Introduction

Among global brands selling high-end urbanism across the planet, ‘Vancouverism’ stands out for the way it animates nature. According to city officials, ‘Vancouverism is an internationally known term that describes a new kind of city living’. This new way of living:

combines deep respect for nature with enthusiasm for busy, engaging, active streets and dynamic urban life. Vancouverism means tall slim towers for density, widely separated by low-rise buildings, for light, air, and views. It means many parks… combined with an emphasis on sustainable forms of transit.… No wonder city planners and urban designers come to Vancouver from around the world to find inspiration. (City of Vancouver 2017)

Taking advantage of the city’s stunning coastal mountain backdrop, Vancouverism attracts people who love the city and love leaving it for the surrounding forests, mountains and beaches (Stoddart 2012). Vancouver’s urban brand is part of a larger production of nature that travels on either side of city limits, and by different modes. While sustainable mobilities grow inside the city, Vancouverites mainly use the car to reach wilderness outside it and happen to use more luxury vehicles than anywhere else in North America (Azpiri 2016). On any weekend or Friday afternoon, many residents hop in their Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Audi, Lexus, Bentley, Rolls-Royce, Ferrari or Lamborghini and leave the city in style for wild nature. Many other residents drive to nature in more humble vehicles – including a small army of vintage Mitsubishi Delicas, Volkswagen Westfalia Campers and other new-age, diesel-powered hippie vans. Overall, this heavy reliance on the car highlights a contradictory production of nature, fragmented between work/recreation, urban/non-urban and banality/splendour. The luxurious automobility, watercraft and real estate (comparable to Hong Kong, Sydney and London) with which elite Vancouverites orchestrate nature, points to broader relations between car-capitalism and neoliberal planetary urbanisation. Such production of nature cries out for Lefebvrian analysis.

In this chapter I examine how Lefebvre’s ideas elucidate the production of nature, using qualitative data on cycling from cities across Canada to explore nature’s enactment in the...
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city. Ecological Lefebvrian analysis is underdeveloped. After all, Lefebvre construed nature as succumbing to abstract spaces of capitalism: ‘the fact is natural space will soon be lost to view. Anyone so inclined may look over their shoulder and see it shrinking below the horizon behind us’ (1991: 31). Leaving behind this much–contested passive idea of nature, and looking ahead at a nature-filled horizon, I examine how Lefebvre’s production of space ideas and historical approach to urban space enrich the analysis of the production of nature, wherein nature takes on transformative agency. This agency means nature cannot be reduced to a product or producer of car capitalism. In this chapter I ask, how can nature be produced otherwise?

To cultivate Lefebvrian ecological analysis, I put his production of space ideas in dialogue with the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006). As Haraway (2016: 35) says, ‘it matters what thoughts think thoughts,… what relations relate relations’. For example, it matters if humans continue to imagine and relate nature with the car and SUV rather than other ways of moving together. Thinking about the production of nature with mobilities can invigorate ecological analysis of 21st-century conundrums such as the way Canada orchestrates nature. Lefebvre’s dim view of nature relates to his prescient critique of the car and its planetary impact (Scott 2013). In fact, Lefebvre’s car critique helped inspire mobilities scholarship, which exploded ten years ago in part because scholars started scrutinising the self-organising, coercive, hegemonic and ecologically disastrous ‘system of automobility’ (Conley and McLaren 2009; Urry 2004; Sheller and Urry 2000). In this chapter I build on Lefebvre’s car critique by arguing that cycling can produce nature differently.

The chapter has three sections. In the first section I review Lefebvre’s car critique and situate new mobilities literature within the production of nature discussion. Drawing on Lefebvre’s production of space ideas, I refine three questions for my subsequent analysis:

• How can spatial practices that enact nature not simply reproduce existing social relations, but transform them, along with what it means to be human?
• How can urban mobilities cultivate representational space alongside more sophisticated representations of nature that cultivate associations between humans and nonhumans?
• Whereas automobility sets nature apart from human activity in the abstract space of neoliberal capitalism, how can cycling, following Lefebvre’s historical approach to the production of urban space, produce nature differently?

