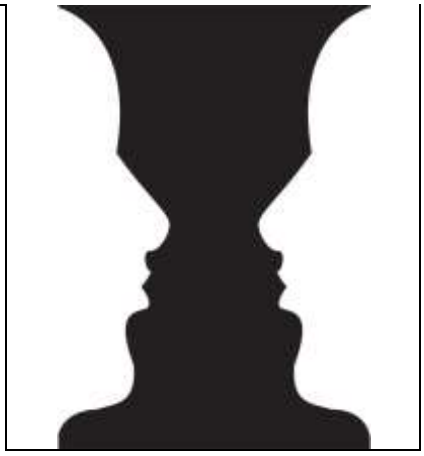
JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Volume 4, Number 1, Summer 2013
ISSN 2068 – 0317
http://compaso.eu



From land to sea: unsettling subjectivities

Patrick Bresnihan[1]

Abstract
In this paper I trace an important conceptual shift which emerged during my fieldwork with fishermen in the South West of Ireland. I begin by describing how my role as a social researcher was interpreted as a valuable 'bridge' between different (epistemological) positions, namely the fishermen and scientists. This approach rests on the belief that individual actors occupy discrete subject-positions capable of being articulated and understood within consensus-making processes. Going to sea marked, for me, a literal and metaphorical departure from this understanding. Rather than thinking of fishermen as bounded, individual subjects acting on and in a 'dumb' external world, and thus having a 'position' from which to make themselves understood, I began to attend to experiences which extended across and between people, places and things. In part two I analyze how the concept of 'continuous experience' helps us to think about experience as relational and contingent, unsettling the (governing) call to identify one's position. Attending to the ways in which experience unfolds through the immediate mattering of relations between people, places and things also allows us to move beyond explanatory modes which seek to identify how subjects are produced through particular structuring relations. In the final part of the paper I describe how the excess of sociability can suspend normal roles and relations, including those which exist between 'researcher' and 'subject'.

Keywords
Experience, subjectivity, representation, materiality

[1] Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, bresnip@tcd.ie

I listen to fellows saying here's good stuff for a novel
or it might be worked up into a play.
I say there's no dramatist living can put old Mrs Gabrielle Giovannitti into a play with that
kindling wood piled on top of her head coming
along Peoria street nine o'clock in the morning.
- Carl Sandburg, 'Onion Days', Chicago Poems (1915)[2]

Introduction

When I arrived in Castletownbere, a commercial fishing port in the South West of Ireland, my research was concerned with transformations in the governance and management of the fisheries. A significant challenge for policy-makers and fisheries managers in this regard was the need to include fishermen within localized decision-making processes and fisheries management. Fishermen were identified as important and valuable actors in the sustainable management of the fisheries. This marks a significant departure from the past when fishermen were (ineffectively) regulated through a top-down management regime informed by (inadequate) scientific knowledge (Sissenwine and Symes 2007). In the first part of this paper I describe how my position as a social researcher was understood in terms of productively mediating between fishermen and other actors, such as scientists, within this new governance regime. There was an implicit assumption that I had a role to play in 'bridging the gap' between fishermen and government, articulating different subject-positions in order to foster a consensus on the sustainable management of the fisheries.

At the same time, it was clear that fishermen were becoming visible as active and responsible 'stewards' of the marine environment within a prescribed narrative of ecological modernization. Those who participated in the new forums for co-management were responding to the limits and opportunities generated by the re-organization of fisheries management. This re-organization is underpinned by the EU's objective of 'balancing' the biological reproduction of fish stocks to fishing effort. On this 'level playing field' fishermen are incited to compete with one another for access to the resource within the demands of a global market. They are able to appear as 'more' or 'less' responsible and productive in relation to the 'natural' parameters of the fish stocks and the market.

While fishermen appear in terms of their relationship to bio-economic resources and the demands of the market, my own research brought me into contact with fishermen who were part of different social and material relations. In the second part of this paper I describe how these research encounters came to change the way I conceptualized experience as something which was beyond representation. As I went out on the boats, and as I continued to live and work in Castletownbere, I was finding, through my participation in a place, over time, that experience materialized beyond any clear position or single perspective. I use the concept of 'continuous experience' to draw attention to these non-spectacular experiences; the banal, ordinary, everyday unfolding

[2] Quoted in Linebaugh 2008: 47.

of relations between people, places and things that were as much embodied as they were articulated.

Understanding experience as something that took place in and through the material world shifts the question of 'difference' from epistemology to experience, or the way we come to be, and become, in relation to the world around us, human and non-human. This understanding of experience is irreducible to a particular 'perspective' that I might 'own' or take up, as much as it evades the normative modes of environmental governance. In the final part of this paper I use the concept of 'continuous experience' to suggest how distinctions of 'researcher' and 'subject' are interrupted through moments of common or shared experience, and the way in which such interruptions can open up productive forms of dis-identification.

Environmental governance and social research

In 2011, the environmental campaigner Charles Glover, who wrote the influential film 'End of the Line', wrote a review of Mark Kurlansky's 'The Last Fish Tale'. Kurlansky's book told the history of the New England fisheries, a 'history from below', as Glover described it scathingly. He writes of Kurlansky: "He [Kurlansky] remains hooked on a mythical figure in an oily sweater at a time when what makes a fisherman great is now measured by what he leaves in the sea." Glover dismisses Kurlansky's romanticisation of fishermen and argues that environmentalists are the best fishermen today, doing the most for the fish and the sea. He quotes the campaign by environmentalists to close off 6,500 miles of sea to fishing, "with support from intelligent fishermen." He concludes: "Kurlansky seems to prefer the tragedy of brave but misguided fishermen, because it is more poetic" (Glover 2011).

