Rural Imaginations for a Globalized World

Editors Esther Peeren
Tjalling Valdés-Olmos



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Rural Imaginations for a Globalized World

Edited by

Esther Peeren
Tjalling Valdés-Olmos



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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

For Erick Fowler – we could not have organized the conference out of which this volume came without you. You live on in our memories



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Rural Imaginations for a Globalized World: Introduction

Esther Peeren and Tjalling Valdés-Olmos

Abstract

This introductory chapter begins by recalling how the most conspicuous appearance of the rural in early globalization theory came not in the form of an engagement with its globalized realities but, rather, by way of Marshall McLuhan's metaphor of the global village. While endorsing critiques of this metaphor by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ginger Nolan that establish more material grounds for the globalized rural, we insist it also has imagined dimensions that co-shape its material realities. Subsequently, we outline how the contributions to this volume explore the role played by social, political, economic, and cultural imaginations in determining what aspects of contemporary rural life – as deeply globalized and thus imbricated in the ongoing, often violent un- and enfoldings of colonialism and capitalism – are highlighted or obscured. This reveals the critical labor necessary to challenge the continued dominance of romanticizing imaginations that look at the rural through idyllic or pastoral lenses, and the affective management such imaginations help to perform.

• • •

> Globalization studies might reconsider their urbanist telos and take account of the new system's engagement with the bones of the rural/indigenous.
>
> SPIVAK 2013: 217

• • •

> I am then very willing to see the city as capitalism, as so many now do, if I can say also that this mode of production began, specifically, in the English rural economy, and produced, there, many of its characteristic effects – increases of production, physical reordering of a totally available world, displacement of customary settlements, a human remnant and force which became a proletariat – which

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> have since been seen, in many extending forms, in cities and colonies and in an international system as a whole.
>
> WILLIAMS 2011: 292

⁘

1 Imagining Rural Globalization beyond the Global Village

Until recently, the main focus of academic and public debates about globalization was on the urban environments containing, since 2007, a majority of the world population.[1] With world cities and urban sprawls firmly in the spotlight, rural areas were largely overlooked as significant sites of globalization, even though they were and still are home to billions of people, as well as accommodating substantial migration and tourism flows, and acting as centers for food production, resource extraction, energy provision, imprisonment, and waste disposal by governments and transnational corporations. Tellingly, the most conspicuous appearance of the rural in early globalization theory came not in the form of an engagement with its globalized realities, but of media theorist Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "the new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village" (31). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak views the global village as an abstraction reliant on the "presupposition that the advances in electronic technology have made it possible for 'the West' … to go back to the possibility of precapitalist spiritual riches without their attendant discomforts" (1998: 329–330). For her, the village in "global village" evokes a wholesome rural social formation lost to urbanized Westerners that may be retrieved, in new and improved form, through the global connectivity offered by new media technologies. Global connectivity instantly dissolves spatial distances and promises control over who to share certain parts of oneself with, thus avoiding the seclusion as well as the regulatory and surveillance practices that are often part of rural life (Woods 2011: 175). Whereas Raymond Williams emphasizes that "the village … shows in actual history a wide variation: as to size and character, and internally in its variation between dispersed and nuclear settlements, in Britain as clearly as elsewhere" (2011: 1), the global village metaphor invokes a selective, homogenizing

1 See https://statisticstimes.com/demographics/world-urban-population.php. In 2021, there were 3.42 billion people living in the rural, more than at any time before. Since then, the rural population has been declining.

imagination of the village – and, by extension, the rural – that plays up its longstanding affective association with "a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue" (Williams 2011: 1). Such a way of life is dominantly imagined to be unavailable in the (global) city where, McLuhan argues, print literacy has induced "the fragmentation of the human psyche" (32).

