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## Growing intimate privatepublics: Everyday utopia in the naturecultures of a young lesbian and bisexual women's allotment

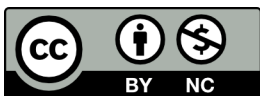
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# **Growing intimate privatepublics: Everyday utopia in the naturecultures of a young lesbian and bisexual women's allotment**

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## **Abstract**

The Young Women's Group in Manchester is a 'young women's peer health project, run by and for young lesbian and bisexual women', which runs an allotment as one of its activities. At a time when interest in allotments and gardening appears to be on the increase, the existence of yet another community allotment may seem unremarkable. Yet we suggest that this queer allotment poses challenges for conventional theorisations of allotments, as well as for understandings of public and private. In this article we explore how the allotment project might be understood to be intensely engaged in 'growing intimate publics', or what we term 'privatepublics'. These are paradoxical intimacies, privatepublic spaces which are not necessarily

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made possible in the usual private sphere of domestic homes. Here we focus on the work involved in materialising the allotment, which we understand as a queer privatepublic 'natureculture' (Haraway, 2008) which appears as an 'everyday utopia' (Cooper, 2014).

### **Keywords**

Allotments, bisexual, everyday utopia, gardening, lesbian, naturecultures, privatepublics, queer, young women

## **Introduction**

The Young Women's Group (YWG) is a 'young women's peer health project, run by and for young lesbian and bisexual women', based in Manchester, in the north west of England.<sup>2</sup> One of the youth group's activities is working an organic allotment.<sup>3</sup> At a time when interest in allotments and gardening appears to be on the increase, the existence of yet another community allotment may seem unremarkable. Yet despite the growing literature on allotments, and increasing attention to gender, there remains little attention to the spatial dimensions of allotment practices, particularly involving young people, and especially young queer people. We offer a redescription of the YWG allotment, so that, as Haraway suggests 'it becomes thicker than it first seems' (Haraway and Goodeve, 2000: 108), highlighting how the YWG allotment is an almost unimaginable space. In so doing we explore how the allotment project might be understood to be intensely engaged in 'growing intimate publics', or what we term 'privatepublics'. These are paradoxical intimacies, privatepublic spaces which are not necessarily made possible in the usual private sphere of domestic homes, but which materialise on an apparently public allotment site in Manchester. These intimate privatepublics might be understood to offer a resourceful counter to tendencies towards privatising that which was previously public (e.g. in processes of urban development and regeneration, often relying on rather different public-private partnerships), whilst at the same time appearing to bring into the public domain that which has been seen to be private and domestic: sexuality. These growing privatepublics emerge in ways that create intimate private spaces in the apparently public domain, necessarily reconfiguring the boundaries of public and private. By exploring how young lesbian and bisexual women may be marginalised in both public and private realms, and how a focus on questions of 'public' and 'private' spaces can leave questions of 'nature' excluded, we understand the process of materialising an allotment run by young lesbian and bisexual women as an 'everyday utopia' (Cooper, 2014), through which we might understand the radical possibilities of gardening (cf. McKay, 2011).

## Queering allotments

While home gardening and allotmenting garner increasing attention, young lesbian and bisexual women have yet to figure in the literature (Bhatti and Church, 2000, 2001; Degnen, 2009; McKay, 2011). Conventionally allotments have been seen as men's spaces, as a way to get away from the domestic, the feminine domestic; that sheds are not only for tools – they are for men and cups of tea, and escaping nagging wives (Crouch and Ward, 1988). Allotments, and sheds, have acted as a masculine, heteronormative private sphere. Allotments have sexual politics. Although, in their classic text, *The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture*, Crouch and Ward suggest that the stereotype of the allotment as 'for men only' may never have been entirely true, their reimagining of the allotment, that it 'was always more of a family affair than was supposed', nonetheless still seems limited (1988: 90).

Reflecting on the increasing popularity of home gardening, Bhatti and Church (2000, 2001) identify gardens as a key site of leisure and of home-making, and one where gender relations are played out in particular ways. Johnston and Longhurst note that much less attention has been focussed on sexuality and gardens, with dream homes in the suburbs being associated with nuclear families and a gendered division of flowers (women) and vegetables (men). They describe the 'Fifth Season garden group', made up of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender gardeners, who organised the Heroic Gardens festival in Auckland, New Zealand. They also cite an account of a gay garden: '[t]o create a small kingdom – an area of sovereignty – has been an essential survival strategy. More than this, it is, in some sense, a triumph. Creating – as in this case, gardening – is how we stay sane' (Wells, 2000: 109 in Johnston and Longhurst, 2010: 71).