As the urgency associated with the depletion of fish stocks intensifies, the shift in the popular image of the fisherman has become widespread. Nor should this shift be underestimated in terms of what it means for fishermen and their role in the future of the fisheries. Dr. Lee, a leading scientist with the Irish Marine Institute told me,

> My own view is that fishermen have lost, or are losing this moral game of custodians of the marine environment. Joe public doesn't see that anymore. 20 years ago sure, they were toilers of the deep. It was a respected business. Being a fisherman, there was kudos. In terms of people's views now, look, we read it all the time- and its complete bollox- but it's this populist view that they're towing metal beams across the seabeds and they're shooting seals and smashing coral reefs and they're catching dolphins. So that, the kind of view of themselves ... in Dingle, or Rossaveal or Greencastle they still have that standing in the community but in terms of the wider community I think that's gone, and I think that fishermen realize that. Which ever way you look at it I think they always feel they're on the back foot, rightly or wrongly, from the greens, the oil prices, imports, you know (Lee 11/08/09).

Dr. Lee told me that there was now a fundamental change in 'culture', as fishermen became part of a new consensus on conserving fish stocks. This situation, he told me, has opened a new space for collaboration and communication between the

fishing industry and scientists, something which had been crucially lacking in the past. He described how productive and effective these collaborations were becoming. Two weeks before I met him, he had been at a meeting in Dunmanway, Co. Cork, with twenty skippers. Lee told me that he was expecting a really tough meeting but it turned out to be one of the most productive he had ever been at: "it was just like forget about what happened in the past. We have to get the science up and running, what do we need to do" (Lee 11/08/09). They spent six or seven hours going through the problems 'as they saw them, and the problems as the Marine Institute saw them.' At the end they had a four point agenda including a plan for one of the fishing boats to carry out scientific surveys. The top-down approach is replaced by relations 'on the ground', talking about what 'really matters', as Dr. Lee described it.

From the beginning, my role as social researcher was interpolated within this consensus-building approach to fisheries governance. As one fisheries manager told me, my social science background would enable me to pass between the different actors opening up 'new avenues of communication, because it all comes down to communication'. Even amongst my academic peers there was an understanding, with or without my corroboration, that my work with fishermen was an inquiry into their 'different' forms of knowledge (embodied, immersed, practical, non-technological) with a critical dimension being the making visible of this knowledge in negoitations over the future of the fisheries. My role was to be a 'neutral' observer passing between camps while also 'softening' these differences by opening up channels of communication and understanding that could render fishermen more amenable to the 're-structuring' of the fisheries. As an ethnographer my presence at once reiterated categories of difference, while also being invested with the task of confirming that we weren't so different after all. It appeared, as Marcus writes, that "[t]he ethnographer is no longer a stranger, but a figure whose presence is anticipated" (Marcus 2007: 1142).

While the 'inclusion' of fishermen as active participants in the management of the fisheries is presented as positive and unproblematic, more critical accounts point to the ways in which neoliberal governmentalities modify and generate the figure of the 'responsible', 'productive' subject (Agrawal 2005; Blackman *et al.* 2008; Brockling *et al.* 2010; Rose 2002).[3] This has become evident in the management of the fisheries over the past seven or eight years through the dramatic shift in the 'burden of proof'. Fishermen are required to 'demonstrate' that they are fishing within the biological limits of fish stocks, while at the same time struggling to remain competitive in a global market. This shift in fisheries governance reflects a recognition amongst fisheries managers, policy-makers and advisers that a sustainable fisheries is only possible if fishermen can be relied on to fish sustainably.[4] This means reversing regulatory and economic incentives to

[3] Agrawal writes, "[p]olicies aiming at greater decentralisation and participation are about new technologies of government. To be successful, they must redefine political relations, reconfigure institutional arrangements, and transform environmental subjectivities" (Agrawal 2005: 7).

[4] The EU Green Paper on the Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy states: "[w]ithout active collaboration between them [industry and managers], even the best-drafted regulations founded on the best-researched science, and supported by carefully targeted subsidies can achieve little. Policy is only as good as its

overfish, while at the same time providing incentives to fish more selectively and to market fish as environmental seafood (Drummond and Symes 1996; (Bresnihan 2014 forthcoming). Fishermen only 'appear' as productive within the narrative of ecological modernization, the balancing of bio-economic resources with resource users within a global capitalist market. While this is presented as necessary in terms of preserving fish stocks, the ongoing re-organization of the fisheries not only involves the exclusion of many fishermen (the 'excess capacity'), but also transforms the social and material relations within the fisheries, not least, as Charles Glover made clear, through the displacing of economic value away from the activity of catching fish towards market-oriented activity and the ownerhip of fishing rights.[5]

While some fishermen express anger and frustration about the strict regulations imposed from the EU, the cheap imports undermining their ability to make a livelihood, or the devaluing of their knowledge and skill, the biological limits of natural resources and the free market are understood as the 'natural' parameters of sustainable development. Those who are unable to compete, or refuse to participate, are unfortunate casualties of 'progress', unable to make the necessary changes in order to 'keep up'.

While there was much enthusiasm about 'communicating' with fishermen, those who didn't communicate, who didn't appear or speak within the new forums of fisheries governance, were by extension atavistic fisherman who had yet to invest in the 'common', sustainable future. Having met a 'converted' fisherman, a local, and hoping he would be my 'gatekeeper' to other fishermen, I was told it would be near impossible to get out on a boat due to their mistrust of researchers. In other contexts I was given suggestive smiles and comments about how fishermen were 'liberal with the truth', that they never told the same story. I was told they were unlikely to want to talk to me. In my first meeting with a local marine scientist in Castletownbere, I was asked how I was going to 'truth' the fishermen. She told me that fishermen never told the truth. They said one thing and then another. This sense of fishermen being in some way opaque or elusive was a theme throughout my research: not providing clear data for scientists; unable to agree on collective management plans; unwilling to cooperate with fisheries managers and researchers.

For the first seven or eight weeks, I watched from a distance as the boats came and went into the town. I watched them pass between Bere Island and the mainland where I walked in the afternoons. They were almost within touching distance and yet the sea acted as a literal and metaphorical barrier: they disappeared to sea and lived their lives out of sight, returning to land where they disappeared into the fabric of the town. Often, after doing errands in the town, I would walk or drive along the quayside where the boats were tied. I would pass groups of fishermen mending nets or chatting by their boats. I was strangely nervous and yet wanted to leave the land and see for myself what

implementation. And in the final analysis, it is the people who work in the fishery who have to make that policy a reality, by adopting it fully in their daily practice" (my italics)(CEC 2008: 9).

