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## GARDENING AS CARE: REWRITING A RESEARCH PAPER IN THE FIRST PERSON

*Adriana Laura Massidda*

### ABSTRACT

We often approach academic writing as the crafting of an argument which needs to be conveyed following preset formulae or, more restrictively, as an exercise of legitimisation within an international academic community. Conventions have indeed helped researchers to share ideas smoothly across the decades; however they present important limitations as they trace a hard boundary between the sayable and the unsayable and consequently between what can be thought or not.<sup>1</sup> Just as a way of example, they involve to a large degree making ourselves invisible; they entail a rigid structure for presenting one's ideas which does not usually reflect how the ideas actually emerged and how the thinking was constructed. Over recent years however, many researchers throughout the world have started to seek and celebrate more pleasurable, expressive, and accessible ways of academic writing.<sup>2</sup> My contribution is intended as part of that conversation as I pilot the rewriting exercise of an article in progress trying to reach a more narrative style. In particular, I aim to engage the way in which I navigated the site, the city, the historical moment and the theoretical context of the research narrated; I will reinvoke, as characters or in-text persons, the fellow humans who guided me and accompanied me in that journey and I will involve both my subjective sensitivity and my intellectual excitement about the subject as I write.

What I present below is a sample of that exercise — in fact, it is its fourth iteration. The original version of the text had a conventional academic writing style (conventional at least in the field of urban studies); the second iteration included the first person but to such a degree that I felt it was almost taking over the narrative. In fact the urban analysis started to pale and weaken as the text seemed to gradually become almost an autobiography. In the third and fourth iterations, I sought instead to weave myself in the text in such a way that it actually nurtures my arguments, my experiences, my thinking. The sample below contains the first section of the article.

### ‘THE URBAN GARDEN’ PAPER

I came to hear about the ‘Urban Garden’ local initiative some time after I joined a university set in Leicester, a post-industrial city in the Midlands, UK. My job there, a research fellowship in an architecture school, also implied my first contact with an England different than that of Cambridge and London, the only UK cities I had known thus far; an urban atmosphere not dominated by the white middle classes. As an immigrant, and after nine years in England, I had heard innumerable remarks about Cambridge or London being ‘a bubble’, of them not representing the real UK, of poverty existing ‘out there’. My work is on the history of urban and spatial dispossession so these remarks had strongly caught my eye. Still, coming from Argentina and so far focused on Buenos Aires shantytowns, I had no imagination to accompany them. In other words, the dichotomy between a struggling Argentina (a place in the Global South) and a comfortable England (in the Global North) in my mind had thus far remained experientially unchallenged.

One of the most diverse cities in the United Kingdom (according to the 2021 England and Wales census), only 33% of Leicester’s population self-defines as white British; the remaining 67% is spread across a wide range of groups among which British South Asian residents are predominant (41%), followed by African diaspora groups (roughly 7%).<sup>3</sup> Beyond statistics, Leicester’s diversity can be perceived in its bustling streets, in its large-scale Diwali festival held every autumn by the South Asian community, and in the Caribbean Carnival that used to take place every August.

At the same time, Leicester residents also experience significant levels of dispossession within the UK context.<sup>4</sup> Again from the 2021 census, 61% of its households are affected by at least one of the deprivation dimensions considered (education, employment, health, and housing) — nine points higher than the East Midlands and England average, which are both at 52%. I felt welcome in Leicester but was also fascinated to see so many migrants and locals crossing paths and the enthusiasm people had about what they were doing. It was, in a way, like love at first sight. There was a certain tension in the air, yet still a sense of excitement, that I struggle to put into words in my writing. For the first time in the UK, I felt not only foreign and South American, but also awkwardly privileged myself in my position and my past experience. In a way, Leicester was not only welcoming me as my new workplace but prompting me to recast and challenging what I had thought was my spot in the world, making me feel strangely white and parochial despite being a migrant.<sup>5</sup>

So I came to hear about Oak Hills, home to The Urban Garden initiative, when I asked colleagues about poverty in Leicester.<sup>6</sup> Leicester has several struggling peripheries in addition to its city centre and Oak Hills is one of them, featuring in the top 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in England reported by the 2019

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and intro. by Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004), 18–25, 48–52 and 84–94.