But we suggest there is much more to be said about queer gardening, and many more possibilities than heroism, or a defensive queer sovereignty. Elsewhere Longhurst notes that gardens can both reflect *and* reinforce emancipatory and oppressive power relations, noting that '[g]ardening can be a highly exclusionary practice' (Longhurst, 2006: 590) requiring cultural capital and money, often implicated in reinforcing (neo)colonial relations. Studies of allotments and community gardens where food growing occurs have also revealed how they both challenge and confirm power relations. In the USA research suggests that whilst community food growing gardens can offer sites of meaning for deprived communities, these spaces can also become aligned with neo-liberal gentrifying processes that seek to exclude poorer residents from urban redevelopment areas. The small number of studies that have explored gender and food growing projects have observed how these spaces offer opportunities for women, often from low income backgrounds, to challenge masculine approaches to gardening and enhance cultural identities (Buckingham, 2005; Metcalf et al., 2012). However, certain practices and activities in allotments, such as digging and growing particular products, are often prescribed as male (Buckingham, 2005; Perez Vazquez, Anderson and Rogers, 2005) and Pitt (2014) found that young women in urban South Wales still view communal food growing gardens as masculine spaces.

If gender and sexuality are little explored with respect to gardens, or allotments, then questions of age, and specifically of young people, are rarely addressed. Exceptions include the ideal of children growing up in nuclear families enjoying suburban gardens, or more recently allotment and growing projects in schools (though here more commonly with young children than with teenagers). There is little association of home gardening or allotmenting with young people, except perhaps vandalism. Arguably one of gardening and allotmenting's exclusions may be young people who are less likely to garden partly because they may lack time, money and the access to gardening spaces (Intel, 2007). In this sense allotments appear as a queer space in which to find young people, and maybe an even queerer space to find young queer people, reminiscent of behind the bike shed, or in the closet. Crouch and Ward's account of the allotment as a 'family affair' only confirms that a lesbian and bisexual women's youth group appears inconceivable in the space of the allotment. Yet the YWG allotment does exist, and here we seek to explore what it means to materialise, to grow, a young lesbian and bisexual women's allotment. What queer privatepublic natureculture, more-than-human, feminist science fiction is this?

### **The Young Women's Group allotment**

The Young Women's Group allotment is one of the activities offered as part of a youth group for lesbian and bisexual women. The Young Women's Group (YWG) has been running as a peer health project since 2005, meeting approximately weekly in the Joyce Layland LGBT Centre just off the busy Oxford Road in central Manchester. On the website, the group describes itself:

We are the Young Women's Peer Health Project run by and for young lesbian and bisexual women. We work to improve young lesbian and bisexual women's health by promoting various activities designed around six areas of wellness which are: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, occupational and social/community. (<http://www.likt.org.uk/>)

The group offers a range of activities and projects around art and crafts, politics, sport, and literature, and tries to respond to any requests for particular activities from within the group.

In 2006 the Young Women's Group took on the allotment after it was given up by a previous adult gay and lesbian (though in practice lesbian only) group which had had the plot for a year, and which Niamh Moore had been part of. When the YWG took over the allotment, Niamh stayed on, and with Amelia Lee, supported young women's work at the plot. Later Claire Holmes joined and took on the work of Allotment Co-ordinator. Involvement in the allotment (and any of the activities the group runs) is voluntary. Young women meet at the Centre and then travel together by bus or bike to the plot, which is about two miles south of the youth centre. The YWG also overlaps with an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans)

youth group which meets in the same youth centre, and sometimes joins the YWG at the allotment. The allotment is sometimes described as ‘LGYM Outdoors’ – the outdoor space for Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester (LGYM). While the plot was very overgrown, and initial years were spent digging and clearing the site, after some years of perseverance it is now thriving. The allotment continues to develop and change: it now, for example, provides produce to the community café set up in 2013 in the Joyce Layland LGBT Centre.