In *The Neocolonialism of the Global Village*, Ginger Nolan questions the "utopian connotation" of McLuhan's image, grounded in a romanticization of rural illiteracy, by highlighting how it was "born of colonial thought" (9). The "global village," she explains, is predicated on "techniques of colonial rule in Africa, specifically … Britain's brutal villagization scheme in Kenya in the 1950s" (Nolan 2018a: 9). This scheme saw "dispossessed denizens" put into camps resembling concentrated villages in order to enfold them into "the incipient nation-form and into the global market, while simultaneously withholding the modes of semiotic power required to participate effectively in a public sphere" (Nolan 2018a: 9).[2] Here, the actual villages that were McLuhan's inspiration are revealed as far from peaceful organic communities. Rather, they were colonial instruments of "quasi-urbanization," designed to break anti-colonial resistance in both the remote, difficult to control rural and the densely populated, better educated (and thus perceived as more likely to rebel) urban (Nolan 2018a: 9). This process of quasi-urbanization conferred a quasi-citizenship upon the villagized, and "might be seen … as symptomatic – and indeed even embryonic – of much more pervasive strategies through which the urban and rural are woven into a single territorial fabric" in today's neocolonial world (Nolan 2018b: 465).[3] Instead of revaluating the village against the city, therefore, McLuhan endorses a city-like village or village-like city that maximizes the capitalist-colonialist dispossession of its inhabitants.

To McLuhan's global village, Spivak opposes the reality of the rural in an age of intensified globalization. One side of this reality is constituted by the "spectralization of the rural" – the "conversion of 'the rural' into a database for pharmaceutical dumping, chemical fertilizers, patenting of indigenous knowledge, big dam building and the like" that has turned the rural into "the forgotten front of globalization for which the urban is an instrument" (Spivak 2003: 92–93). The quotation marks Spivak places around "the rural" signal another instance

2 Elsewhere, Nolan points out how villagization in 1950s Kenya was preceded by and modeled on the "new villages" (*kampung baru*'s) in 1940s Malaya designed to counter the Malayan Communist Party's anti-colonial mobilization of rural people, as well as on the "New Deal agricultural settlement camps in the western United States and related agricultural planning schemes undertaken by the Tennessee Valley Authority" of the 1930s (2018b: 450–451).

3 This territorial fabric is approached through the concept of the hinterland in Gupta et al.'s *Planetary Hinterlands: Extraction, Abandonment and Care*.

of its homogenization, this time effected by late capitalist globalization as "an imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere" – a system of financialization tending to abstraction and to the virtual (2003: 72). As Spivak insists, "this spectral rural is not the empiricity of green fields and vials of blood; it has, in the manner of catachreses, no literary referent" (2012: 215).[4] The rural is spectralized in the double sense of being capitalized while having this process remain largely invisible due to the difficulty of imagining the rural as offering anything else than a "natural way of life." Of course, on the ground in the rural, the effects of its capitalization do manifest, as, for example, chemical fertilizers and monoculture deplete the soil and big dams are erected, displacing communities and destroying ecosystems.

It is from this material rural ground that Spivak sees the other side of the reality of the globalized rural emerging: those "movements for ecological, environmental, and reproductive justice" in which "the rural-local directly confronts the global, and the 'village' is a concept- metaphor contaminated by the empirical" (1998: 343). Through these movements, the rural asserts itself as harboring "the epistemes or mind-sets foreclosed by the capitalist/socialist [urbanist] teleology, defective for capitalism" in the form of "more or less habitable ruins" that might enable "an effortful project of developing something de-formed and de-constituted, fragmented into disjointed joining, through a species of prayer to be haunted" (Spivak 2012: 201).

Two points are important here. First, although Spivak associates the epistemes and mind-sets upon which counter-globalization movements might be built with rural and indigenous practices, her reference to "more or less habitable ruins" emphasizes that these epistemes and mind-sets have not survived intact. In addition, they have not remained unaffected by capitalism/socialism, cannot be comfortably dwelled in by everyone, and should not be romanticized. The warning against romanticization is fleshed out in *Death of a Discipline*, where Spivak performs a prayer to be haunted by reading the Cuban revolutionary and writer José Martí's "ruralist left-humanism" against the grain for a way to challenge globalization's spectralization of the rural (92). In doing so, the greatest difficulty is resisting "the temptation to 'ruralism'" (Spivak 2003: 92). Ruralism's "primitivist romanticization of the rural" appears to counter capitalism and (neo)colonialism by placing the rural outside of (in space) and before (in time) these intertwined systems (Spivak 2003: 93). However, as Williams so forcefully shows in *The Country & the City* and

4 The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines catachresis as "improper use of words; application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor." Both the "global village" and "villagization" are catachrestic.