[5] The present CFP is committed to introducing some form of Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) which is a form of exchangeable, private right of access to the fisheries resource.

happened at sea. The sea itself began to occupy my thoughts. I was told frequently that it would be very difficult for me. While I had never been seasick people who knew told me that once I passed beyond the horizon and the land fell away the sea became an altogether different place.

I first met a fisherman through an incidental exchange in the local pub. I asked the man beside me if he knew any lobster fishermen. He told me to get in touch with another man, and gave me his number. I rang him the next morning and met him the following afternoon. It was a Friday and the pub we met in was filling up. A large man sat at the bar and knew who I was immediately. He told me that his wife and sisters were behind us. They met every Friday for lunch. A group of about six women and several children sat over his shoulder. His wife carried a small baby, their grandchild, in her arms. He got me a cup of tea and we talked for an hour or so. He asked me vaguely what I was researching and I told him it was for a book on the history of the fisheries. He didn't ask any further questions and was happy to talk to me about a range of subjects depending on how the conversation flowed. He asked if I'd come around with him in his van as he had a few jobs to do. We drove to a small pier about ten miles away. He had some pots to collect. I helped him lift them into the back of the van as I tried to ask him questions about the fisheries. Things shifted when the conversation 'fell' on something outside us: a passing boat; the Martello Tower above Blackball Harbour; the weather we had just had. While these deviations were only fleeting and occasional they opened up different avenues of conversation from my pointed questions about his experience of fishing, science and the EU. On the way back to town we stopped at his friend's house and had tea and biscuits. He introduced me to his friend and his wife and I sat listening to them speak about local problems, friends and history.

I went out fishing with Frank several times over the next few months. While he owned a large trawler which his son skippered, he also owned a small, inshore boat which he took out most days. The catch from this inshore fishing did not amount to much but he told me he wouldn't be able to get by without going fishing.

On my last day fishing with him, we came to hauling four strings of pots we had shot the day before. There were forty pots on each string. Donal was excited about pulling them in because he wanted to give me a 'feed of prawns before I left'. After hauling the strings there was nothing except a few small crabs and three prawns. I asked whether it was the weather and Donal said that the prawns usually liked an easterly wind. I asked if it was because the pots hadn't been left long enough and he said they often check them after a day and there are plenty of prawns. He said, 'I don't know who to ask about this, three bloody prawns, it must be the worst ever', though he was half joking.

The manner in which Donal laughed about the failure to catch any prawns reflects a sentiment or understanding which many of the fishermen I worked with over the course of my fieldwork had towards the sea and the unpredictability of fishing. Out on the boats the experience of multiple agents converging on one another, soliciting certain responses which were never fully certain or resolved, was made tangible and intense. When I learnt how to tie knots on the boats, Frank told me that a good knot should be as

easy to undo as it was strong. You never knew when conditions would change and something would have to be let go, or something brought into play. In response to questions about why something was done this way, or why there were fish in that place, Frank was often unable to answer. He would shrug his shoulders suggesting 'that's just the way it is'.

The experience of fishing is not something that is easily communicated. This helps to understand how fishermen find it difficult to explain or describe what makes a 'good' fisherman. Perhaps the best response I got was: "to be a good fisherman you have to *want* to be a fisherman". A good fisherman is not 'explained' by a certain set of skills or knowledge, but rather by the extent to which you are able to commit and adapt to the variety of possibilities which arise. The chronic uncertainty of going to sea promises opportunities, but it also means certain failure and disappointment. This precarious existence is embodied everyday by the demands of the sea, ensuring that decisions are rarely made on the basis of clear, pre-determined strategies or plans.

Going out to sea opened up a different orientation in my research: the sense in which the world was not a blank space on which to project a well-laid, linear plan, or time the linear unfolding of an individual trajectory. Fishermen, no more than anyone else, are not bounded, individual subjects acting in a 'dumb' external world of discrete resources. They are part of ongoing, social and material relations dispersed across places, people and things. The openness and uncertainty of this relational experience conflicts with the economic subject being demanded by the emergent strategies of neoliberal governance in the fisheries. In the bio-economic analyses of the fisheries, the problem is reduced to an 'imbalance' between individual, self-interested fishermen and a finite array of bio-economic fish resources. The bio-economic 'nature' which emerges from this analysis excludes the many 'everyday natures' which emerge through ongoing social and material relations, which produce different uses, value and experiences.

It emerged that here, in this conflict, was a different value to social research: not the articulation of subject-positions through a 'better' understanding of a particular milieu, but attention to the rich, material experiences which were messy, incoherent and incomplete. The question is how to make sense of these many different, rich and ongoing experiences? How to articulate them beyond the limited narratives of ecological modernization? These questions do not just involve a methodological turn but a theoretical one: it means conceptualizing subjectivity as something more than the *homo economicus* of neoliberal environmental governance, while at the same time ensuring that it is not submerged within the 'local' milieu.

Relational subjectivity and continuous experience

In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour suggests that the acronym ANT (Actor Network Theory) fits perfectly the role of the social researcher: "blind, myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveller" (Latour 2005: 9). Instead of joining points through theoretical leaps the job of the researcher is to travel 'down into the valleys and up into the hills', tracing the movement of actors, discourses, representations through their

messy negotiations with the world (Law 2002). This productive step requires the 'complexification' of existing relations in order to account for the rich multiplicity of the world; "to recognize the complex associations of entangled, socionatural beings, instruments, and practices that constitute different natures" (O'Reilly 2005: 116).

The 'complexifying' method of the actor network is evident within critical studies of globalization.[6] It can also be seen in the 'materialist turn' which attunes to the agency of the non-human and, by extension, the distributed or de-centred quality of human subjectivity. Nigel Thrift, for example, identifies the need to map a new 'cartographic' person. Eliding the terminology of archaeology, of digging and discovering, he tries to think of the personal and collective biography as something spread out on the surface of the world rather than buried in its past (Thrift 2008). Echoing this relational, material approach to ontology, Tim Ingold writes, "[i]f nothing exists in and for itself, but is only the more or less ephemeral embodiment of activity-in-relation-to-others, then the whole project of classification - which groups and divides things according to fixed attributes- becomes impossible… In short, in such a world names are not nouns but verbs; each one describes a going-on" (Ingold 2005: 161).