## Queer privatepublics

In seeking to provide an account of the YWG allotment, we take up an observation made by Bhatti and Church, who intriguingly noted that some of their respondents seek *privacy* in the garden, even though it is a semi-public space (Bhatti and Church, 2000: 187). While allotments may seem, even more so than the garden, to be thoroughly public spaces, we noted that there is a lot that is still private among the brambles at the YWG allotment. This apparently contradictory finding echoes Longhurst’s turn to Gillian Rose’s work on ‘paradoxical spaces’ to describe gardens as spaces that are ‘imbued with contradictions and allow for the simultaneous occupation of dualist categories’, ‘troubling the binary divisions between nature and culture, private and public, individuality and sociality, leisure and work, and colonial and postcolonial’ (Longhurst, 2006: 581–582). As we will explain, the YWG allotment certainly seems to trouble existent understandings of public and private. We offer *privatepublics* as a way into understanding the imbrications of public and private at this site, drawing on Haraway’s use of neologisms to resist dualisms. In this we echo Haraway’s turn to the possibilities of ‘naturecultures’ to attend to how ‘all actors become who they are in the dance of relating, not from scratch, not *ex nihilo*, but full of the patterns of their sometimes joined, sometimes separate heritages both before and lateral to this encounter’ (Haraway, 2008: 25). Likewise we see *privatepublics* as drawing attention to the ways in which public and private are categories that cannot be assumed in advance but rather come into being in relation.

In turning to *privatepublics* we also seek to extend Berlant and Warner’s work on ‘sex in public’ (1998). Berlant and Warner have highlighted the ways in which certain privileged forms of heterosexuality have been allowed privacy while the publicness of queer venues such as bars, saunas and clubs was called into question for appearing to flaunt homosexuality. Their paper is not about ‘sex in public’ as might be commonly understood; rather they want to describe what they ‘want to promote as the radical aspirations of queer culture building: not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture’ (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 548). Bhatti and Church have already alerted us to some women’s efforts to renegotiate the possibilities of privacy in the apparently semi-public spaces of the garden: we suggest that the YWG allotment offers a

manifestation of Berlant and Warner's queer culture building. But first we return to the supposed public nature of allotments.

### Public allotments or allotments for the public?

Allotments can seem to be thoroughly public entities. In the UK allotments are generally provided by local councils who have a statutory responsibility to make plots of publicly owned land available to members of the public for a small rent. The controversy around the setting up of The New Allotment Company Ltd in 2010, a private company providing allotments on the grounds that local authorities are not doing enough to meet public demand, suggests just how important the notion of the 'publicness' of allotments is.<sup>4</sup> The New Allotment Company Ltd describes allotments not as a public good, but as an extension of the private. However, this is not framed as the extension of a private limited company into the public domain, but rather as an extension of the domestic private: '[a]n allotment is an area of land where fruits, vegetables and herbs are grown for you to eat at home. It's really an extension of the garden and the kitchen table'.<sup>5</sup>

In this light, it is useful to briefly trace the history of the allotment. In the UK the origins of allotments are often traced to the enclosures of common land (the Inclosure Acts of 1750–1860); common land had been used by local people for grazing animals and gathering timber and sometimes growing crops. Following the Inclosure Acts, the Commons Act 1876 recognised a need for land for cultivation by the poor. The law regarding allotments was first explicitly outlined in the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908.<sup>6</sup> Allotments might be understood as the 'illegitimate offspring' of the enclosures (cf. Haraway, 1985), undermining the privatisation of once public, common land. In this sense then, The New Allotment Company Ltd is merely the latest instance of the privatisation of land in the UK (Ravenscroft, Church and Parker, 2012). Nonetheless private allotments are still uncommon in the UK; most sites are public, provided by local councils. Allotments, and the huge growth in interest in them, might be understood to offer a counter to other ways of framing the city, and its rough edges, through urban regeneration and rather different publicprivate partnerships.

Yet, for supposedly public sites, allotments are often curiously hidden away, classically glimpsed in passing only from train windows, visible only fleetingly from the corner of one's eye, there for a blurred second and gone again before they have quite registered, framing the city and journeys between cities, so that you might almost have imagined this other higgledy-piggledy world. So we suggest that allotments are also intriguingly hidden publics.