Nolan's rereading of McLuhan also stresses, this romanticized dislocation or alienation of the rural from capitalist and colonialist spatiotemporal constellations is precisely how such hegemonic systems of power retain their hold on the urban and rural alike, within and across national borders. While ruralism is "quite in the grain of Martí's text" and has a certain allure, Martí's metaphors (Nature, Earth, woman, land) allow his work to be read, instead, as proposing something different:

> The country here is not simply the prenational as opposed to the national. It is also the *hylè* or mass of the national … that becomes continuous with the exchange with the Earth. The Earth is a paranational image that can substitute for international and can perhaps provide, today, a displaced site for the imagination of planetarity. (Spivak 2003: 95, emphasis in original)

Planetarity is what the Earth in Martí points to for Spivak: "The globe is on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank. No one lives there; and we think that we can aim to control globality. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, indeed are it" (2012: 338). If the globe is a figure that capitalism wants to be taken as self-evident, the planetary, more readily imagined from the rural than from the urban, can interrupt and denaturalize it. Thus, while Spivak, in one of the epigraphs to this introduction, maintains that globalization messes with – exploits, violates – "the bones of the rural/indigenous," she considers these same bones (or the fragments and dust remaining of them) capable of disrupting globalization.[5]

The second important point is that Spivak associates counter-globalization movements with a village that is distanced from the global village as it is commonly understood by its empirical contamination without ceasing to be to some degree an imaginative construct – a "concept-metaphor." The global village is contrasted with more grounded rurals that nonetheless manifest as what Arjun Appadurai calls *imagined worlds*. For Appadurai, electronic mediascapes do not, like McLuhan's global village, turn "the public sphere from a site of discourse into a site of media reception" where "to participate is to give

5 Ramesh Srinivasan's *Whose Global Village? Rethinking How Technology Shapes Our World* critiques McLuhan's global village from an information studies perspective, arguing that it "assumes homogeneity instead of respecting plurality" (6). In aiming "to reimagine the concept of the 'global village' so that technologies can support a range of practices, visions, priorities and belief systems of indigenous and non-Western cultures around the world," he, like Spivak, identifies the rural/indigenous as able to renegotiate its forms and effects (Srinivasan 6).

oneself over to prevailing *programs*" (Nolan 2018a: 24, emphasis in original). Rather, they present "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" that provide audiences with "a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives"; these scripts "can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live" and which allow them to imagine and move towards living otherwise (Appadurai 1996: 35–36). Both Spivak and Appadurai view metaphors as more than mere figures; they encapsulate perspectives on the world that can have real effects, even when they (appear to) lack empirical grounding. If, for example, the rural is related to globalization primarily through the metaphor of the global village, taken, "in popular usage," as "suggesting a perpetual peace enabled by electronic communications" (Nolan 2018a: 9), exposing and addressing the violence exerted by globalization's spectralization of the rural becomes more difficult.[6]

This volume foregrounds the globalized rural as always in part imagined – with its imagination shaped, to various degrees, by its materialities and vice versa, in a mutually constitutive relationship. Most of the contributors attended a conference held in Amsterdam in August 2022 in the context of the "Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World" project funded by the European Research Council (2018–2024).[7] Coming from the humanities, the social sciences, and the art world, these contributors explore the crucial role various social, political, economic, and cultural imaginations play in determining what aspects of contemporary rural life, as deeply globalized, do and do not become visible. In addition, they ask how this affects the way people, inside and outside the rural, make sense of the rural, shape it materially, mobilize it politically, and conceive of their own relation to it.

Across the globe, rural dissatisfaction and unrest are on the rise as a result of the spectralization processes highlighted by Spivak, but also land disputes, rural depopulation, reductions in rural services, and declines in rural industries, leading more and more rural communities to be conceived of as – and to

6 If the "global village" has a material association it is Global Village Dubai, a vast entertainment complex opened in 1997 where visitors can see replicas of global landmarks, rural and urban, in Mini World. A Google search for "global village" yields Global Village Dubai's website (https://www.globalvillage.ae/en/) as the first result and Wikipedia's entry on McLuhan's metaphor (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_village) as the second.