To explore these questions, in the second section of the chapter I analyse data from an ongoing ethnographic study of urban cycling in major Canadian cities, started in 2013, for which I am principal investigator (with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada). These data include interviews with city planners and politicians as well as mobile video data collected using GoPro cameras during ride–alongs and follow–up video elicitation interviews. I present results from four ride–alongs and follow–up interviews with experienced urban cyclists that focus solely on biking to nature in the city: Theo and Dasha in Winnipeg, Colm in Toronto and Francesca in Ottawa (all pseudonyms). These interviews all lasted about an hour and a half and were conducted, recorded and transcribed during the summer of 2015. I then expand my analysis by applying Lefebvre’s historical approach to the production of urban space to show how automobility, through early 20th–century parkways in North America, can ecologically inspire the expansion of cycling nature. My analysis finishes with a comparison of cycling nature in Canada and Finland. In the third, concluding section, I suggest that nature and wilderness stand a greater chance of flourishing if their production by cycling ameliorates rather than exacerbates planetary gentrification.
Automobility and the production of nature

Lefebvre’s writing on the car, more than his observations on nature, cultivates the production of nature as a site for ecological analysis. For Lefebvre, the car is a critical tool for imposing the conceived and orderly space of engineers and planners upon historical, messy lived space. He decries how complex, knotted cities, like the old Paris obliterated by Haussmann, were ‘sliced up, degraded, and eventually destroyed… by the proliferation of fast roads and places to park and garage cars’. Lefebvre laments ‘tree-lined streets, green spaces, and parks and gardens’ that were ‘sacrificed to that abstract space where cars circulate like so many atomic particles’ (1991: 312–359). Some take issue with Lefebvre’s depiction of the car as a purveyor of abstract space and global capitalism. Edensor (2003), for example, complains that Lefebvre contributes to ‘legion’ depictions of car driving as ‘inherently malign’. He protests Lefebvre’s criticism ‘that the driver moves through an “abstract”, “flattened” space and is concerned only with reaching a destination’. Edensor (2003: 152) argues that car driving affords sensuous and creative possibilities for ‘reverie’, kinaesthetic skills and pleasure. But this is unfair; Lefebvre does not deny such possibilities, and it misses Lefebvre’s larger point, that mass car travel engineers the dominant space in a growing number of societies for accelerating capital flows through new car-oriented development as infrastructure for neoliberal urbanism (Scott 2013). Lefebvre was onto something big.

Writing decades ago, Lefebvre shows how the car contributes to rigid nature/city dualisms, setting nature apart from city and society by enveloping it in the abstract space of neoliberal capitalism. This prescient car critique is borne out by research on the hegemonic system of automobility in the new mobilities paradigm (Conley and McLaren 2009; Sheller and Urry 2006; Sheller and Urry 2000). The car is not inherently malign but is caught up in significant ecological degradation, America’s ‘secessionist automobility’ (Henderson 2009) and divergent forms of neoliberal populism, like the pro-car authoritarian populism of Rob Ford’s government in Toronto, 2010–2014 (Walks 2015). What did become legion across the 20th century were inherently benign, freedom-loving depictions of the car by prolific commercial advertising as the only vehicle for nature. As Aronczyk (2005) puts it, ‘without cars, wilderness as we know it could not exist’. Automobility assembles wilderness, from Iceland to Quebec, as a predefined destination for car travel across many sites of travel practice (Huijbens and Benediktsson 2007). New versions of the car, via digital sophistication and construction of ever more intelligent roads and vehicles, produce nature by focusing more attention on car consoles, media and software, with wilderness outside the car acting as a backdrop. In effect, neoliberal car capitalism re-romanticises and pacifies wilderness, producing nature as something pure, external and exclusive for people rolling in with the right wheels.