2 See for example: María Carman, *Las fronteras de lo humano: cuando la vida humana pierde valor y la vida animal se dignifica* (Siglo XXI, 2017); Emma Cheatle, *Lying in the Dark Room: Architectures of British Maternity* (Routledge, 2024); or the work of Gisela Heffes, which cuts across the academic, fiction writing, and themes of personal migrant experience.

3 Within ‘British South Asian residents’ (my own category), I include: ‘Indian or British Indian’, which is the largest in this subgroup and the second in Leicester and Oak Hills after ‘White British’; ‘Pakistani or British Pakistani’; ‘Bangladeshi, British Bangladeshi’; ‘Asian British’; and ‘Indian or British Indian’ under the branch ‘Other ethnic group’. My analysis of: ‘Ethnic Group (Detailed)’, Office for National Statistics, 29 November 2022, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS022/editions/2021/versions/1>> [accessed

7 April 2023].

4 ‘Tackling Poverty in Leicester’, Leicester City Council, n.d. <<https://www.leicester.gov.uk/anti-poverty/poverty-in-leicester/>> [accessed 7 April 2023]; Julia Kollwe, ‘Leicester Has Lowest Household Disposable Income in the UK’, *The Guardian*, 25 May 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/25/leicester-has-lowest-household-disposable-income-in-the-uk>> [accessed 7 April 2023].

5 I am writing about personal experience here rather than urban theory frameworks. However, the questioning of categories that my contact with Leicester everyday life produced is reminiscent of the dislocation proposed by Jennifer Robinson in: Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (Routledge, 2006).

6 I am using a pseudonym for this neighbourhood in order to care for it and its residents’ concern about stigma.

Index of Multiple Deprivation and the top 5% of deprived wards in the UK according to the 2021 census. Another of them, Saffron Lane, had already hosted me and others for a research seminar just before the Covid pandemic.<sup>7</sup> But, out of a complete coincidence (or not), Oak Hills in particular happened to be site of a former sewage farm — just like the London social housing complex I was researching at the time.<sup>8</sup> My overall project, ‘Down to Earth’, interrogated the overlap between ecological and socioeconomic vulnerability in urban space — more specifically, the relation between waste and urban poverty in urban peripheries. Seeking to build on from my studies of Buenos Aires shantytowns, I worked on the hypothesis that unwanted land tends to be where low-income families are forced to settle, either through the dynamics of a capitalist real estate system or through direct government action. Waste plays a role in this: be it ‘matter out of place’ (a common reading of Mary Douglas’s phrase)<sup>9</sup> or matter that is simply unwanted in a given consumerist circuit,<sup>10</sup> waste creates both material contamination and symbolic unwantedness, perpetuating disadvantage. Douglas’s phrase in fact regards dirt rather than waste which points to impurity in a certain ordered system. There is therefore a cultural code, a structure underpinning what is desired or not, where each element falls, and how the cultural place of dirt is constructed. In our first site visit, my colleague Mark Hillier asked me how that site compared to Buenos Aires shantytowns. At first sight, it could not have been more different. Where *villas* were all density and music, Oak Hills was unsettlingly quiet. Where there was a strong decades-long tradition of collective work in *villas*, all we heard from locals in Oak Hills was a disheartened sense of individual isolation. The wider practices of social mobilisation in Argentina also stood in contrast with what I observed in England, a society effectively demobilised since the administration of Margaret Thatcher.<sup>11</sup> Would my hypothesis stand? Embracing the differences, I also thought that the process of co-design and citizen science that residents had

already started, and the collaboration with them that we could set up with our students, had the potential to effect micro-scale change or at the very least something to learn about it. Despite structural inequality and disadvantage, residents in different geographies had made their aggregated microscale efforts count and there was no reason not to observe what could happen in this one.

7 Adriana Laura Massidda and Valeria Guarneros Meza, ‘The Clandestine Hand of the State: A Workshop’, *Centre for Urban Research on Austerity*, 29 May 2020 <<https://cura.our.dmu.ac.uk/2020/05/29/the-clandestine-hand-of-the-state-a-workshop/>>.

8 This work, done in collaboration with Architects for Social Housing, can be found in: ‘Saving St. Raphael’s Estate: The Alternative to Demolition’ (Architects for Social Housing, 2021) <<https://www.architectsforsocialhousing-design.co.uk/reports/saving-st-raphaels-estate-book/>> [accessed 7 April 2023].

9 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, 2nd edn. (Routledge, 2002), pp. 44–50, 196–203.