7 Core project members: Esther Peeren (PI), Emily Ng (postdoc), Hanneke Stuit (postdoc), Anke Bosma (PhD), Lélia Tavakoli Farsooni (PhD), and Tjalling Valdés-Olmos (PhD). Affiliated project members: Shao Shao (PhD), Chen Zhou (PhD), and Lingli Ren (PhD). See: https://www.ruralimaginations.com/. Research assistants: Zaza de Ridder, Calvin Duggan, Ayumi Filippone, and Erick Fowler.

feel as if they are being – "left behind" (Hadi; Biao; Gould; Wuthnow).[8] Some of these left-behind communities are making themselves heard in protests, elections, and referendums, sometimes as part of counter-globalization movements in the planetary mode delineated by Spivak, and sometimes supporting nationalist-populist agendas.[9] We are aware that this volume skews towards geographic Wests and Norths, and acknowledge the need to more robustly and structurally support and (comparatively) engage critical work in the conceptualization of imagined ruralities across different Souths and Easts. Nonetheless, many of the contributions here include resistant imaginaries and rural subjectivities that result from a collective but always differential experience of oppression under the forces of globalization. Hence, in speaking to the urgent coalitional potential of Spivak's *planetary* counter-globalization movements and their epistemologies, we stress the Global South as referring to a "deterritorialized geography of capitalism's externalities and means to account for subjugated peoples within the borders of" contemporary imperial blocks, "such that there are economic Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South" (Mahler n. pag.).

Spivak not only warns that a rural-derived planetarity should not indulge in the aforementioned romanticizing and homogenizing ruralism that often underpins nationalist-populist narratives on the right and left. She also insists that such a planetarity should not rely on "an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided 'natural' space rather than a divided political space" (Spivak 2003: 72). Heeding this warning is particularly important given the continued dominance, across social and cultural realms, of genres like the idyll and pastoral, which play a vital role in determining what does and does not become visible of disparately globalized rurals. Emerging from Europe but now globalized in literature and other art forms, as well as in the imagined worlds of the social realm, these genres associate an undifferentiated rural with an escape from globalization's pressures and pollution. They do so in space (with

8 In the wake of 9/11, Venezuelan diplomat and international relations scholar Alfredo Toro Hardy recast Samuel P. Huntington's "clash of civilizations" as a "clash of villages" that sees the "global village" challenged by the "small village" in all parts of the world (29). In Hardy's view, the small village is legitimately agitated by the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, but misguided in adhering to fixed notions of cultural identity in response.

9 For Spivak, "fundamentalist nationalism arises in the loosened hyphen between nation and state as the latter is mortgaged further and further by the forces of financialization" (1998: 330). To counter this trend, she proposes "another way of conjuring with nationalism, in the name not of the globe, but of a global girdling" (1998: 330). This "global girdling" (referring to tree-barking by which the growth of a tree can be stopped) is tied to the interruption of globalization by rural/indigenous epistemes and mindsets.

the rural conceived as offering seclusion and a renewed connection to nature) and in time (with the rural conceived as timeless and unchanging). Across their historical and present incarnations (including those positioning the rural more negatively as backwards), the idyll and pastoral are characterized by a "mystification" of rural activities that works to naturalize and legitimate particular, usually conservative, social relations, notably patriarchal, capitalist, and (neo)colonial ones (Short 144). Challenging such mystification as well as the political, economic, social, and cultural forces driving it is important, both with regard to these dominant rural genres and with regard to McLuhan's global village. Nevertheless, as Spivak suggests and as this volume underscores, this should not lead to the exchange of one mystification for another.