This emphasis on ongoing, material relations suggests that knowledge and subjectivity emerge through a bodily engagement with the world beyond or outside of discourse and consciousness.[7] Ingold describes this as a 'sentient ecology', not just a formal, authorized knowledge of the environment but a 'felt' one developed through long experience in a particular environment (Ingold 2000). Ingold describes, for example, how a biologist regards the tree as an inanimate object whereas the hunter, 'accustomed to the woods', registers the tree through "the swaying of the boughs in the wind, the audible fluttering of leaves, the orientation of branches to the sun." (Ingold 2000: 98)

However, while this 'dwelling' or 'ecological' approach goes beyond the subject / object dualism, the relations which are understood to generate knowledge and subjectivity carry a degree of functionality. The 'on-going-ness' of social and material relations in the world does not refer to the unpredictable and strange encounters which arise in daily life, but a more durable set of relations which serve to structure subjectivity in certain ways.[8] The 'hunter' analogy, for example, suggests that the hunter perceives

[6] Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, for example, identify the need for ethnography to find ways of adapting to the cross-cutting connections generated by global dynamics. These 'global assemblages' create a situation in which the "forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematised or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and intervention" (Ong and Collier 2005: 4).

[7] This overlaps with a phenomenological reading which looks at the body-subject as an experiencing entity rather than perpetuating the dualism of subject and object (Merleau-Ponty 2005; Ferguson 2001; Seamon 1980)

[8] Ingold's analysis of the *The Harvesters* (1565), a painting by Pieter Bruegel, is indicative. He points to the ways in which the painting represents how historical time is materialized through the specific organization and inscription of the land, the countless paths and journeys which have been taken by humans and animals alike. He points to the many ways in which a tree's narrative is inextricably bound up with a human one: people use it for shade, fruit and wood, activities which simultaneously effect the tree's material form. Ingold uses *The harvesters* to illustrate what he calls the 'taskscape', the way in which places and people

the tree in a certain way *because* he is a hunter.[9] The functional tone of this understanding does not account for the way experience is provoked by the world in entirely unexpected and startling ways; it doesn't account for how the biologist can also be struck by the 'fluttering of the leaves'. The consequence is that there is little or no space for singularity or novelty. The 'invisible hand' of emergent ecological relations has a structuring dimension which does not comfortably account for irruption or sudden transformation, for the suspension of 'accumulated wisdom' and the generation of a new, 'meaningless' subjectivity. In this way the 'dwelling' perspective, as with other 'ecological' perspectives, can enrich our accounts of existing relations between people, animals, things and places, but it doesn't point towards the unrealized social and material relations which are excessive to any existing network or assemblage. A different approach attempts to grapple with the 'excess' of everyday experience, which is not visible or cannot be made visible within existing sets of relations.[10]

Dimitris Papadopoulos and Niamh Stephenson have sought to address the loss of experience in some contemporary critical research by turning to the everyday, continuous experience which unfolds outside of the regulative function of representation in contemporary regimes of control. The concept of 'continuous experience' is drawn from the work of the twentieth century philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead. For Whitehead the experiencing being is, at every moment, in the presence of countless things and people, as well as past experiences, which converge, prescribing but not determining what is possible in that moment (Rose 2002). Only some of what is experienced in the world is turned into an 'event' which has a degree of stability and is representable. In Whitehead's analysis the experiencing being is thus always an individuation, an abstraction of some but not all of what was possible. There is always a

are co-produced through their relational activities. But this visual representation identifies only one particular mode of 'going-on'. The social and material relations which are inscribed in the land, and in the canvas, are structured by a 'natural' cycle, an ecology furrowed through the reciprocal relations between people and their environment. As one of a series of twelve paintings representing the different months of the year, The Harvesters offers an idealized view of time and space and the particular activities (and thus relations) which are appropriate to it. While this world consists of ongoing relations, these relations are already part of a world of meaning and value.

[9] In his book written in the 1930s Jakob Von Uexkull gives as an example the different ways in which an oak tree is perceived. The fox builds his lair in the roots; the owl perches in the branches; the squirrel hides in the crannies; the ant forages in the bark; the wood cutter cuts if for lumber; the little girl is scared of it. Each confers on the tree a 'functional tone'. In terms of immediate experience the tree does not appear as a 'Tree' for any of them (UexKull 1957). This has been taken up by thinkers like Ingold as an example of the way in which 'nature' is co-produced. However the emphasis on the 'functional tone' suggests an *a priori* subject which draws meaning out of the world, rather than meaning itself being generated through the process of interaction.

[10] Niamh Stephenson writes: "In this, governmentality theory is contradictory: it suggests that experience is discursively constituted, but it critiques the attempt to research experience on the basis that it can only invoke experience as fixed, a given. The cost of jettisoning a close examination of the particulars of subjectification (researching lived experience is one way of doing this) is to deter engagement with the problem of alternative modes of political engagement (Stephenson 2003: 141).

remainder, an unfulfilled potential which does not come into the world of articulate narration or representation.

Papadopoulos and Stephenson use the novel *The Emigrants* by W.G. Sebald to elaborate the concept of continuous experience and the way in which it escapes stable narratives of identity. The book follows four characters who lived through the Holocaust. Sebald juxtaposes the 'fact' of the Holocaust as it is grasped by the protagonists with the 'meaning' of the Holocaust as it materialises in a bewildering assortment of objects, photos, memories, places and people. While the 'fact' is normative and universal, a public knowledge, the 'meanings' are much more complex and individuated as each individual draws on the many experiences that happened around the event. "The Holocaust is dispersed in situations, encounters, things, people… History disseminates in the most unexpected corners of one's experience" (Papadopoulos and Stephenson 2006a: 445).[11]

It is not surprising or accidental that Papadopolous and Stephenson use an example from literature to illustrate the ways in which experience is always more than a straightforward narrative, a clear and transparent representation of a particular subjective position. Sebald's characters do not each have their own discrete experience of the Holocaust which can simply be placed against or alongside other, dominant narratives. Their historical experiences are fundamentally different in that they have little or no consistency. They are constantly evoked and generated through encounters in the present. Their encounters with random objects, places and people are entirely unexpected. They are not 'trained' by any 'education of attention', but rather appear, suddenly, momentarily, and then disappear, without leaving anything satisfying or resolved. Experience is thus seen to be full of contradictions and possibilities. While it is represented retrospectively, this is always within a particular 'milieu' or context, one in which certain aspects of experience are identified as significant or relevant. Other experiences can appear in apparently banal moments, fragments, conducted through objects, animals or people. These experiences do not pertain to the articulate subject of neoliberal governance, or the 'embedded' ecological subject.