The production of nature discussion grew over the last few decades from a predominantly Marxist focus (Smith 2010) towards diverse theoretical perspectives, including science and technology studies (Haraway 2016). One way to characterise this shift entails a move away from strong social constructionism to approaches that recognise the material reality and agency of nature. For example, Fitzsimmons (1989: 106–10) argues that once capitalism and urbanisation abstracted nature as society’s antithesis, nature gained a ‘mystifying power’ over urban intellectual life that shrouds the role of capitalist production and the ‘material reality’ of nature. Elaborating this line of thought, Castree (1995: 13) argues the materiality of nature must include ‘both the ontological reality of those entities we term “natural”, and the active role those entities play in making history and geography’. Fast forward to more recent discussion, and we see less emphasis on exceptionalising humans and more comfort with inviting diverse nonhumans into the ranks of nature’s producers (Latour 2004; Haraway 2008). As Ingold (2011: 7–9) puts it, there are multiple ways of being alive in the world – ‘there are human becomings, animal becomings, plant becomings, and so on’. Or, as Vannini and Vannini (2016: 215) put it, wilderness is a ‘meshwork’
Recent discussions on assembling nature and wilderness refocus attention on the significance of movement (Lund 2013), which Lefebvre emphasised in his car critique and the production of space. Lefebvre imagined social space as moving, among other ways, like the motion of water:

Great movements, vast rhythms, immense waves – these all collide and ‘interfere’ with one another; lesser movements, on the other hand, interpenetrate…. any social locus could only be properly understood by taking two kinds of determinations into account: on the one hand, that locus would be mobilized, carried forward, and sometimes smashed apart by major tendencies;… on the other hand, it would be penetrated by, and shot through with, the weaker tendencies characteristic of networks and pathways.

(1991: 87)

Hegemonic automobility and driving nature comprise a great interference, an immense wave with vast sociotechnical momentum. It begs the question, can other spatial practices of mobility that enact wilderness avoid reproducing existing social relations, like rigid nature/society dualisms and neoliberal urbanisms, caught up in the car? Will cycling get dragged along with automobility’s production of nature, or can it escape the car’s undertow sideways and reassemble nature differently? Can cycling cultivate representational spaces of nature alongside sophisticated representations of nature in which humans and nonhumans flourish? Can ecology actually challenge neoliberal capitalism? This last question, about nature’s moral worth (Thévenot et al. 2000), speaks to the high stakes of politically challenging the car and its wilderness.

Producing nature differently

Spatial practices of cycling nature carry the potential to contest, if not transform, existing social relations and perceived spaces of nature and the city. Whereas automobility tends to produce nature as an unspoiled destination for the car bracketed apart from the ordinary urbanised space in which the majority of humans live, cycling insinuates nature and wilderness into daily spaces of practice. Participants in a multiyear ethnographic study of urban cycling in Canada demonstrate how cycling, on river trails and multi-use pathways set outside car traffic (yet in the orbit of work and home), brings nature, nonhumans and immersive weather into everyday life. It is already well documented (Spinney 2006; Furness 2010; Aldred 2013; Larsen 2014) that cycling exposes people to the nature of their surroundings. In what follows, to advance Lefebvrian ecological analysis I show how cycling transforms the production of nature.

Theo in Winnipeg captures a common sentiment about cycling nature in practice. Lamenting the high number of pickup truck drivers in the prairie city who seem dangerously detached from their surroundings, he avows:

but that’s the fun piece in biking in my mind, is that you have to be aware of your environment and how you interact with it, you don’t have a choice.

(Interview with author 2015)

Dasha says cycling, even in Winnipeg’s brutal winter, gives her:

‘the time to actually enjoy her surroundings’. She describes how her cycling to work also affords access to city green spaces, where ‘there’s a sense of removal from traffic, and then
quiet, or like a different noise. Like by the river, there’s spots where you can kind of get away [see Figure 26.1], even around other people’.

(Interview with author 2015)

Theo elaborates how cycling on pathways in the woods by the water, separated from the car, does not separate ‘nature’ and ‘daily life’ into silos or what Lefebvre (1991: 329) calls different ‘space envelopes’. For Theo, cycling:

reminds you that the city has a natural or nature component to it. It’s not all jungle de béton. Especially in a city like Winnipeg with so many spaces interacting with the river and natural riverbanks, there’s something fun to allow yourself, especially if it [is] as simple as getting to work, to insert a bit of natural environment in your life, and combine it as part of something utilitarian.

