

The Materiality of Research: Towards a Sociology of Plants by Jennifer Jordan

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In this feature essay, Jennifer Jordan considers the deeply physical and visceral components of forging a sociology of plants, drawing on her own research into human-plant interactions and landscapes of sustenance. While connecting the study of these spaces to questions of power and exploitation, a sociology of plants also reminds us of the capacity to create and sustain life.

This essay is part of a series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at Lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk.

Towards a Sociology of Plants



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The questions at the heart of my research are always similar — how do memory and meaning shape the material world? — but I ask these questions in starkly different kinds of settings, as well as both indoors and outside. When I first started my dissertation research on post-1989 urban change and collective memory in Berlin, I headed to the State Library in the former West Berlin, or Stabi West — the modernist library in the opening scene of Wim Wenders’s film, *Wings of Desire*. This was 1996, so the serious but helpful librarians pointed me to the long row of card catalogue drawers where I spent hours flipping through the soft paper cards in search of knowledge and ordering books from the closed subterranean stacks. In those thoughtful days at Stabi West, there were a few clunky (but back then cutting-edge) computers with the beginnings of computerised databases. Web 2.0 was still years away, and most of my research was analogue and on-site.

On days when I wasn't in that library or hidden away in one of the many archives across the city, my outside research involved a pair of sturdy sandals or urban-appropriate boots, a notebook and a camera — first my father's Canon AE-1, in my brief foray into the world of SLRs, and then a Canon Sureshot that I could quickly pull from the pocket of my jacket, get the shot and move on. I would shoot 400 or sometimes 200, mostly slide film and sometimes black-and-white. I would get it developed at the local drugstore, always careful in how many pictures I took as each click of the shutter had a clear financial cost. A decade later, one of those photographs became the cover of my first book, *Structures of Memory: Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond*.

I would walk for miles and miles in Berlin. The city smelled of diesel, cigarettes and coal smoke, some generated by my own coal stove. For all their toxicity, these smells still provoke a deep nostalgia to this day. I walked through derelict postindustrial landscapes, which today house gleaming condos, and down row after row of apartment buildings hastily built in the late-nineteenth-century boom, which had become layered with the violence of the twentieth century — bullet holes, neglect, air pollution. The quiet hours in the library paired with the dogged, pedestrian inquiry into the forgotten corners and secret memories of this complicated city. For me, a researcher posing specific questions about human action and the material world, the one didn't make sense without the other. My ability to read the landscape grew with the hours spent learning the unique German vocabulary for talking about the built environment. But those books, and the mimeographed papers I pored through in the archives, made more sense the more time I spent learning, inch by inch, the topography of the city.

Today this pairing of indoors and outdoors continues in my research, but the locations and objects of inquiry have changed — to gardens and fields and forests, and to the digital world. After completing nearly a decade of work on Berlin and on the violence that once occupied its streets and buildings, I turned to the plant-human intersection and to landscapes of sustenance. My last book investigated heirloom tomatoes and antique apples (*Edible Memory: The Lure of Heirloom Tomatoes and Other Forgotten Foods*), and I am now writing on the one hand about climate change and historical kitchen gardens, and on the other about the changing landscapes of beer brewing — forgotten hops fields, revitalised barley fields, abandoned malt houses and hop kilns and the like. My research continues to be profoundly material. Even in this digital age, I do much of my research with old-fashioned books and am still a committed user of libraries, taking advantage of the serendipity of open stacks and the tactile focus of paper books and interlibrary loans.

I pair this indoor work with the work I do quite literally out in the field, with muddy feet, finding old apple trees or talking with gardeners in the shade of an arbor. While conducting this research I have been too hot, too cold, soaked to the bone, jetlagged, sunburned and mosquito-bitten. This research also requires an unfamiliar pace for my hectic self — being slow, standing still, watching, listening. It is a very physical, visceral form of research, and one that allows me to be present in landscapes that are often undergoing great transformations that are not always immediately apparent.



Image Credit: Royal Kitchen Garden, Hampton Court, London ([Jim Linwood CC BY 2.0](#))

There are aspects of this research that are terrifying (thunderstorms, climate change), but there is also much joy and pleasure to be had. Because I focus on edible plants, there is almost always something good to eat or drink at hand. I have eaten plums pulled of a tree that is a research object, been nourished by the tea room at Hampton Court Palace with its Henry VIII-inspired menu and produce from the Georgian garden nearby and tasted tomatoes plucked from a garden in a vacant lot in Garfield Park in Chicago. This research engages all senses — it has smells (some good, some bad), tastes (almost always good). It also has the sounds I have learned to listen for of bird and insect life as well as the weather, those important forces that [Mark Laird](#) and others remind garden historians to attend to. This work is also utterly visual and tactile. I am certain that part of what has sent me in this direction is the deep draw of gazing out at a landscape that contains more shades of green than I will ever be able to name.