Introducing young women from the youth group to the allotment often throws up interesting questions. When one young woman, Liz, came to the allotment for the first time, she said she had not actually known what an allotment was. She probably wasn't the only one. So while allotments may be public, they are often not just hidden from view, but may be utterly unknown entities for some. Initially she seemed almost overwhelmed trying to take this new thing in, struggling to get

some grasp of 'it'. She asked if it was 'ours', belonging to the Young Women's Group. Niamh explained that it was rented from the council. Nonetheless she repeated 'but you mean it's ours?' The answer that the allotment was rented from the council was clearly not the main point. This was not a notion of private property ownership then. Rather Liz seemed to suggest that such a rambling overgrown space could appear vast, unanticipated, unimaginable, and how little there might be sometimes that might be 'ours'; conveying a sense of a new world opening up. She also said 'it's all our own work'; implying a different kind of ownership, the ownership of collective labour, where something is earned, created and materialised together. It was in fact her first visit to the allotment; although not her first time to the Young Women's Group, but she already felt that she could insert herself into the history, and labour, of the allotment. The transformations then are not just of the 'land', but of a group transformed by the force of this encounter with a scrubby piece of earth, reconfiguring relationships and possibilities. This quasi public nature seemed to offer possibilities for those often excluded from both private and public spaces; figuratively, and as we explore later, sometimes literally, homeless. So allotments are public, but somewhat hidden from view and perhaps in the case of the YWG allotment, still private enough.

### **Public, but still private (enough): On (not) being 'out' at the allotment**

Being at the allotment might appear to mean being in public – after all, everyone has left 'home', the so-called private sphere, to be there. Although it is not clear what public or private might mean for those young lesbian and bisexual women in their mid to late teens and early twenties who generally (have to) inhabit someone else's space; the allotment offers an alternative to the limits of 'bedroom cultures' (McRobbie and Garber, 1976). For many home may be neither private, nor domestic, as usually understood, and at the same time young people are not always welcomed in civic public spaces. The chaotic cosiness of the youth centre has also been left behind, as young women travel by public transport (or bikes now) to the allotment. Despite the appearance of being in public, not all the group members are 'out', either at home, or at the allotment. On the one hand there is the shared unspoken out-ness, not necessary to say out loud; on the other hand there are, for instance, conversations about going to Pride and some not going to avoid being 'seen'. In public 'down the allotment' might be okay, but for some being seen at Pride might be more risky. So there is a lot that is still private in this hidden public among the brambles. And it's not clear what public or private means to those who have been, or still are, in foster care or 'supported' accommodation, like The Foyer, whose name suggests a public space to be passed through briefly, but not inhabited, not lived in, not home, not obviously much better than a closet.<sup>7</sup> The Foyer offers 'a room of one's own' to young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, who are in full-time education, though, decades later, it appears a more cramped space than Virginia Woolf envisaged with her call for a space for



women's writing ([1929] 2002). Certainly today's 'benefits' for under twenty-fives do not amount to 500 guineas a year. Possibly for some the allotment is as private as it gets. Even those young people who do, or did, live in houses with gardens (and possibly nuclear families) do not necessarily have access to the gardens. Liz recounted that her father would not let her help in the garden; although a few weeks later she came back and told of asking her father about whether there was anything that could be done about the horsetails (no there was not).

The YWG allotment then is another materialisation of possibilities, beyond homes and supported accommodation, and even beyond the youth centre, which however necessary, also has its limits. The allotment has been called 'LGYM Outdoors' – Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester Outdoors – in recognition of its importance to, and relationship with, the work that goes on in the youth centre.