(Interview with author 2015)

The integration of work and play, concrete and nature, playing out in Winnipeg through cycling nature challenges tidy divisions between functional spaces of practice conceived by automobility, especially human society versus wild nature. Spatial contraventions by cycling show how prolific spaces of practice, like work and nature, become embroidered in the material world.

Cycling transforms nature by pouring its spatial practice into daily life, but also by prying the production of nature apart from neoliberal capitalism. Lefebvre (1991) criticises the car, not for creating routine practice per se, but for the way the car’s practice coerces people into driving through commodified landscapes (Sheller and Urry 2000), increases compulsory consumption (Soron 2009) and:

services the reproduction of global capital, in a manner that increasingly alienates us from the rhythms and desires of the human body… and the cycles of the natural world.

(Gardiner 2004)

Cycling can, though, lubricate the flows of global capital by contributing to gentrification and racialised neoliberal urbanism (Hoffman 2016). But cycling, being less coercive and channelled
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into development than automobility, also opens up spaces of practice beyond market worlds of neoliberal capitalism, like wilderness pathways in the city. Ecological skills, such as noticing and following change in more-than-human environments, flourish in public spaces outside the marketplace. On wilderness pathways, people cycle with enough speed to satisfy daily mobility needs, yet with enough slowness and physical exposure to know, and feel like they are part of, their surroundings. On such paths, Theo and Dasha engage nonhumans, like rivers, birds and plants, as ends rather than commodified instruments. Such slower, closer enactments of nature may only comprise a small space of practice compared to driving nature with a car. But they render people more vulnerable to becoming human with nonhumans, and challenge anthropocentric notions of what it means to be human.

Representational spaces of cycling nature further contest abstract, human-centred notions of nature by folding moments of wonder and possibility into a narrow but growing space of cycling practice. Such cycling moments alter the directly lived space of nature. For Lefebvre, lived spaces, spaces of representation, are alive in the sense of folding time or duration into space. Lived space opens up the production of space to a ‘radical outside’ (Seigworth 2000: 248) past the familiar productions of the city that slice up space into society/nature, work/play and urban/wilderness. Representational space enters the production of cycling nature during fleeting moments, notably while riding and dwelling on wilderness pathways assembled through water, bridges, play and public art.

Colm in Toronto slips through a representational space that resonates with the experience of other people cycling through Canada’s cosmopolitan ecology (Gandy 2013). While riding along a polluted if biodiverse and resilient river valley hidden in the ravines beneath Toronto’s cement crust, Colm stumbles upon a man painting a mural on the concrete foundation of a gigantic viaduct arching over the top of the valley. Lurid colours and surreal animal figures, floating up the viaduct towards an invisible vibrating stream of cars, clash with the faded grasses and sumac trees around the river banks. The odd scene pulls Colm off his bicycle into conversation with the artist, who explains the mural aims to defamiliarise and celebrate Toronto’s natural underworld as part of an international sporting event. What makes the familiar valley suddenly seem strange to Colm, however, is a feeling of awareness of the wider watershed as a whole piece of the city that overflows this space, if only for a moment. The ability to stop and imagine his surroundings with art allows Colm to notice nature differently, with more mindfulness (interview with author 2015). He contravenes and plays with his boundaries between city and wilderness, but also between the trivial and extraordinary, articulating an ‘everyday utopianism’ (Gardiner 2004).

While riding to work or just for pleasure, Theo experiences similar flashes of presence triggered by water crossings and public art. He calls them ‘moments of Zen’. There is one bridge in particular that plays with his temporal, representational sense of space:

There’s one bridge in Winnipeg, the Arlington [1910], that was designed for the [River] Nile, and then something happened, so Winnipeg got it for like, half off kind-of-thing. There’s something about that moment, where you cross a bridge that was designed to cross the Nile.

(Interview with author 2015)

Moments of Zen or spatial duration emerge for Theo, especially where art escapes the spatial control of the gallery and moves into active transportation pathways along natural corridors. Such art ranges from human faces carved in trees that watch and startle passers-by, to furnishings
in natural amphitheatres at ancient river crossings that point to constellations of stars. Cycling along nature pathways, says Theo:

Many bridges now incorporate an art element, and it’s fantastic to witness and be inspired by that and stop and actually look at the art. So I go, it’s not necessarily nature versus non-nature. I don’t know what the opposite of nature is… But cars go too fast, so they miss the art.