But the ability to read a landscape of plants is quite dependent on some kind of experience and expertise. This is most often the knowledge of plants acquired over a lifetime and handed down across generations in communities that rely, at least in part, on foods and medicines gathered from forests, meadows and seashores or grown in local gardens and fields. Most of the time I have a guide of some sort explaining the landscape to me — a seasoned gardener or young apprentice, a costumed interpreter or an eager volunteer. In many respects, landscapes do not speak for themselves. And, in contrast to how I feel in a library or a database, I am a novice in the landscapes I enter: an intruder, a visitor, uninitiated.

When I stand in a garden or a field or a forest, my interpretation of that landscape is profoundly limited. In other words, I see the forest and I see the trees, but without a conversation with the local expert or gardener, a look into the archive or a perusal of archaeological and meteorological reports, I have little ability to place this landscape into context. I have little way of knowing if it has changed, if I am glimpsing a snapshot of radical transformation or arboreal or horticultural continuity. A local forager, a historian, a botanist, a park ranger, a phenologist and a meteorologist might all have different takes on a given landscape. Or, surveyed, their takes on that landscape might line up in compelling or even startling ways.

So, for my purposes of seeking the links between human action, memories and meanings and the landscapes we inhabit, I triangulate. I sit quietly at home or in my office, reading a stack of library books or the dim glow of journal

articles held in the vast expanse of my hard drive. Then I walk out into the world, either alone or in the company of a knowledgeable farmer or gardener, and seek to bring together what I see (and smell, hear, taste and touch) with what I have read, and with the instruction that my guide can give me in reading the ways of the landscape. Sometimes this is quite obvious, embarrassingly so, as when a young gardener at Old Sturbridge Village answered my question about their apple tree collections by pointing to a good-sized cider orchard that was sitting in plain sight and that I had just walked by — no excuse. Once this past summer, another costumed interpreter at a different historical garden, observing me from afar for a while, finally crossed the dusty road running through the centre of a reconstructed agricultural village. He had watched me taking an inordinate number of photographs — with my phone rather than the SureShot of my Berlin days — in the apothecary’s garden that he tended. My read of that garden changed utterly once he talked and walked me through it — my initial impressions were wrong, nearly the opposite of what I learned when he told me of its origins and intentions.



Image Credit: (Tracy Reid CC BY 2.0)

A sociology of plants is already underway, and is also very much demanding the presence of the researcher in the field and the archive. Two examples are Seth Holmes’s *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, where the materiality of the research requires Holmes to work alongside the broken bodies of the women and men he writes about, to cross the border with them, to see and experience all the painful physicality of migrant labour, the people who harvest the fruit in such high demand across the USA and around the world. A quite different example would be Chandra Mukerji’s *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles*, where the researcher triangulated the physical experience of viewing the garden at ground level and from above with deep archival records that explain not only the meaning of this particular arrangement of box hedges, annual beds and opulent fountains, but also the military technologies and intentions at work.

I now spend a lot of time with plants, both under the open sky and with the digital and analogue research materials at my desk. This is not ornamental work. Do I even have to say it? Without plants, there are no people. Water is life, and so are plants. Look to your plants. The weeds in the cracks of the sidewalks, the great trees like time machines from past centuries and millennia, the meticulously monotonous cornfields, kelp washing up on shore. The apple orchard, carrot patch and the rice paddy. The rain forest, the chaparral, the high desert with its plant life meticulously adapted to arid conditions, the alpine meadow. Without them, there is no us, no life on planet earth.

Many of my colleagues, with good reason, write about space, territory and violence of various sorts. Violence and loss are never far away, and the sociology of plants is as intricately connected to power as any other realm of sociological inquiry. But I keep reaching for space, territory and *joy*, a very intentional move. There is much death in the world, and I want to write about life. So much cruelty, but I want, sometimes, to write about kindness. This is part of why I set out into the kitchen in my last book, and now wander forth into gardens and forests. It is impossible to ignore that these green spaces are intrinsically connected to systems of struggle, exploitation and deep imbalances of power, but, as [Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo](#) and others make so clear, they can also be places where people find peace and create life.

Jennifer Jordan is professor of sociology and urban studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is the author of *Edible Memory: The Lure of Heirloom Tomatoes and other Forgotten Foods* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) and *Structures of Memory: Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond* (Stanford University Press, 2006) as well as numerous scholarly articles on topics such as kitchen gardens and collective memory, apples and German national identity and on dumplings. Her latest research delves deeper into two kinds of edible landscapes — historical kitchen gardens and the forgotten landscapes of beer and cider production, in particular hops cultivation and cider orchards. She has been a Fulbright scholar, a senior scientist at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a senior fellow at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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