also, Merleau-Ponty 1992 p. 137). In the words of Ingold (2000 p. 207):

> The landscape, in short, is not a totality that you or anyone else can look at, it is rather the world in which we stand in taking up a point of view on our surroundings. And it is within the context of this attentive involvement in the landscape that the human imagination gets to work in fashioning ideas about it.

All the respondents dwelt in the countryside – that is to say, it was a space known to all through their bodies. When they were asked to describe 'the countryside', specifically in terms of what it meant for them, the respondents often focused on the kinesthetic and somesthesia sensations that came from their physical presence in that space. Farmers frequently spoke, for example, of the countryside in terms of their readiness-at-hand in this space. For the following respondent an understanding of the countryside came 'years spent on my tractor'. Nick,[2] the author of this quote, had been farming for almost 40 years. I asked, 'What do you mean by that?' He replied:

> Most people only know the countryside from the inside of their car. I'm talking about people who have never farmed, obviously. But instead of knowing the countryside from a car on the road looking out at a field I know it from my tractor in the field looking out at the road. It's just the reverse for me.

For Nick, understanding the countryside come, at least in part, from a particular embodiment known largely to only farmers: from on the seat of a tractor in a field. Yet such embodied understandings go beyond optical ways of knowing. To know like a body, in other words, involves more than the sense of sight. I asked:

> What does it mean to know the countryside from the seat of your tractor? What sort of understanding are you acquiring from that location?

He replied:

> Well, you get to know first hand the contours of the land as well as soil type – you know, what spots are wet, which are sandy, stuff like that.

I asked, 'You can tell all this from your tractor?' Nick's response was short yet insightful:

> When you've been doing this as long as I have you can tell a lot about the ground by how the tractor handles. It's almost like the tractor is part of me.

It's almost like the tractor is part of me. In this sentence, Nick reports an experience similar to Merleau-Ponty's (1992) example of the blind person and their cane, which in time becomes absorbed into their living body. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the unpracticed person probing the ground with the cane feels only the ground through the cane. As habituations slowly lead to the absorption of the cane into the body, however, more sophisticated forms of interaction develop. In doing this, one begins to feel the ground directly, in which case the stick ceases to be an object in itself and becomes instead part of the body (Hirose 2002).

The blind person's cane and Nick's tractor illustrate not only how we understand the world as bodies but also how our bodies are indeterminate, continually unfolding with injury and alterations, technology and habitual activities. As Russon (1994 p. 295) explains:

> It is by establishing such spheres of habitual being-in-the-world that we make possible for ourselves more sophisticated forms of interaction, thereby allowing *our world* to become more determinate for ourselves, and, reciprocally, allowing *ourselves* to become more determinate: both the identity of our selves and of our world *becomes* something through these dynamics of embodiment and habituation. (emphasis in original)

Nick's particular being-in-the-world – in a word, his dwelling – makes available to him certain embodiments unknown to others. The understanding acquired from the seat of his tractor, which has over the years become absorbed into his living body, has given Nick a distinct feeling for the countryside. And this sense of the countryside is noticeably different from that acquired, in Nick's words, 'from a car on the road looking out at a field'.

Nor was Nick alone in this respect. Non-farmers too spoke of knowing the countryside like a body. I do not wish to suggest that non-farming rural residents are not also corporeally engaged with this space. Yet the corporeal engagements of these bodies tended to be different from the daily practices of their farming neighbours. The different embodiments that accompanied this group of respondents helped to give shape to different understandings of this space. As the following quotation shows, some of these embodiments even underlie an understanding of the countryside from the perspective of a body-in-a-car-on-a-road:

> That's one of the things that I like about my commute: that I get to look at the countryside for 30 minutes. It's so much better than my old commute when I lived in town. I like being able to see farmers in their fields and the livestock. (Nora)

This is not to suggest that non-farmers only knew the countryside with their eyes; that their feeling for this space was a product of being physically detached from it. As the following respondent makes clear, non-farmers also expressed a deeply sensuous engagement with this space. For this individual, his self-proclaimed 'closest encounters with the countryside' take place during daily bike rides through a nearby wooded area. Like Nick and his tractor, this individual's lived body, during these evening rides, expands to include his bike:

> These rides get me so attuned to the changing seasons of the countryside. I've been doing this so long that I know just when trees are going to bud in the spring and when the leaves

> drop in the fall. ... You also get to the point where you notice differences in the terrain; about, you know, how the ground gets wet and the grass slick in the spring and hard and dry in the summer. You don't really appreciate those things unless you're out their doing it [biking] every day. (Bart)

You don't really appreciate those things unless you're out their doing it every day. In this sentence, Bart makes direct reference to how this particular bike-centric embodiment offers experiences and forms of interactions unknown to those who never feel the countryside through this embodied activity. Because of this embodiment, Bart has become 'attuned to the changing seasons of the countryside', while acquiring an understanding of how the terrain varies with the passing months. With this example, we see again how understandings of the countryside are closely tied to the material doings within this space.