Entanglements of objects, animals and people come to re-territorialise understandings of subjectivity and experience. As evoked so clearly in Sebald's narratives 'elements of the material world are artefacts of experience.' "Other people, things, material spaces, situations- all these actants - participate in the unfolding of experience. Experience is not primarily a matter of thought. Things and spaces are carriers of experience, which becomes ours" (Papadopoulos and Stephenson 2006a: 442). Attending to continuous experience thus takes us away from 'optic' strategies of

[11] Sebald manages to avoid any singular rendering of these experiences: there is no sentimentality, pathos, sorrow, regret, or if there is they overlap so that none can preoccupy the experiencing subject. Even in those moments when the history of the Holocaust has been monumentalised, for example in a graveyard, the characters refuse any predictable response: what is experienced is mundane, tangential, seemingly irrelevant. "Although their everyday existence has been touched by the Holocaust the migrants' lives are not dominated by the trauma of survival.... They live arbitrary lives, which are no more and no less exceptional than most. But in doing this, they let history emerge and flow through many different unconnected, small incidents of life" (Papadopoulos and Stephenson 2006a: 446).

understanding to the 'haptic' strategies employed by people engaged in ordinary, everyday life. 'Optic' refers to the ways in which people plot and narrate their trajectory through the world as more or less individualized, linear and the outcome of rational reflection. Tools of social research adopt this 'optic' understanding, seeking to detect causality, motivation and calculation. 'Haptic', in contrast, describes the messy negotiations and imbrications which people find themselves in and work through as everyday experience unfolds through unexpected events and encounters. In this sense experience "is simply there; it is particular neither to special actors nor to extraordinary moments of transgression. It is an ordinary, ongoing, largely overlooked aspect of being" (Papadopoulos and Stephenson 2006: 444).

The 'haptic' mode of being is non-spectacular in the double sense. First, it takes place on the terrain of the banal and ordinary. Second, it is not amenable to the 'optic' norms of causality and motivation. Papadopoulos and Stephenson conceive of continuous experience in terms of a world beyond normative patterns of social interaction, thus opening a space where different relations between human and non-human actors can emerge. This 'excess' of experience "pertains to forms of social imagination which are beyond existing representations, which are affective, contentious and not yet realized in nature" (Papadopoulos 2008: 148). Rather than conceive of subjectivity as merely that which is visible within existing social and material relations, there is an excess of social and material relations which is open, undetermined and full of possibilities.

This distinction, of 'fact' and 'meaning', or 'identity' and 'experience', was useful when trying to think about the difficulties and contradictions which fishermen had in speaking about their experiences and what they valued about working and living where they did. The fishermen I met and worked with were part of many different 'ecologies'. They wanted to make a profit from fishing but they also wanted to fish less in order to preserve the fish stocks; they were individualistic but they were also part of communities; they were scientific but they were also against science; they loved where they lived but they also resented it; they found the sea beautiful but also got angry with it. The figure of the fisherman is a vivid example of the multiplicity of subjectivity. Operating in such an unpredictable and risky environment they are explicit and open about contradiction and uncertainty, about their multiple perspectives.

Continuous experience and social research

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the distinction between practical knowledge and abstract knowledge has been obscured by a 'scholastic fallacy' (Bourdieu 1990). He argues that this fallacy or 'prejudice' assumes an equality between 'detached thinking' and 'immersed practice'. The origin of this misunderstanding is traced to the notion of universal aesthetic experience articulated first by Enlightenment philosophers in the eighteenth century. The universal aesthetic of Kant and Schiller was, for Bourdieu, an arrogance. It forgot, or ignored, that the possibility of such universal feeling required, first, the universalization of those conditions of economic and social privilege. Similarly

the sociologist who interprets reason and logic in the actions of a subject forgets that such reason is only present for those who occupy a situation of *leisure*, time to contemplate and know where and how one comes to be.[12]

Bourdieu calls for the completion of the task of true critique, that is, critique of self and the activity of 'thinking the world'. Once the distortions affected by the 'intellectual bias' are recognized the true procedures of scientific work can begin. "It is a question of understanding and mastering these distortions" (Bourdieu 1996: 18), asserts Bourdieu. Rather than trying to avoid the fact of asymmetry, between subject and researcher, either through distance or phenomenology, Bourdieu posits that the social scientist must seek to control it.[13]

Such presumptions about the role and position of the researcher in relation to the 'subject' of research, Paul Rabinow writes, "requires, demands, fabricates, and defends clearly drawn boundaries between subjects and objects in order to operate" (Rabinow 1996: 20).[14] He goes on to ask: "[w]hat if we did not begin with the distinction of subject and object and its secondary assumption that it is the culture that is enunciated through speaking subjects?" (Rabinow 2003: 109). As a 'floating inquirer' he recognizes that as an anthropologist, professor, citizen, he occupies multiple positions, a set of ambiguities that is not a quality of his alone but of all people.[15]

If there is no pre-existing 'subject' to be understood then there can be no 'distortions' to remedy. 'Distortions' can be re-imagined not as 'errors to control' but as potentially productive modes of dis-identification, movements away from subject

[12] Jacques Ranciere attacked Bourdieu on exactly this point. Ranciere argued that despite seeking to overcome inequality Bourdieu's analysis succeeded in endlessly re-inscribing *a priori* distinctions of who was capable of thinking and who was capable of acting, who was outside and who was inside (Ranciere 2006).