### **Albert Kennedy, Cath Hall and Joyce Layland: Names we call home**

In a city where a young gay boy died falling from a car park roof as he was chased, where running was the only space left, it is salutary to reflect on the complexities of home and on any easy assumptions that the bright lights of the city offer sanctuary for LGBT people, and particularly young people. The Albert Kennedy Trust (AKT) is named after this sixteen-year-old, who was a runaway from a children's home in Salford. The AKT was founded in 1989, a year after Albert Kennedy's death, by Cath Hall, a foster carer who was working with Manchester's LGBT youth group at the time. Hall recognised the need for support for young LGBT people who were homeless or in a housing crisis, acknowledging that neither parental homes, nor so-called care homes, were necessarily adequate for the needs of young LGBT people.<sup>8</sup>

In a city, like many other places around the world, where young people are kicked out of home or flee before they are kicked and more (again and again); in a city which is the supposedly safe landing point after a smuggled journey out of 'other' countries where it is not safe to be gay, it is not insignificant that the LGBT Centre was renamed the Joyce Layland LGBT Centre, after the mother of a young gay man who helped found the original centre.<sup>9</sup> When her son came out to her as gay, Joyce Layland did not kick him out of home; rather it seems that she recognised her limits and perhaps also a sense of responsibility, and the needs of her son for other safe spaces. When she found that, even in a city with a large lesbian and gay population, there were no specific facilities for LGBT young people, she went about setting some up. That a mother recognised that she was not enough, that (one) home is sometimes not enough, and was not threatened by this but rather sought to expand the places her son might call safe, is a significant story. Yet to domesticate the youth centre as another home for young people would perhaps be to miss part of the point; the name is intentional – a message to other parents that there are options beyond kicking your child out of their home. The story of the name of the building gets told and retold because it serves a very important

political purpose. The dangers to young LGBT people are not only flying through the air, the dangers include the multiple displacements that put young people 'on the street'. The Joyce Layland LGBT Centre offers a kind of home to young people who may, or may not, have other options, but it also reminds parents not to make their children homeless, and so is as much a role model, an ideal, for parents.

Just as homes are not always enough, sometimes too the youth centre is also not enough; it is often noisy and full of chaos. The allotment offers yet another space of possibility. The beds, and the work of weeding them while hunkered down in the paths between, offer a cramped, constrained, but big enough space for conversations to spill out, sometimes loud and noisy and shared, sometimes quiet and low and private, sometimes conversations that cannot quite happen in the youth centre because there is not quite enough space there.

It was at the allotment for instance that H took out a carefully folded-up letter, to show those present her offer of a place on a course at a local university, where she made everyone read all the words, where she shared her excitement, hopes and fears, about how she would be able to manage, this life that she once never imagined, that was never imagined for her, that she had to work hard at to imagine into being. And a place at university meant she would be around for at least another three years, and be able to stay involved with the allotment. As well as starting her university course, she also took a course at a local community garden centre, so that she could learn more about growing vegetables organically.

So it was quite a shock when she announced she was getting an allotment of her own. Such apparent individualism seemed so contrary to the ethos of a collective project. But H's new plot was adjacent to the YWG plot. It was less about cutting ties and going it alone, than stretching one's toes just a little, growing into a more expansive project. And in any case, it was like the YWG plot at the beginning, huge and hugely overgrown, so the plan was to share tools and labour and help her clear it. And, after all, Claire, the Allotment Co-ordinator, and Niamh actually had allotments of their 'own'; though these were with partners and friends. Indeed, Claire gave up her plot at another site and got one just along from the YWG allotment to make it easier to work both plots. While Niamh moved house and got an allotment elsewhere, she still 'came back', even though this meant a two to three hour round trip by inconvenient trains and buses, or a twenty-mile bike ride each way. So an allotment of one's own was hardly about cutting ties with the YWG allotment (perhaps more a desire for vegetables of our own, for even more possibilities of growing), and the boundaries between plots not so distinct as tools, seeds and labour are shared back and forth. These boundaries were made literally even more fluid one day when a plan for a day's solid digging was undone. When H arrived she found hundreds of tadpoles swimming in an inch of water in the creases of a sheet of plastic covering the ground of her plot. There had been a plan for the day, but it unravelled in the moments of standing around the sheet of plastic in the rare burning sun in Manchester, silently watching the teeming life, and contemplating what had been plotted for the day, and what to do now, as if there was any decision to make. Then two were sent off to get a pond liner while everyone

else dug a pond on the putative borders of the plots, moved by the ‘significant otherness’ (Gabb, 2011) of the tadpoles still wriggling furiously in the water.

### Queer naturecultures

In turning to privatepublics to understand allotment life we are referencing Donna Haraway’s ‘naturecultures’. Our aim here is to draw attention to the ways in which privatepublics and naturecultures are entangled. A focus on public/private dualism, with private signalling the domestic, and public often conjuring up civic, urban spaces, has often meant that nature disappears from consideration. Yet the queer-naturecultures of the allotment bring privatepublics back into view.