Bart's encounter with the countryside from his bike also highlights the significance of mundane technologies for giving shape to our understanding of the world around us. This parallels the findings of research investigating the relationship between everyday technologies, bodies and understandings of nature. Michael (2000), for example, describes how the commonplace technology of walking boots has led to the emergence of a particular body-regime, which, together, have brought forth a novel way of perceiving the natural world. Likewise, Macnaghten and Urry (1998) write about how the camera and the car have altered the way nature is now experienced by many in the west. Elsewhere, Lewis (2000) details the mediating effects of modern rock climbing technologies in the dialogue between mountains and rock-climbing-bodies. All this lends support to the idea that the body is not only spatial, but that it also spatialises. That is, it creates space by absorbing habits and technologies that then become part of the lived body, which then alter how and what space is perceived.

The sensuous moral landscape

While all the respondents in this study dwelt in the countryside, their experiences of this, as hinted at above, varied significantly, which led to divergent understanding of this space. More specific still: while all the respondents engaged sensuously with the material world, clear differences existed between farmers and non-farmers in terms of morally understanding and defining the countryside. Farmers and non-farmers described different engagements with their surrounding environments; engagements that brought with them different sensual experiences. These divergent embodiments led to different moral landscapes in terms of what was considered 'in place' and 'out of place'. When asked to complete the sentence 'When I think of the countryside ...' farmers and non-farmers described noticeably different moral landscapes. Some representative responses by non-farmers are:

> I think of corn as far as the eye can see, quiet sunsets and beautiful sunrises. (Barb)
>
> Fresh air and silence. (Lyle)
>
> I think of vast open fields full of wildlife, trees, wildflowers and birds. (Nancy)

Compare the above statements to those made by farmers:

> That's easy, agriculture. When I think of the countryside I think of agriculture – livestock, long days in the fall harvesting corn, things like that. (Jeb)
>
> I think of farms, barns and the whiff manure in the air. (James)
>
> What first comes to mind are family farms dotting the landscape. After that I see nice clean rows of corn and [soy]beans, black dirt and John Deere green. (Teddy)

While farmers were far more likely to include in their understandings of the countryside agriculture, it was the type of agriculture described that varied most significantly between these two groups. For non-farmers, the type of agriculture described – at least what was considered 'in place' – tended to be optical in nature, such as 'corn as far as the eye can see' or 'vast open fields'. Non-farmers understandings of the countryside rarely included, for instance, the sounds and smells of livestock. Farmers, on the other hand, rarely excluded such sensuous experiences from their understandings of this space. This perhaps explains why farmers were more likely (when compared to their non-farming neighbours) to view livestock and their corresponding sounds and odours as in place in the countryside.

This divergence in moral geographies between farming and non-farming rural residents reflects a broader respatialisation trend taking place in the countryside. Briefly, this trend is in part an effect of the industrialisation of agriculture; a process that has led to the consolidation, concentration and specialisation of farms as farmers seek to spread production costs over as large an operation as possible (Buttel *et al.* 1990). Tied to these structural changes is an increase in livestock concentration and dissipation. As livestock (and their odours) continue to be concentrated into fewer areas, other areas are becoming sanitised due to the disappearance of these animals. The effect of these two concurrent processes is firstly, there are fewer farms today than a generation ago, which places greater distance between neighbours, and secondly, that among the farms that do remain, fewer are raising livestock today than was the case a few decades ago. These trends have played an important role in shaping understandings of the countryside; conceptions where livestock (and their associated smells and sounds) are increasingly becoming 'out of place' (Phillips 1993, 2004).

Linked to these trends, however, is another story. I am talking about the embodied knowledge/s tied to these broader structural changes in livestock production. As hinted at earlier, non-farming respondents described their understanding of the countryside from bodies that are removed from the world of production agriculture. For an increasing number of rural inhabitants, lived embodied activities do not included many of the smellscapes (Porteous 1985), soundscapes (Schafer 1977) and tactilescapes (Carolan 2006, 2007) routinely encountered by past inhabitants of this space. And as rural embodiments become increasingly removed from the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations of production agriculture, understandings of the countryside will continue to be cleansed of these once ubiquitous sensations. As Rose (2002 p. 463) notes, all that 'landscape ever is, is the practices that make it relevant'. Thus, as rural practices change, so too changes what that landscape is in terms of what we include and exclude in our definitions of it.