[13] "Attempting to situate oneself in the place the interviewee occupies in the social space in order to understand them as *necessarily what they are*, by questioning them from that point and in order, to some degree, to *take their part*… is not to effect that 'projection of oneself into the other' of which the phenomenologists speak. It is to give oneself a *general and genetic comprehension* of who the person is, based on the (theoretical or practical) command of the social conditions of which she is the product: a command of the conditions of existence and the social mechanisms which exert their effects on the whole ensemble of the category to which such a person belongs (that of high school students, skilled workers, magistrates, etc.) and a command of the conditions, psychological and social, both associated with a particular position and a particular trajectory in social space" (Bourdieu 1996: 22-23).

[14] "Fieldwork, in this light, may be understood as a form of motivated and stylised dislocation. Rather than a set of labels that pins down one's identity and perspective, location becomes visible here as an ongoing project" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 37).

[15] While there have been critical reflections on the relationship between the categories of 'field' and 'home' in recent decades (See Caputo 2000; Bornstein 2007) they remain necessary distinctions within social science. While D'Amico-Samuels argues that '[t]he field is everywhere' institutions (the academy) cannot accept such radical dissolutions. Instead they respond with the predictable: 'if it is everywhere then it is nowhere.' Finding a way out of this impasse Clifford suggests that "'[t]ravel' denotes more or less voluntary practices of leaving familiar ground in search of difference, wisdom, power, adventure, an altered perspective" (Clifford 1997: 218). Travel is a moment of transcendence then, liable to happen to the fieldworker as much as the person pursuing their everyday life, and capable of happening at any time (not within a particular, objective space or time i.e. 'during fieldwork').

positions constructed by social norms and perception.[16] Sociability in this sense always entails an element of *mis-understanding,* rather than an *a priori* understanding of what is at stake and who is involved. Not only does this re-orientation towards mis-understanding question Bourdieusian notions of the structuring 'habitus', it questions all 'explanatory' approaches which ultimately render the subject incapable of embodying or articulating an experience which is outside the structuring habitus, culture, network or discourse. Following this shift means that the (binary) relationship between researcher and subject becomes questionable in the light of rapid and multiple transformations: the 'quickened beat of improvisation stands to outrun the habitus's glacial force' (Biehl *et al*. 2007).

My first time out on the boat with Frank, we stopped after a morning hauling pots for breakfast. It was a beautiful, crisp winter's day. Frank boiled some of the fresh prawns we had just caught in a pot and we ate them together admiring the day and saying several times how we couldn't think of anywhere we would rather be. We had just worked together for four hours in relative silence. He had shown me the basics of what I had to do. We didn't talk about anything in particular, occasionally he asked me what it was like in Dublin. I had presumed fishermen didn't like fish and were too busy working to admire the scenery. He had presumed I'd get sea sick as soon as I was out to sea. The next time we went out I brought some soup I had made. He enjoyed it and each time we met after that he asked if I had made any more.

As well as fishing with Frank I would often meet him on the street as he cycled his bike or passed me in the car. These were all different, shared experiences. They became layers, not in any cumulative way but as part of a growing relationship that had a ground beneath it, something material. Standing on deck helping to cut a dead seal free from a tangle net is different to meeting on the street when a friend from Dublin was visiting and the introduction becomes awkward and the space and time for talking disallowed. Similarly, meeting in the woods when we hadn't met for a while and we had more news to share, or he was reminded I was still there and interested in fishing and would invite me out next day, were all part of the meandering ways in which relations are formed, not only or principally between researcher and subject but between people with *common* experiences. As our exchanges, our communicating, traversed these different terrains, different sides emerged, different opinions, contradictions, mistruths, exaggerations, facts, opinions, information about the weather, the local restaurant or the Lisbon treaty. In each new encounter a different story would be told, a different reflection or association - the house he was born in, the boat he used to own, the wall he built. These shared but fleeting encounters were not cumulative in the sense that they built on one another, revealing a clearer picture of him or me, but they did develop a growing sense of things in common.

Instead of trying to artificially suspend difference through the imposition of a commonality (as phenomenology might), or else insisting, as Bourdieu does, on the

[16] Strathern writes that critical research should refuse meaning rather than seek to impose it or 'discover' it (Strathern 2004).

difference of researcher and subject and thus the need to find ways of accounting for that difference, the encounter between two discrete, individual subjects can be interrupted and suspended through the mutual discovery of common ground. Rather than beginning with an *a priori* subject and a desire to 'know' that subject (to 'excavate' or 'map' the relations which generated that subject), the concept of continuous experience "neutralises the question of 'knowledge' at the outset, because meanings - be they native (relativism) or supra-cultural (universalism) - no longer need to be excavated, illuminated, decoded and interpreted" (Henare *et al*. 2007: 4). To experience *with* the other is not to try and grasp the 'truth' of the other. It requires that we inhabit the world differently (rather than 'imagining' ourselves in 'their shoes').[17] These moments of 'border-crossing' are not, as I describe them, suddenly transformative or world-making. They do not have any obvious goal and their outcomes, if there are any, can only be known retrospectively. The concept of continuous experience does not suppose that there is some 'alternative' or readily available subject waiting to emerge, but rather that the many experiences that unfold through ongoing relations with people, places and things hold possibilities for alternatives.[18]

Niamh Stephenson writes about this in an effort to re-conceptualize modes of sociability. She writes of the limitations of thinking about relations with the Other in terms of the subject-object distinction. This binary hamstrings the possibility of anything new emerging, of mutual transformations. Either we are led to suspend difference (leading to a negation of Self), or to foreground alterity (leading to an affirmation of Other). In both cases the emphasis is on negotiating the gap between 'us' and 'them' or 'self' and 'other'. Stephenson argues that there is another possibility which involves going beyond the distinction which seems to necessitate these strategies of compromise.

> As in mourning, abrasions and moments where the 'self' is suspended are integral to the process of forging links between distinct entities. Like speaking bad French, being open to the world means suspending any insistence on one's own singularity. However the aim is not to restore order but to engage in a process of transformation, of becoming other to oneself, of reworking order. This suspension propels one into motion, towards the 'general interest' (Stephenson 2004: 180).