David Bell’s (2010) account of ‘queernaturecultures’ includes the utopian pastoralism of Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter, as well as lesbian separatist communes, radical faeries, and phenomena such as the popularity of the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and the practice of dogging. Histories of lesbian land, of lesbian separatist communities, of efforts to make space for women and a relationship with land, can be considered part of the genealogy of the YWG allotment (Munt, 1998; Sandilands, 2002; Shugar, 1995; Valentine, 1997). Such versions of queer natures are often counters to assumptions that cities offer the appropriate liberatory space for gay politics, against the supposed conservatism of the rural.

One of the ongoing challenges for feminists and queers is the apparently doubled-nature of nature. Nature has been understood as that which is other than human, as the non-human. Yet nature is also that which is precisely the essence of being human, as in ‘human nature’. For feminists questions of ‘women’s nature’ have often become more troubling when women are seen to be ‘in’ or ‘for’ nature. Thus lesbian separatists creating lesbian land are often held up as paradigmatic essentialists, even while they are engaged in the intense *labour* of building women’s *culture*. Similarly when feminists are also environmentalists, not only ‘in’ nature, but ‘for’ nature, they too are often vilified as essentialists, as eco/feminists have discovered to their cost (Moore, 2014).

Haraway’s work, and that of (other) eco/feminists, has been useful for troubling any notion that humans are separate from nature, or that human nature might be best understood as about deterministic essences. Haraway directly addressed the question of nature in ‘The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others’, where she proposed that ‘nature is made, but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans’ (1992: 298). She argued:

So, nature is not a physical place to which one can go, nor a treasure to fence in or bank, nor as essence to be saved or violated. Nature is not hidden and so does not need to be unveiled. Nature is not a text to be read in the codes of mathematics and biomedicine. It is not the ‘other’ who offers origin, replenishment, and service. Neither mother, nurse, nor slave, nature is not matrix, resource, or tool for the reproduction of man. [...] Nature is also a tropes, a trope. It is figure, construction, artifact,

movement, displacement. Nature cannot pre-exist its construction. [...] Nature is a topic of public discourse on which much turns, even the earth. (Haraway, 1992: 296)

Haraway usefully implodes any separation of nature and culture, alongside any notion of nature's passivity – while insisting that the public is a key site for reworking nature/s.

This attention to the public is taken up in David Bell's (2010) use of 'queer-naturecultures' to address 'the nature of our sexual natures' (Weeks, 1991: 86, cited in Bell, 2010: 134), to think through the nature of sex and the sex of nature. While the focus here is on questions of sexuality, rather than sex *per se*, Bell's work clearly remains pertinent. Both Haraway and Bell pick up on the questions of publics. Haraway suggests, perhaps counter-intuitively for some, that nature is 'the place to rebuild public culture' (1992: 296). Bell concludes his reflections on queernaturecultures with a series of questions: what does it mean to talk about the publicness of nature? And if we can speak of more-than-human publics, what does that mean for the politics of nature and the politics of sex (Bell, 2010: 144)? While Bell is addressing the naturalisation of sex, alongside its 'relegation' to the private sphere, here we focus on the limits of the public, through suggesting how allotments undo neat distinctions between public and private, nature and culture, rural and urban, domestic and civic.

### **Growing intimate privatepublic naturecultures: The YWG allotment as 'everyday utopia'**

So what does it mean to materialise, to grow, a young lesbian and bisexual women's allotment? What queer privatepublic natureculture, more-than-human, feminist science fiction is this? We suggest here that it means to make something up, to imagine something into being that does not exist, or only barely exists, threatening to disappear any second. The allotment might be seen as a site of what Davina Cooper terms 'everyday utopia' – 'sites and spaces which aspire to accomplish some routine aspect of social life in a more democratic, equal or freer fashion'.