Affordances: the countryside of less mobile bodies

Another way to approach the subject of how we think as bodies is through Gibson's (1986) ecological theory of perception and in particular his concept of affordance. According to Gibson (1986, p. 127), affordance refers to 'what it (the environment) offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes'. Affordances constitute the way the environment affords the body a variety of actions and sensations: for example, light affords the body colour; a landscape dotted with objects affords the body a sense of visual depth; and an environment of water affords the body such actions as swimming and floating (not to mention certain kinesthetic sensations unavailable to a body on dry land).

Social scientists have since used Gibson's argument to inform understandings of embodied space (Ingold 1992; Costall 1995; Michael 2000). I have already discussed how things like tractors and mountain bikes afford bodies certain activities and sensations. Yet for this subsection I have something else in mind. I would like to step away from speaking about the embodiments of non-farmers and farmers to address another theme that emerged over the course of this research: namely, how elderly respondents thought about the countryside.

Of the 37 individuals interviewed, eight were at least 70 years old. Among these eight, seven reported a loss of mobility due to their age. The physical mobility of this group varied considerably. One respondent, for example, relied upon his tractor to get around the farm. Another used a cane to move about. The remaining five, in the words of one, had simply 'lost a step or two over the years'. I mention this to set up the following finding: that those with disabilities tended to talk about the countryside, at least in part, through their physical limitations.

Of course, all the respondents' understandings of the countryside were shaped by their physical limitations; that is, after all, what it means to think as a body (e.g., the brute fact that our bodies do not allow us to live at the bottom of the ocean obviously shapes our understanding of this space). What was different about this group, however, is that their understandings of the countryside were coloured by a noticeable decrease in physical mobility and capability. This provides us the opportunity to link up embodied knowledge with our physical competency.

Take Emily, who has lived in the countryside her entire life, most of which was spent on a farm. Emily, along with her husband, recently retired from production agriculture. They now lease their land and buildings to a neighbour, although they continue to reside in the house that is located on their (now rented) farm. At one point in our interview, while speaking bout livestock odours, Emily made the following comment:

> I grew up around the stuff [manure]. I can't remember the smell of it really ever getting to me. After a while you just get used to it; sometimes even forget its there. In the last couple years, though, I don't know, it just started bothering me. We had an old neighbour lady who used to complain about the smell coming from our [hog] operation. Just thought she was being an old crab. But now I'm starting to have some sympathy for her. I think it has to do with our age. The smell and dust just really bother me now. I can't say I really enjoy being around it [livestock odour/dust] anymore.

For Emily, changing physical competencies – in this case physiological sensitivity to livestock odours and dust – have resulted in changing attitudes toward agricultural odours. Yet Emily was not alone in illustrating how changing physical capabilities altered understandings of the countryside. Others explained that they knew the countryside through the mobilities/immobilities that the environment affords their bodies. In the words of two respondents:

> I admit that there are stretches of time in the summer that I rarely leave the house. I just can't take the heat and humidity like I used to. I love it here in the spring and fall, but the summer and winter I can do without. ... I can now understand why others leave for the summers and winters. (Julia)

> There are times I wish I lived in town, especially now that I'm older. My knees; they can make it hard to get around. Going to church or to the store wouldn't be such a chore if I didn't live all the way out here. (Clark)

As these quotes suggest, understandings of space are to some extent products of our changing bodies. Affections for a space, such as Julia's 'love' of the countryside in the fall and spring, are more than simply a cultural artefact or a manifestation of one's social network. At least according to Julia, such affections are importantly tied to our bodies and our body's physical capabilities (such as the degree to which our bodies can take the heat and humidity). As also illustrated in the above quotes, these capabilities and impairments colour our understandings of distance, which, as in the case of Clark, give us a sense of how far is too far. And as those bodies change, such as in terms of what they can and cannot do, so too changes our understandings of the countryside as an embodied space.[3]

All respondents aged 70 and above were also long-time residents of the rural county studied. Some, in fact, had lived their entire lives in the house they today call home. It is worth noting how the changing physical space around them actually made the countryside, in some respects at least, less familiar to them. As I was told repeatedly, today the countryside in question looks nothing like it did just a couple decades ago. In the words of Jed:

> I might have been here my whole life but there are times when I don't know where I'm at. ... There used to be some timber north of here. Whenever I'd be coming back from town I know I'd be getting close [to the house] when I saw that timber. I'm mean, way back as a boy that told me home was near. A few years back they harvested it; all of it. ... Sometimes I still look for the trees to know that I'm getting close to the house. The only problem is – they [the trees] are not there any more.