'The aim is not to restore order but to engage in a process of transformation'. This mode of sociability is transformative because it does not ignore the excess of relations

[17] While this can pose a number of further questions the energy for it derives from a need to bypass or avoid questions of dualism: of representation/ reality, of subject/ object, of fact / fiction. As Henare et al. (2007) write, the question is: "How, in other words, the ways in which people go about their lives may unsettle familiar assumptions, not least those that underlie anthropologists' particular repertories of theory" (Henare *et al.* 2007: 8).

[18] In a similar way Judith Butler asks that we "reread 'being' as precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation" (Butler 1997: 131) This 'unexhausted' subjectivity can not be understood in terms of what it is. In political terms it is 'excessive' precisely because it does not have a place within the existing system; it does not fit.

which open up through encounter, but seeks to *engage* with it. What we encounter in this excess is something strange, new and unclear. Either this excess is ignored and the 'proper' order can be re-instated or we commit to it. This commitment is an act of faith because the outcome can not be known in advance. This new plane of sociability exceeds any prior distinctions; it belongs to neither Self or Other. This allows the opening of an as yet unclaimed space: the 'general interest'. The 'general interest' is not founded on a specific identity but through the unqualified and transformative power of excessive sociability in the present. Committing to this unknown means entering onto a plane of commonality with the other, of recognizing something else beyond an individual claim or subject-position, while at the same time not knowing what that might be.[19]

In a similar way, the philosopher Isabelle Stengers evokes the character of the 'idiot' as a metaphor for the way in which a new subjectivity emerges in the 'in-between' space, breaking with what exists but not yet capable of sustaining a different world (Stengers 2005). The 'idiot' refers to the same root as 'idiom': 'a semi-private language excluded from a form of communication characterized by an ideal of transparency and anonymity.' Unlike the model of communicative democracy the 'idiot' is not a perfectly articulate citizen capable of representing himself within the already agreed consensus on what the common consists of. Her way of speaking is not the 'slick communication' of the neoliberal subject able to insert themselves into different governance regimes. Rather the 'idiot' speaks an idiom that is borne out of the novel but stuttering excess of experience.

The crucial difference between the 'idiot's' position and that of her 'sane' colleague is that the 'idiot' does not yet exist in a world fitted with a reason and logic embodied in the fabric of institutions, rules, regimens. In contrast to the 'politicised citizen' of political ecology armed with 'speech prostheses', the 'idiot' resists the demand we are daily faced with: "[i]f you want to exist for us, come and explain yourself, become a shareholder with us" (Stengers 2005: 1001). In this way the 'idiot' is not seeking a way into a pre-existing collective, nor is she speaking from a pre-existing collective. Through her words and actions she generates a different kind of collective, one that is incommensurable with what exists.

For Stengers, the task of the social researcher is to attend to the 'unreasonable' utterances of the 'idiot', not to make 'sense' of them (as 'social research experts') or to make them understandable (to who?) but to work with and through them in order to construct as yet unknown alternatives. The concept of continuous experience helps us to think about this by taking us away from the tendency to prematurely explain and interpret individual or collective experiences through terms which are readily available. Rather than locating/flattening subjectivity in a network of social and material relations,

[19] The importance of uncertainty or ignorance in relation to analyzing everyday experience is encapsulated in Papadopoulos and Stephenson's notion of 'tarrying with time': "[t]arrying with time does not entail a concrete vision of an alternate future, but an expanded, slowed-down present which fuels new imaginary relations with other actants and new forms of action, possibilities people are compelled to explore, but which only later and unexpectedly will materialize in an alternative future" (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006: 158-9).

attending to continuous experience reveals the malleability and indeterminateness of subjectivity. In a context where dominant narratives of ecological modernization (constructed around the 'naturalization' of scarcity and the fantasy of a 'natural balance') prevents the making and naming of alternative socio-material futures, the importance of social research which engages with and works through the excess of social and material relations in order to create (not reveal) new knowledge, subjectivities and collectives appears paramount.[20]

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined the ways in which a re-conceptualization of subjectivity and experience can shift the focus of research. In my own case this shift meant moving away from an initial focus on the way particular subjects (fishermen) were being interpolated within new forms of environmental governance to the ways in which ongoing, everyday experience unfolded beyond any single or articulable subject-position.

While the neoliberal subject has been critically addressed in social research and critical theory one of the consequences has been a hollowing out of experience: subjects are considered as nothing more than an epi-phenomenon, 'the outcome of a complex constellation of textual, material, institutional, historical factors' (Blackman *et al*. 2008). In this analysis subjects do not appear to have experiences except in so far as they relate to existing forms of power and knowledge. At the same time, another strand of critical social theory adopts the notion of relationality to account for the distributed and material quality of subjectivity. One of the consequences of this has been a multiplication of studies which describe or 'reveal' the many ways in which subjects (and objects) are embedded within different networks or relations. Tracing these relations serves to further the explicative or interpretative mode of social research. Whether it is a 'dwelling', 'cartography' or 'actor-network' approach, the aim is to unravel the ways in which knowledge, subjectivity or value are constructed within certain contexts. This is like good detective work, working backwards or outwards from an event or subject in order to better understand it. As a result, this work is useful for revealing different ecologies and rationalities, but its emphasis on making visible or understandable means that the more opaque, singular and 'excessive' aspects of experience can be elided.[21] In focussing on the major sets of relations, these accounts are not as attuned to the

[20] "To the extent that the current post-political condition, which combines apocalyptic environmental visions with a hegemonic neoliberal view of social ordering, constitutes one particular fiction (one that in fact forecloses dissent, conflict, and the possibility of a different future), there is an urgent need for different stories and fictions that can be mobilized for realization. This requires foregrounding and naming different socio-environmental futures, making the new and impossible enter the realm of politics and of democracy, and recognizing conflict, difference, and struggle over the naming and trajectories of these futures" (Swyngedouw 2007: 36).

[21] The words of C. Wright Mills come to mind: "[i]t is the imagination, of course that sets off the social scientist from the mere technician . . . Perhaps he [the technician] is too well-trained . . . Since one can be trained only in what is already known, training sometimes incapacitates one from learning new ways" (Mills 2000: 211-12).

singularities of experience, the interruptions, which could serve to open up radically new subjectivities.