(Interview with author 2015)

Dasha, too, finds Zen moments on bridges in the urban wild, dwelling less on the art than the special acoustics and big soundscapes along bridges and shores set apart from cars by water. She plays with this space, taking her feet off the pedals and standing on her bicycle frame while swerving around manhole covers, listening to how nature and the city enable each other. In fact, people cycling nature across urban Canada, from Vancouver to Halifax, report flashes of extensive presence with nonhumans during playful moments on wilderness pathways, wherein the regular risks and rules of the road relax. They may be ephemera, but representational spaces of cycling nature form an important part of the reason why cyclists search for nature outside in the city to begin with.

Spatial representations of cycling nature provide a powerful tool for expanding small spaces of practice and fleeting moments of Zen into a larger, concrete production of urban nature. Mobilising representations of cycling nature is politically complicated in Canada, where cycling activity across the board remains low. In 2011, the proportion of workers commuting by bicycle ranged from a low of 0.2 per cent St. John’s, Newfoundland, to a high of 5.9 per cent in Victoria, British Columbia (Statistics Canada 2013). Whether cycling practice and banal utopianism grow into more-than-human nature outside the car depends on plans, technical models and conceived space. Simple conceived spaces of cycling nature helped cultivate the planning of Winnipeg’s Churchill Parkway, on which Theo and Dasha enact nature in the heart of a continent, and Toronto’s Don River Valley Trails, on which Colm lets his imagination wander off into an urban wasteland (Gandy 2013) teeming with nonhuman history and rhizomes. These and other wilderness pathways help assemble the Trans Canada Trail (renamed The Great Trail upon its completion in 2017), an ambitious 24,000-kilometre route aiming to provide a dedicated trail for persons-without-cars that links 15,000 communities across the country.

Models and representations of cycling nature, like Vancouverism and The Great Trail, wield a double-edged sword. On one hand, they picture planning and development for nature outside the car. On the other hand, because all representations of space ‘are tied to the relations of production and to the “order” which those relations impose’ (Lefebvre 1991: 33), representations of cycling nature may lead to the production of a nature suspiciously similar to the romantic and anthropocentric nature produced by the car-industrial complex. However, there are hopeful signs that some conceived spaces of cycling nature can help swim cycling sideways and escape the strong undertow of automobility into a more embodied, messier nature, one which cultivates closer relations with nonhumans.

Representations of cycling nature are not planned and plonked down on some virginal tabula rasa, but in the material reality of the city (usually around its knotty points and bends). This means in urban Canada that cycling nature involves tangoing with cars where, according to Francesca in Ottawa, ‘cars think they own the place’ (interview with author 2015). Just like her Winnipeg and Toronto counterparts, Francesca begins the process of cycling nature by leaving her street and negotiating fast-moving motorists on a linear arterial road conceived
Lefebvre’s historical approach to the production of urban space illuminates how some representations of cycling nature, like Ottawa’s pathways, over time bolster particular, embodied ways of practising and reimagining nature with cycling (Scott 2016). An historical approach also shows that while car driving and cycling diverge with respect to nature’s production, driving nature can guide, if not ecologically inspire, the expansion of cycling nature. For example, Ottawa’s wilderness pathways, Canada’s most prominent, also constitute the nation’s earliest network of such pathways. They were conceived and laid down starting in the 1970s along the capital’s canals and rivers, in many cases alongside parkways that were designed for the same purpose – connecting people to nature into the city – but with motorists in mind. Ottawa’s parkways enjoy an even longer, illustrative lineage. In 1888, Frederick Law Olmsted established, in the case of Buffalo, what:

is to be understood by the term parkways. They plainly serve, not simply as branches or outworks of the park with which they connect but as a part of the general street system of the city’.

(Olmsted 1888, in Sutton 1997: 147)

The parkway’s value for Olmsted derives not from speed, but from the nature surrounding it. Ottawa took this idea to heart, elaborating slow and windy park roads across the city for motorists to experience remarkable vistas without the signage or industrial trucking that would distract them from contemplating nature (Scott 2012; Gordon 2015). The moral force of this production of nature is tempered by its romanticisation of nature and role in imposing colonial space on unceded Anishinaabe (Algonquin) territory. Notwithstanding these important limitations, the parkway offers ecological inspiration and material direction for the urban expansion of cycling nature.

