*Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*

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# Framing nature: visual representations of ecological paradigms

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**Abstract**

This paper provides a brief discussion on the implications and outcomes of ethnographic filmmaking as a means to understanding environmental perception among farming communities. I argue that the unique contribution of filmmaking as a research method lies in its epistemological ability to engage with diverse ways of knowing. In this paper, I provide a close examination of a vignette filmed during my research to demonstrate how this methodological and analytical approach can be used to reveal environmental perception and knowledge as processes, rather than as substances.

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## Background

Ethnographic research has contributed a cultural understanding of how people perceive, know, value and respond to their environments and climate shifts (Roncoli et al., 2009; Crate, 2011; Barnes et al., 2013). One way in which social scientists have framed environmental perceptions has been through cultural models (Holland and Quinn, 1987; Kempton et al., 1995; Paolisso, 2003; Crate, 2008). This way of visualizing local understandings of the environment, while useful, is also limited by its form as an abstracted and fixed configuration of what is a fluid and changing process. Such distinctions have been elucidated in the work of Ingold and Kurttila (2000) who, in their discussion on Sami environmental knowledge, distinguish between two ways of approaching local knowledge. The concepts of MTK and LTK are loosely defined as traditional knowledge framed within the modernist discourse, and traditional knowledge as understood locally. The modernist interpretation considers traditional knowledge as discrete and consistent pieces of information that are passed down through generations. The concept of LTK, on the other hand, connotes knowledge that is both constantly changing yet anchored by a consistency of form and application; it is a form of 'wayfaring' (Ingold and Kurttila, 2000). The distinction between these two becomes crucial in moments of policy-making, advocacy, or research during which efforts are made to fix, record, or define local knowledge in order to make it legible within political or academic discourses, a process that at times obfuscates forms of LTK. Local practitioners frequently negotiate between these different ways of knowing in order to sustain their practices within various governing structures. Filmmaking offers a complementary research method through which to engage with diverse ways of knowing and practitioners' negotiations among them.

The uniqueness of film, as a tool of ethnographic inquiry, lies in the distinct qualities of the medium as a mode of investigation. First, the film creates a space for the material presence of the environment (and the physical performance of relationships) to co-exist within discussions around environmental knowledge and perceptions. The camera focuses both the researcher's and film subjects' attention on the material world (people, plants, animals, things) and the subsequent film brings the physical and material qualities of key relationships to the fore. Secondly, film, as a time-based medium, portrays relationships and interactions as ongoing processes. The film does not lend itself to aggregation or abstraction, but rather requires immersion into particular moments. While a thorough transcript might provide similar data, film requires a durational experience and includes the nonverbal and performative aspects of interactions, thus extending the ethnographic import beyond the discursive. These qualities provide a means to foreground the fluid and processual nature of local knowledge, perceptions and relationships.

## Methods

My approach to filmmaking combines observational and participatory techniques. Observational filmmaking is a skilled practice of being present in the moment and responding to relationships and situations happening in front of the camera (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009). Participatory filmmaking uses the contributions of participants both as a means to probe deeper into research questions and as a collaboration between researcher and participants (MacDougall, 1975). In my research, filmmaking was a repetitive process of collaboratively filming, editing and viewing

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material in what I term *adaptive co-production*. This method of filmmaking provides a medium through which researchers and participants can share intersubjective moments.

The short vignette discussed below was collected as part of my dissertation research conducted between 2011 and 2013. My research was an ethnographic investigation of the activities of the grassroots organization, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF). The FSC/LAF is a network of cooperatives and farmers that focuses on land-based development for African Americans within the southeastern US. My research worked with farmers and organizers in Mississippi and Alabama. I shadowed organizers and farmers, and filmed practices, activities and interviews. The vignette explored in this paper was filmed during a visit from a FSC/LAF organizer in Alabama to a local farmer who had recently erected a hoop house. He was demonstrating how his vegetables had grown within the new arrangement.

## The film

Due to the brevity of this paper, I will only briefly discuss the film. I recommend viewing the short vignette in its entirety before reading further and viewing it again after reading my analysis (watch video at: https://sarfranzen.wixsite.com/dogdaysfilm).

Three key relationships are explored within this vignette. First is the relationship between the farmer and his environment. Second is between the farmer and the organizer, and by extension, between the farmer and the climate change 'scientists' and the 'scientific' community at large. The third relationship is between the farmer and the camera. By extension, the camera also represents a potential academic or public audience.

