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An interview with River Dean

Kate Fletcher

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Colonialism is based on the logic of conquest, the fantasy of greatness and domination... including over humans. I write the 'including over humans' adjoiner self-consciously, as each time I read the sentence back it trips me up and makes me think about where our focus tends to gravitate. Certainly as we seek to broaden the intellectual canon of fashion scholarship with a wider range of perspectives, like those examined within this Special Issue, the more-than-human world is part of it. After all, nature, while often celebrated within fashion as visual inspiration, is another 'other'.

In a journey towards a positive theory about freedom and emancipation in fashion, non-humans are both part of the travelling hoard. Taking my lead from other researchers, including those working in the field of design and animism (e.g Bertulis, 2019), I decide to set out to hear from another stakeholder who doesn't use the products of the fashion system but is nevertheless affected by them. Specifically I visit a river, seeking its comment.

A river seemed an apt choice as I live in an old cotton mill town in the north of England and it was the river – and the free availability of water to power the mills – that brought the textile industry here in the first place. Historically, technically and domestically, a river and its water is indivisible from the fashion system; as is its channelling, harnessing, polluting.

I use perhaps the commonest research method of all, the interview and I approach this one as I would any other. I pack my note book and a voice recorder. I prepare my question, I want to ask about limits. Like others before me, I think about a release form, and what it means to ask for permission when working with those unable to communicate informed consent. I give myself an hour and a half.

At the River Dean I start out sitting on a log at its edge and press the record button on my phone. My being here chases away four or five birds. The river is narrow, maybe three metres across, it cuts between a rocky bank and a drystone wall. I listen to the flow, watch it, I feel like I am trying to turn it over in my mind. I see detritus high on the bank from the winter floods and uprooted trees and banks of stone piled up by the torrent. So much power. Yet today the river is soft, benevolent. Water: the great-sustainer. Just above the water's surface there are flies with glassy wings, hundreds of them, ironing the river flat with their busyness. There is also a swirl of breeze, cold in my nostrils. I realise that I have forgotten to introduce myself and I jump up and onto a stone mid-stream. Instead of a handshake I plunge both hands into the flow. The water is full of tiny snails and a sandy sludge covers the stones in the river bed. I can touch the bottom easily and I remember how little rain we've had recently, a dry spring. The link is so obvious it brings me into a moment of awkward awareness. The relationality of living systems. What is here now is linked to what came before and to what will follow. And I am in relationship with it.

You never get quite what you imagine from an interview. For my part I ended up with the squashed body of a soft insect in my ear. And lots of questions, like how to communicate

contextual, relational knowledge? And what would the literature say about who is the intellectual authority here, about whose voice is authoritative?

Dean gurgles on.

Reference

Eugenia Bertulis (2019), Co-creating with a Tick in K. Fletcher, L. St. Pierre and M Tham (Eds), *Design and Nature: A Relationship*, London: Earthscan from Routledge, 44-50.