As cycling nature in Canada’s capital suggests, the production of nature is an international process, which can be further elucidated through international comparison. Canada affords diverse forms of cycling nature across a vast urbanising landscape, but levels of cycling activity, as in the United States, are generally low. One avenue for developing this analysis entails comparing Canada to another country with a more advanced cycling culture and more extensive experience with cycling nature. While the Netherlands, Germany and Scandinavia all offer fruitful possibilities, I suggest Finland, especially the northern Finnish city of Oulu, provides an analytically important comparison. As a capital of winter cycling in the Global North (Babin 2014), Oulu faces many of the same weather-related challenges to everyday cycling as Canadian cities, yet meets these challenges with innovative maintenance and effective educational campaigns. Winter, however, is not the most salient basis of comparison.

On the surface, Oulu’s pyörätie or cycle pathways look very similar to multi-use pathways in Ottawa, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto and Halifax. However, a critical difference emerges that helps explain why people cycle at much higher rates in Oulu and think of cycling nature, if they think of it at all, as simply part of everyday life. This difference, according to a city transport planner and a cycling campaign leader I interviewed in Oulu in summer 2015, lies in the way Oulu’s pathways were planned and developed, beginning in the 1970s, as the
most efficient way to travel in green spaces between city neighbourhoods and the urban core. Ottawa was lucky, also getting in on the ground floor of pathway planning, such that Capital Pathway network grew into efficient routes that combine nature with daily mobility needs. Most cities in Canada, however, like those in the United States, are now left scrambling to assemble wilderness pathways after decades of already implementing expensive car-based infrastructure, which, as Europe shows, is very difficult, politically and physically, to unbuild (Hommels 2008). As part of a larger, historical production of urban nature, the pyörätie offers a compelling opportunity for international policy transfer, with Ottawa already demonstrating a version in Canada.

Conclusions

In this chapter I demonstrate how Lefebvre’s broader production of space ideas, more than his observations on nature, offer an effective conceptual toolkit for expanding the production of nature as a site of Lefebvrian ecological analysis. In particular, I show how spatial practices, representational space, representations of space and Lefebvre’s historical approach to the production of urban space can be applied in combination to illuminate the production of nature, using cycling across urban Canada as a case study. To advance the production of nature research, I place Lefebvrian thought in dialogue with the new mobilities paradigm, noting how this paradigm draws inspiration from Lefebvre’s prescient car critique. In the spirit of Lefebvre’s biting critique of the car and its production of space, I examine how nature can be produced outside the parameters of hegemonic automobility and neoliberal car capitalism. I show how cycling nature, more than driving it with a car, produces nature as an embodied, exposed and ecologically valuable process of cultivating closer relations with nonhumans. I conclude that cycling can reassemble how humans value and engage with more-than-human nature.

Limitations of my analysis, including its focus on the Global North and my lack of attention to social cycling inequities, point to ways of advancing research on the production of nature. There lingers the fundamental, ethically complex question: who gets to cycle with nature? The preponderance of high-quality cycling facilities in Northern Europe and a growing number of wealthy cities in the Global North speaks to two pressing needs: transferring and adapting cycling nature knowledge to the Global South, while cultivating existing cycling cultures and expanding cycling in an equitable way within cities worldwide. Cycling equity is made all the more significant in light of megacities in the Global South expanding through automobility, but also because of the globalisation of gentrification, as Vancouverism illustrates, which threatens to transform cycling-friendly areas of the city into exclusive living space for global elites. An important avenue for future Lefebvrian ecological analysis entails examining how cities can produce nature as neither abstract nor absolute space, but as differential space with political possibilities for expanding rights to urban nature, in particular non-anthropocentric urban natures that contribute to the flourishing of nonhuman beings. Given the capacity of people cycling to notice, engage with and reimagine their surroundings, cycling, in combination with artful, off-car wilderness pathways, can mobilise ecologically good productions of urban nature.

References