This quote reminds me of what Andy Clark (1999 p. 11) calls 'wideware'. Wideware speaks to the extended cognitive process of consciousness. Building on the well-documented phenomena of how Alzheimer sufferers maintain a high level of functioning in a familiar space (e.g., their home) (Baum 1991), Clark argues that similar processes underlie how we all make sense of the world. In other words, we all rely upon external props to the extent that they become 'part of the cognitive machinery itself' (Clark 1999 p. 14). Thus, just as the world of familiar objects to some degree speaks to individuals with this dreadful disease, non-Alzheimer sufferers look to an array of props and aids (such as maps, laptops and global positioning technology) to make sense of the world. Yet Clark's conceptualisation of wideware places too much

emphasis on modern technological artefacts. He seems to forget how we all – like the Alzheimer suffer – find mundane props good to think with. Take Jed. Even with those trees now gone, Jed still occasionally finds himself grasping for this long utilised cognitive structure, becoming like a phantom limb.

This is not to suggest that we should attempt to freeze these spaces in an effort to preserve the cognitive machinery of rural inhabitants. At the very least, however, we should be mindful of what changes to these spaces mean for those living in them. When viewed in this light, Mike might not have been exaggerating when he remarked: 'I feel like I'm losing a piece of myself every time I see farmland turned into the latest bedroom community'. The pain Mike describes (a pain familiar to many rural inhabitants) is perhaps more real – more sensuous, more physical – than we might otherwise understand when the body is purged of descriptive and explanatory meaning.

Conclusion

In sum, understandings of the countryside are more than mere discursive constructs. Rural scholars and social scientists more generally need to pay greater attention to issues of embodiment. While far from definitive, the findings of this article illustrate that the body can no longer be ignored by (rural) social scientists and theorists. I have shown that we do not think about the countryside as brains-in-a-vat but rather as bodies-in-the-world.

While the conclusion is not the usual place for injecting a subject not addressed in an earlier section I would like to make the following observation. Based upon the above findings, it appears wise to think of ways to fold embodiments tied to agriculture into the world of non-farmers, particularly if we are serious about reducing rural tensions. The so-called clash of cultures between farming and non-farming rural residents is becoming more heated with each passing year (Smith and Krannich 2000). In light of the above findings, it might be useful to view this clash as being linked to divergent embodiments. This then raises the question: how can we give non-farming bodies a feel for production agriculture? This may open up an interesting, yet largely unexplored, field of activity for, say, community supported agriculture, community gardens, farmers' markets, agro-tourism and so on. The specific question is, what embodied experiences do these spaces offer and how might they shape people's attitudes towards things like nature, the countryside and agriculture?

My point in mentioning these alternative agricultural forms is simply this: if embodiments really do matter – if they really do inform our understandings of the world – then we should not be afraid to talk about embodied knowledge when attention turns to the question of how to reduce rural conflicts. For perhaps we already have some sensuous templates to work from – in such forms as community supported agriculture and community gardens. I will have to leave it to future research to explore this point further.

Notes

[1] While I am aware of the critiques of Merleau-Ponty (such as from Derrida) and phenomenology more generally (e.g., that it remains irreducibly connected to intentionality and that

it cannot speak to the interconnection between memory and perception), there is not the space to address this literature here.

[2] Identifiers are given for each quotation to show that a few respondents have not been overly relied upon in the analysis. All names have been changed to protect respondents' identities.

[3] It is not my intention to suggest that the physical capabilities that accompany being in one's seventies or eighties only take away (phenomenologically speaking). Physical immobility, as I was reminded of repeatedly over the course of this research, can also add to one's sensuous understandings of a space. It is not a matter of either/or. Ultimately, it all depends upon how people attune their body to the space in question. As Paul made clear:

> Having this old-man-hip and bad knees forced me to slow down. I wouldn't say I'm missing anything. If anything, it was when I was younger – that's when I was missing stuff. Always rushing but never paying attention. Now I get sit, like now [we were sitting on his front porch at this point in the interview]. Before you got here I caught myself watching that hornets nest up there. Must have been doing it for 10 minutes. I would have never done that 20 years ago. Wouldn't have had the time.

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