The concept of continuous experience holds that subjectivity is always excessive to what is drawn out or made visible within the visible or 'optic' world. This challenges the relationship between researcher and subject by encouraging us to abandon what is obvious in favor of what is opaque. While the dualism of 'home' and 'field', 'researcher' and 'subject' have been questioned within academic literature the emphasis has been on how the relationship can be managed in order to be understood. Continuous experience suggests that identities are more fluid and open to disruption than this. While not ignoring or neglecting the significant social, economic and epistemological structures and relations which inform, modify and generate subject-positions, attuning to the ways in which such positions are not fixed or reified allows for a more transformative and creative understanding of engaged social research.

REFERENCES

Agrawal, A. (2005). *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Duke University Press, Durham and London.

Barry, A. (2001). *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society*. The Athlone Press, London & New York.

Biehl, J., Good, B., Kleinman, A. (Eds.) (2007). *Subjectivity Ethnographic Investigations*. University of California Press, Los Angeles.

Blackman, L., Cromby, J., Hook, D., Papadopoulos, D., Walkerdine, V. (2008). Creating Subjectivities. *Subjectivity*, 22, 1-27.

Bornstein, E. (2007). Harmonic Dissonance: Reflections on Dwelling in the Field. *Ethnos*, *72*(4), 483- 508.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Bourdieu, P. (1996). Understanding. *Theory, Culture and Society*, *13*(2), 17-37.

Bresnihan, P. (2014). *The Politics of Finitude. Scarcity and Excess in Ecological Politics.* University of Nebraska Press (forthcoming).

Brockling, U., Krasman S., Lemke T. (Eds.) (2010). *Governmentality: Current Challenges and Future Issues*. Routledge, London.

Clifford, J. (1997). Spatial Practices: Fieldwork, Travel, and the Disciplining of Anthropology. In Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (Eds.), *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science)*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Caputo, V. (2000). At 'home' and 'away': reconfiguring the field for late twentieth century anthropology. In Amit, V. (Eds.), *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary Worlds*. Routledge, London and New York.

CEC (2008). *Common Fisheries Policy: A user's guide.*

Clandinin, D. J. and Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Drummond, I. and Symes, D. (1996). Rethinking Sustainable Fisheries: The Realist Paradigm. *Sociologia Ruralis*, *36*(2), 151- 162.

Geertz, C. (1996). Afterword. In Feld, S. and Basso, K. (Eds.), *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe, New Mexico, School of American Research Press.

Gell, A. (1998). *Art and Agency*. Clarendon, Oxford.

Gibson-Graham, G. K. (2003). An Ethics of the Local. *Rethinking Marxism*, *15*(1), 49-74.

Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (1997). Discpline and Practice: "The field" as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology. In Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (Eds.), *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. University of California Press.

Glover, C. (2011). Review: The Last Fish Tale by Mark Kurlansky. *The Daily Telegraph*, May 12.

Henare, A., Holbrand, M., Wastell, S. (2007). Introduction: Thinking through things. In Henare, A., Holbrand, M., Wastell, S. (Eds.), *Thinking through things: theorising artefacts ethnographically*. Routledge, London and New York.

Holmes, D. R. and Marcus, G. E. (2005). Cultures of Expertise and the management of globalisation: Towards the re-functioning of ethnography. In Ong, A. and Collier, S. J. (Eds.), *Global assemblages: Technology, politics, and ethic as anthropological problems*. Blackwell Publishing, U. K.

Ingold, T. (2000). *Perception of the Environment Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Routledge, London.

Latour, B. (1987). *Science in Action How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

Law, J. (2002). Objects and Spaces. *Theory, Culture & Society* 19 (5-6), 91-105.

Linebaugh, P. (2008). *The Magna Carta Manifesto*. University of California Press, California.

Marcus, G. E. (2007). Ethnography Two Decades after Writing Culture: From the Experimental to the Baroque. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 80, 1127-1145.

Mills, C. W. (2000). *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Papadopoulos, D. and Stephenson, N. (2006). *Analysing Everyday Experience: Social Research and Political Change*. Palgrave, MacMillan, Hampshire and New York.

Papadopoulos, D. and Stephenson, N. (2006a). Outside Politics/ Continuous Experience. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 6, 433-453.

Rabinow, P. (1996). Science as a Practice: Ethos, Logos, Pathos. In (Eds.), *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Rabinow, P. (2003). *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Ranciere, J. (2006). Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge. *Parrhesia*, 1, 1-12.

Rose, N. (2006). Governing 'advanced' liberal democracies. In Gupta, A. and Sharma, A. (Eds.), *The Anthropology of the state: A reader*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Rose, P. (2002). *On Whitehead*. Wadsworth, California, USA

Sissenwine, M. and Symes, D. (2007). Reflections on the Common Fisheries Policy. Report to the General Directorate for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs of the European Commission.

Stengers, I. (2005). The Cosmopolitical Proposal. In Latour, B. and Weibel, P. (Eds.), *Making Things Public- Atmospheres of Democracy*. MIT Press.

Stephenson, N. (2003). Interrupting Neo-liberal Subjectivities. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 17, 135-146.

Strathern, M. (2004). *Partial Connections*. Altamira Press, Rowman & Littleman Publishers, Oxford.

Swyngedouw, E. (2007). Impossible 'Sustainability' and the Postpolitical Condition. In Kruger, R. and Gibbs, D. (Eds.), *The Sustainable Development Paradox- Urban Political Economy in the United States and Europe*. The Guilford Press, New York.

Thrift, N. (2008). *Non- Representational Theory. Space Poliitcs Affect*. Routledge, Oxford.

Varela, F. J. (1999). *Ethical Know-How. Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*. Stanford University Press, California.

Viveiros de Castro, E. (1998). Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4 (3), 469-488.

Patrick Bresnihan holds a Phd in Sociology from Trinity College, Dublin. He is currently teaching a comparative course on the politics of food, water and energy with the International Honors Program. He participates in the Provisional University, an independent research and education project, and is an active member of the Authority Research Network, based in the UK. He is completing his first book, The Politics of Finitude, to be published by the University of Nebraska Press.