The vignette begins with the farmer making a comment about 'dog days', a concept with which the organizer is unfamiliar. He grabs his farmers' almanac from inside his truck in order to show her when this time period will be. The organizer questions the validity of the almanac and its ability to be used in diverse situations, such as growing in a hoop house. She is also wary of the almanac's potential connection to superstition. Partly this is the organizer's own personal feelings, but her apprehension reflects a common attitude towards certain local practices by both scientific and religious communities. However, as an advocate for the farmer, she also wants to maintain good relations and so brushes aside the conversation in order to move on. These moments of negotiation between the organizer's and the farmer's perspective continue throughout the short film, never fully resolved.

Upon entering the hoop house the farmer directs the attention of the organizer and the camera to look at specific plants and take note of his practices. The farmer discusses various agricultural techniques, each of which approaches knowledge differently, demonstrating the fluidity with which the farmer makes decisions concerning his agricultural practice. The environment remains a constant presence throughout the interaction. Pointing to the dusted leaves of a few of his plants, he proudly demonstrates the success of his traditional, and secret, insecticide technique. He then points to his eaten turnip leaves to demonstrate to the organizer why the white butterflies are bad for his plants. As he stoops down, he plucks a few leaves of mint, sniffs them and passes them to the organizer who in turn sniffs the leaves. The farmer teasingly feigns surprise that she knows what it is, and explains that this is his experimental practice of insecticide, one that was initiated after receiving the mint from another farmer. Each of these singular pieces of knowledge pertaining to the relationship between insects and plants is prompted by the presence of the plants themselves and told through physically engaging with the environment. Each technique blends together information gathered from multiple sources into a practice of constant observation and adjustment.

As the farmer is pointing out his plants, the organizer announces that some 'scientists' will be holding a climate change workshop and that he should attend. She explains that the scientists are interested in the old ways farmers could determine climate shifts. When she asks him about the old ways, the farmer gives an example of observing the position of hornets' nests. The organizer rightly points out that there really are no longer many hornets' nests to observe, and questions the last time the farmer even saw one. The farmer agrees, commenting that this is just what the old folks said, to which the organizer contends that perhaps this is why farmers now need scientific knowledge.

Within this short exchange, which serves as the crux of the whole piece, the incongruity between different ways of knowing comes to the fore. The organizer preludes what was likely to be asked during the meeting with the climate change researchers – a direct inquiry into traditional ways of understanding the weather and environment. And the farmer responds in a way he very likely responded to the scientists, with a discrete technique that can acceptably be categorized as traditional knowledge. However, this is not a technique that is part of his regular practice and, as the organizer pointed out, has probably not been practiced for some time. When giving the tour of his hoop house, the farmer's responses are quite different. His explanations are prompted by the process of touring his vegetables and he offers knowledge that is neither classified as traditional nor scientific. Yet by the end of the film, the farmer asserts the importance of protecting traditional ways of knowing. What he values are not discrete facts but his 'wayfaring,' his knowledge that cannot be contained in books. What the film offers is space for him to demonstrate, explore and reveal his relationship with his environment as an aspect of his 'wayfaring.'

As the tour progresses, the farmer begins to directly address the camera, instructing me to document specific elements of importance. Not satisfied with simply telling me about his 'true blue' collard seeds, we walk over to his seeding plant to examine the pods. He then instructs me to get a good shot of his extremely large cabbage, explaining how the different government programs (providing grants for hoop houses and plastic culture) have given him the opportunity to experiment with different forms of growing. He is generating living knowledge out of scientifically researched extension knowledge. Before leaving the hoop house, the farmer gathers some garlic plants, pulling them as they squeak out of the ground. He gives them to the organizer to plant in the FSC/LAF demonstration farm, physically passing on his knowledge.

At the end of the film, the farmer further reflects on the idea of the 'scientists' in general. He comments that they only know things through experiments. But he knows through doing. His knowledge cannot be learned through books; it has to be learned through apprenticeship and experience. This way of knowing is slowly disappearing. This film ends as the farmer pulls out some African heirloom seeds from the dash of his truck and poetically comments on both the seeds and the ways of farming they represent: 'we're losing all this. In fact, we about already lost it.'

## Conclusion

Filmmaking offers a means to view environmental perception and knowledge as a series of relationships and processes. This vignette

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directly engages how the farmer moves through and relates to the environment combining discursive, performative and sensory information as an unfolding sequence. Through his interaction with the organizer, we see how the farmer contends with and negotiates his practice with external institutions and alternative ways of knowing. As an intermediary, the organizer both relates to and challenges the farmer, straddling different frames of knowledge production. The farmer similarly incorporates diverse forms of knowledge into his practice. At the same time, he advocates for the uniqueness and value of his 'wayfaring.' Filmmaking offers potential insight into the farmer's wayfaring, his negotiations and relationships with interlocutors, and his own perspective on the value of his way of knowing.

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