There is little explicitly said within the Young Women's Group about what a lesbian and bisexual women's allotment might mean. But the process of producing YouTube videos as part of a research project allowed new conversations to emerge.<sup>10</sup> In the YouTube videos there is a repetition of the allotment as a space apart from the stress of other daily life, which, for a few hours, recedes; a space for regeneration all round. Typical of this is the following exchange between four young women in a focus group after the making of the videos, in response to a prompt about what about the allotment makes them happy:

I think it makes me a lot happier when I go to do other things. Like it's like a thing at the end of the week like. It's fine, I can do all of this hard work' cause I'll get to spend four hours on the allotment on some days.

It's very therapeutic. So like weeding and weeding [all laugh] and yes, more weeding [all laugh] and, you know, just kind of just getting really stuck in. I think it gives you that head space where, you know, you're able to kind of relieve maybe some kind of troubles and then you come out feeling refreshed, renewed and ready to carry on.

I think it's like for me, it gives me that sense of having a group which I feel comfortable in and kind of that whole thing of community or our own little community . . . it makes me happy [laughs].

In this conversation there are the 'shadows' of other aspects of lives, other worlds, which do not appear to be so nourishing. Ecofeminist philosopher, Val Plumwood, used the term 'shadow places' to reference north/south inequalities. Plumwood was reworking the grounding of environmental ethics in a reified 'sense of place', and suggested that what was needed in its stead was 'an ethic of place' (see also de la Bellacasa, 2012). She suggested that the reification of place in much environmental discourse requires the privileging of one's own place and relationships, at the expense of other 'hidden places' (Plumwood, 2008). Plumwood asked whether

discourses of place and belonging marginalise denied, dislocated and dispossessed identities, privileging 'the self-identical and well-rooted ones who have natural rights and stable homes'? (Haraway, 1997: 215; Plumwood, 2002: 23). Is the ability to maintain access (unproblematically) to a special homeplace and to protect it not at least partly a function of one's privilege/power in the world. (2008: 140)

Given Plumwood's attention to interlocking matrices of oppression, she would likely not have objected to using shadow places to think through the implications of heteronormative places and their shadow lands. Indeed such an account is implicit in her commentary on the recent attention to the figure of the child:

I am not of course arguing that there's necessarily anything wrong with loving a special place, or that justice demands that we each love and care for all places equally, any more than it requires one love one's child only as much as all other children and no more. But justice does require that we take some account of other children, and of our own and our child's relationship to them, perhaps even that we not aim to have our child thrive at the expense of these other children. (Plumwood, 2008: 147)

This version of an ecofeminist maternal ethic of care offers something quite other than 'reproductive futurism' (Edelman, 2004). With her call for more multiple relationships to place against a 'monogamous ideal' (Plumwood, 2008: 147) of relationships with singular and special places, Plumwood's ecofeminist ethic and politics of place was already queer. It is the kind of queer ethic of place/home which Joyce Layland articulated and which is carried on in the visionary practices of professional youth and community workers like Sally Carr, Claire Holmes,

Amelia Lee and many others who continue Joyce Layland's work. As feminists have long noted, home is a difficult space for many women. As Caren Kaplan articulates it:

We must leave home, as it were, because our homes are often the sites of sexism, racism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. What we gain is a reterritorialization; we reinhabit a world of our making. (1987: 194)

Eco/feminists might stress that the 'our' of 'a world of our making' is not all human.

This everyday utopia offers not a reified sense of place, but as Davina Cooper has articulated:

the movement of members between everyday utopias and a wide array of other sites – indeed the interwoven character of the sites themselves in their multiple entangled relationships to other places and process – highlights a crucial dimension of everyday utopias. Far from offering totalizing expressions of what an ideal self-sufficient life could be, everyday utopias are more akin to hot spots of innovative practice. (2014: 9)

The YWG allotment was never intended to sustain a nuclear family of four. It is not even clear if the plot has managed to sustain the hedgehog that came to the allotment from a hedgehog sanctuary (though, more precisely, it was never likely that the hedgehog needed us in any case, but we hope he is living happily somewhere amongst the undergrowth). For a long time, it was not possible to pretend that the vegetables were sustaining anyone, although the idea, the promise, of vegetables, gathered young and older women together at the allotment, even those who say on video that they 'don't like veg', for the hard work of digging, and digging, and more digging. Nonetheless, the ambitions for the plot change and grow, from being 'LGYM Outdoors', to bringing fruit and vegetables back to the Centre and cooking and eating together; to supporting the new Sidney Street Community Cafe<sup>11</sup> and creating opportunities for training and employment; to a rearticulation of the work at the allotment as a transgenerational project; and a transformed notion of the interconnections which might be community.

