

Book review - The Unsettling Outdoors: Environmental estrangement in everyday life

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Book review

The Unsettling Outdoors: Environmental estrangement in everyday life

Russell Hitchings
Wiley, 2021, 166 pages, £24.99 (Pb)
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Recent years have seen a blossoming of ‘nature memoir’: personal stories that integrate or juxtapose individual accounts of trauma with the restorative or consoling power of landscapes. Examples include Amy Liptrot’s (2016) *The Outrun*, Kerri nì Dochartaigh’s (2022) *Thin Places*, Anita Sethi’s (2022) *I Belong Here* and Noreen Masud’s (2023) *A Flat Place*. Sethi’s narrative opens with a shocking incident of racist abuse on a train, and takes us through a journey through Pennine landscapes in which the author finds new ways of asserting her right as a person of colour to claim the English countryside as hers. This is an important genre, reconnecting the human inhabitants of a dysfunctional society with the more-than-human.

In the absence of a close reading, though, there’s a danger that they can reinforce an uncomplicated view of the ‘nature cure’ – as can policy initiatives such as green social prescribing, in which activities in natural environments are offered to support people with mental health problems. Green social prescribing is an important addition to the range of services that can support people’s mental wellbeing (Fullam et al., 2021). It is of growing interest to many policymakers and practitioners because it combines health benefits with a rationale for investment in green spaces. Yet it can also be presented in a facile fashion as a simple alternative to traditional healthcare (BBC News, 2023); and when the evidence to support heroic claims of cost savings to the NHS is complicated by thorny realities such as the difficulty of accessing green activities when you’re homeless or facing poverty, it becomes easy in turn for government to dismiss the benefits of green activities because there is no direct causal link between participation and reduced use of healthcare services.

In such a context it is necessary to pay attention to the complexities of everyday entanglements and disentanglements with nature in late-capitalist Britain. There is a risk that instead of seeing society and its practices as the problem, the focus is individualised: nature is on hand to restore the victims of social and political damage, while leaving damaging systems unchallenged.

Russell Hitchings' collection of studies, *The Unsettling Outdoors*, is a timely counterweight to oversimplified notions of nature as the best medicine. It provides valuable insights into how deeply practices of material consumption and detachment from nature are integrated into ordinary behaviour. Hitchings asserts, from evidence assembled from four research projects, that in reality many of us actively avoid encounters with the natural world, or keep them at arm's length. Hitchings paints a picture of discomfort with and in nature, of entrenched ways of living that reinforce avoidance and disconnection. In the middle of an extinction of species, they describe an 'extinction of experience' of outdoor environments.

Hitchings guides the reader through his studies of the behaviours embedded in four types of 'everyday' experience: office workers on their lunch breaks, runners on treadmills at the gym, gardeners who outsource their gardening to designers, and festival-goers whose practices of showering are disrupted by their time in muddy fields at summer music events. Drawing extensively on insights from sociology and social practice theory, Hitchings suggests that embedded behaviours can undermine and counteract the maxim that 'green space is good for you'. If we don't pay attention to such practices, he asserts, there is a risk that outdoor environments may become endangered themselves because people no longer want to use them.

The Unsettling Outdoors is a compact, readable succession of snapshots of everyday life. The examples chosen are illustrative rather than representative: Hitchings' research participants are by and large comfortably off, in secure employment and with at least enough time and money on their hands to enjoy conventional leisure activities. These are people who, as far as a reader can tell, are managing reasonably well in life.

The case studies illustrate how they are 'captured' by norms and forms of behaviour that keep them 'away from positive encounters with greenspace'. Given the chance to go outside for a lunch break, office workers explain why they prefer to remain indoors: one lawyer, for example, describes the fear of breaking into a sweat as a result of being outside on a warm day shortly before a meeting with a client. Garden owners outsource their horticultural decisions to professional designers because they feel themselves lacking in the 'repertoire of talk and thought' required to engage with living plants; instead their experience becomes one of shopping for plants. Treadmill runners describe their visits to the gym in terms of habit and routine rather than choice.

Hitchings suggests that such practices are increasing; if so, his research participants are 'the potential pioneers found at the edge of social change' (p41). He thus holds out the unenticing prospect of future generations who never leave the office at lunchtime, run in airconditioned indoor settings rather than outside, pay others to do their gardening and only break their routines with occasional visits to outdoor music festivals.

The hypothesis here is that the social practices of contemporary leisure drive a wedge between people and green spaces. This research thus provides an important balance to the multitude of studies that show how green spaces benefit physical and mental health. Hitchings does not suggest such estrangement is inevitable: rather, he alerts us to the ways in which humans '*are often quite malleable creatures who think about what we are doing sometimes, but not always, and who are vulnerable to how practices can capture us and control our actions thereafter*' (p147). The author is concerned here with individual subjectivities and how they aggregate into social patterns. It would be instructive to set this work alongside studies of how businesses seek to actively shape such unfolding social practices for their commercial ends.

The author is careful not to over-claim in this book, but instead gently suggests that researchers should attend to processes of 'disentanglement' from nature alongside the current plethora of studies examining how humans are entangled with the more-than-

human world. The audience here is the research community rather than policymakers or the public: scholars, Hitchings suggests, should be concerned with the nuances in how people describe their everyday lives and be on the lookout for signs of disconnection as well as connections. Part of that process may be for researchers themselves to be prepared to endure some discomfort in asking participants what might seem odd or impertinent questions about their everyday habits.

For those looking for actionable policy solutions or more evidence of the restorative powers of nature, this book may be disappointing and frustratingly open-ended. For the curious, it provides an engaging and revealing account of a few of the counter-currents facing those who champion the health and wellbeing benefits of green spaces.

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