10 Geoffrey Kantaris, ‘Waste Not, Want Not: Garbage and the Philosopher of the Dump (Waste Land and Estamira)’, in *Global Garbage: Urban Imaginaries of Waste, Excess, and Abandonment*, ed. by Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner (Routledge, 2015), 71–74, 79–80 and 87–90.

11 Jonathan Davies, *Between Realism and Revolt: Governing Cities in the Crisis of Neoliberal Globalism* (Bristol University Press, 2021), p. 58, pp. 155–177.

RESPONSE TO ADRIANA LAURA MASSIDDA'S  
WORK / BY LAURA MARK

The introduction to your paper speaks about your recollections of moving to Leicester and your experiences of the city. It feels like for you there is a kind of nervousness about speaking as an outsider or as someone acting as a gatekeeper or mediator. I was wondering about ways you might tackle this in writing about the garden of Beaumont Leys.

I don't know whether Luis and Emma knew this when they paired us up, but I also lived in Leicester. I moved to Leicester in 2005, and lived there until 2012, so as someone with a common familiarity with the city I wanted to write to you about my own experiences of Leicester. For me Leicester is the place I have felt most at home – even as an outsider. I still refer to Leicester as my home (it can get quite confusing). So maybe in an act of encouragement to you I thought I would write this as a love letter to Leicester.



Figure 1. Swimming in Aylestone Meadows, Leicester.

*Dear Leicester,*

*You are a city which is often overlooked and forgotten. When I tell people of my love for you, I get a look. It's almost a look of pity. But I'm always surprised by the fact that most haven't visited you. For me, you are halfway between my two other homes – of Sheffield and of London.*

*You are city, where most people are making a new home for themselves. You have opened out your streets, parks, green spaces in an open embrace.*

*I'm drawn to think of moments of my own growing within the confines of the city. A city in which I also grew as a person.*

*Each Saturday morning we would get up, and cycle the five miles out of the city along the old railway line to Whetstone. At Whetstone we had worked as part of Transition Leicester to establish a community farm. We would dig, weed, drink tea and sing as we worked. Then return with our cycle trailer full of vegetables which we would deliver to others as we wended through the streets to our home off the Narborough Road. Sometimes we would stop to swim in the meadows, wild ponies eating grass by our discarded clothes. We would return home tired and aching but full of the joys of interesting conversations and time spent with friends.*

*Our house off the Narborough road, which became widely known as 'The Corner House', was fronted by a large garden that wended around the side of the house. Many who passed our house, mistook our lively home for a community centre. It was a six-person house but at times there could be more than 20 people living there. On Sundays there would be a parade of friends bringing dining chairs down the street as we cooked huge roasts. On weeknight evenings there would be meetings of whatever local community group in our lounge — Transition Leicester, the Green Light Festival or the Rusty car share group. There were always people coming and going. It was easy to confuse it.*

*We started growing in our dusty bit of garden — it was a means of production but also a protection from the busy street. One day I spilled a jar of dried chickpeas in the kitchen and I swept it up and threw it out the window. Months later chickpeas plants grew beneath the window. We grew sweetcorn, potatoes, kale, salad leaves, carrots. At the junction opposite was a corner shop. The man who lived there with his family was a first-generation immigrant from India. The man from the corner shop invited us into his own garden. He brought us seeds — seemingly somewhat surprised we were attempting to grow anything on the street. His wife brought us curries and samosas, and they began to stock oat milk in the corner shop at a time when it was not easily found among the supplies of local off-licenses.*

*These are my memories of you, Leicester.*

*With love,*

*From someone who will always call Leicester her home.*



Figure 2. Residents of 'The Corner House' in a garden in Leicester.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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*Adriana Laura Massidda*

Adriana Laura Massidda is an architect, urban historian and activist focused on the history of Argentine villas (local name for shantytowns). Her main project to date analysed the transformation of the Buenos Aires Southwest floodplains into a landscape of villas and state-sponsored projects over an extremely convoluted historical period: the Cold War, and specifically the late 1950s and 1960s. In a later project she explored the environmental history of two housing estates in England set on top of former sewage farms: St Raphael's Estate (London) and Beaumont Leys (Leicester). Her current project looks into the 1967 flood in Buenos Aires, asking what it can tell us about climate (in)justice. She collaborates closely with grassroots communities for her work.