In seeking to create alternatives to Manchester's gay scene, not only spaces for young people, but also alternatives to the scene, the YWG, and the allotment, offer a manifestation of Berlant and Warner's call for a queer culture that would make room for 'the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation' (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558). We suggest that the YWG allotment offers a queer eco/feminist re-vision (cf. Rich, 1979) of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf, 2002), anticipated by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our*

*Mothers' Gardens* (Walker, 1983). This vision pushes the possibilities of a room of one's own, of a garden of one's own, even of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Collective, 1973), to encompass an allotment, and a demand for a whole joined up planet, a queer ethic of place, a worlding of privatepublic naturecultures. A world where, for a short while, the blur of the allotment from the train window is reversed and the view from, and the experience of, the allotment allows a recentring, so the rest of the world, the rest of the week, a shadow world, temporarily recedes into the corner of one's eye, and for a while a different world, an everyday utopia of an almost unimaginable intimate privatepublic natureculture, comes into being.

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### Notes

1. This article is co-authored, that is co-authorised, if not all co-written (see, for example, Lassiter, 2005 on the distinction between co-authoring and co-writing). Niamh Moore is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) at the University of Manchester. She has also been involved with the YWG allotment since its beginning. Jacqui Gabb is a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the Open University, and also a member of CRESC. Neil Ravenscroft and Andrew Church are based at the University of Brighton. Claire Holmes and Amelia Lee are youth workers involved in the YWG allotment project; Amelia Lee is the Strategic Director of LGBT YNW, the YWG is a partner organisation; Claire Holmes is the YWG Allotment Co-ordinator, as well as more recently Cafe Manager of the Sidney Street Community Cafe. This article draws on AHRC Connected Communities funded research projects; as well as conversations with Jacqui Gabb in CRESC on public intimacies and 'significant otherness'; and Niamh Moore's ongoing involvement in the allotment (see 2013).
2. See <http://www.likt.org.uk/> (the Young Women's Project was previously named Likt).
3. See <http://www.likt.org.uk/activities/allotment/>
4. See 'Private Allotment Company Gets Mixed Welcome', *Ecologist*, 5 January 2010 ([http://www.theecologist.org/News/news\\_round\\_up/391703/private\\_allotment\\_company\\_gets\\_mixed\\_welcome.html](http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_round_up/391703/private_allotment_company_gets_mixed_welcome.html)).
5. See <http://www.thenewallotmentcompany.com/allotments.html>
6. This was later modified by the Allotments Acts 1922, with further revisions up until 1950.

7. The Foyer is run by St Vincent's Housing Association and provides supported accommodation for young people: 'The Manchester Foyer offers accommodation to young people aged 16-25 in housing need who are actively engaged in education; priority is given to those with a local connection. Schedule 1 offenders will not be accepted. Those with a history of arson and/or a conviction relating to possessing an offensive weapon may not be accepted. Other offences assessed on an individual basis' (<http://www.foyer.net/>).
8. See <http://www.akt.org.uk/>
9. See the work of the Lesbian Immigrant Support Group (LISG), set up in Manchester: <http://lesbianimmigrationsupportgroup.blogspot.co.uk>
10. The research on which this article is based includes participatory video-making with the Young Women's Group, which resulted in two YouTube videos, 'I love you allot' and 'Spearmint? I'll have some of that!', available at: <http://www.lik.org.uk/activities/allotment/>; and a focus group with twelve young women, all of whom had gardened at the allotment on at least one occasion, and most of whom were regulars at the allotment. The focus group, which took place at the Platt Chapel Community Centre in Manchester in June 2011, was facilitated by Amelia Lee, a youth worker trained in group facilitation methods (ICA-UK's *Technology of Participation*) who worked regularly with the young women. Andrew Church, Niamh Moore, Neil Ravenscroft and Paul Gilchrist, another researcher based at the University of Brighton, were also present at the focus group, but did not actively participate.
11. The Sidney Street Cafe opened in 2013 at the Joyce Layland LGBT Centre. See <http://www.lgbtcentremcr.co.uk/sidney-st-cafe.php>

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