2 Shifting Rural Attachments

That the rural idyll has been exposed many times over as a "cultural fantasy" has not stopped it from being turned into "a tangible reality" affecting the material shaping of the rural and the lives of both those it accommodates and "those whose circumstances do not allow them to fit within the received and constantly reproduced ideas of the idyll" (Short 144). This is where the importance of the affective dimension of rural imaginations comes into view. What causes so many people across the world, including some of those who do not have a place in the rural idyll, to continue to feel emotionally invested in the rural as a refuge from globalization? And might this investment explain why they so fervently resist alternative imaginations, especially those acknowledging the rural's implication in (neo)colonialism and climate change? Such a line of questioning seems vital to us for understanding why certain rural materialities and actors, not least non-human ones, remain unseen and unheard. There is, moreover, a particular urgency to ask how the unseen and unheard can be made part of new, less exclusionary, more planetary rural imaginations that, instead of obfuscating rural globalization, highlight and counter it.

The affective dimension of rural imaginations is central to Williams's *The Country & the City*, where he insists that "what is knowable is not only a function of objects, of what is there to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of observers – of *what is desired and what needs to be known*" (2011: 165, emphasis added).[10] While changes in "what is there to be known" on the ground may

10 The argument presented here about Williams and Bakhtin also appears, in condensed form, in Emily Ng and Esther Peeren's forthcoming "Scenes of Extraction: Mediating Rurality, Wilderness, and Hinterland in Dutch and Chinese Film."

shift the desires and needs involved, disjunctions arise as "certain images and associations persist" through these changes (Williams 2011: 1–2).[11] The literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin similarly argues that some artistic genres (like the idyll) – conceptualized as time-space configurations or *chronotopes* – linger long after they cease to articulate with the social actualities from which they sprung, and do so precisely as affective structures:

> In literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values. Abstract thought can, of course, think time and space as separate entities and conceive them as things apart from the emotions and values that attach to them. But *living* artistic perception … makes no such divisions and permits no such segmentation. (243, emphasis in original)

"*Living* artistic perception" can be extended to "living social perception" as, ultimately, "every entry into the sphere of meaning," even when abstract thought is at stake, "is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope" (Bakhtin 258).[12]

Williams and Bakhtin recognize the difficulty of apprehending how feelings, emotions, and values shape social actualities in literature and in life, especially from within a chronotope or structure of feeling taken as unmediated reality. On the final page of *The Country & the City*, Williams marks the effort involved:

> I moved from country to city, and now live and work in both. I learned, in many forms, the shapes of this history, its ideas and its images, …. This left, in my mind, every kind of question, and intricacy, and I had slowly

11 Such persistence is facilitated by a "structure of feeling," initially emergent, becoming "formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations" (Williams 1977: 132).

12 Both Williams and Spivak contest the abstract conceptions of the rural characteristic of global capitalism-colonialism. For Williams, "The land, for its fertility or for its ore, is in both [farming and mining] abstractly seen. It is used in an enterprise which overrides, for the time being, all other consideration" (2011: 293). Spivak, quoting Paul de Man, advocates for interruptive activism from below that relies on an understanding of irony "as 'the permanent parabasis of an allegory (of globalization) … the systemic undoing, in other words, of the abstract'" (2013: 214). Such abstraction, however, is, as Williams notes, not without affective appeal, even for those critical of global capitalism-colonialism: "We call the technical changes improvement and progress, welcome some of their effects and deplore others, and can feel either numbed or divided; a state of mind in which, again and again, the most abstract and illusory ideas of a natural rural way of life tempt or at least charm us" (2011: 293).

> to retrace the experience, in myself and in the record, as a way of gaining the present and the future through a different understanding of the shaping and fascinating past. (2011: 306)

Williams's unlearning of the structure of feeling within which the country is felt as naturally and universally peaceful, innocent, and virtuous but also backwards, ignorant, and limited, proceeds through a reconsideration of the pastoral as evolving from a genre that, in ancient times, was "not yet abstracted from the whole of a working country life" and that, in English literature, first appeared in an openly "theatrical and romantic" courtly form, into an "idealisation of actual English country life and its social and economic relations" (2011: 17, 20, 26). The latter allowed the broad appeal of the idea of "the simple plenty of the countryside: the metaphorical but also the actual retreat" to be strategically appropriated by the land-owning class as part of "a self-consciously rural mode of display" uncontaminated by the empirical, as Spivak might say (Williams 2011: 23, 282). This mode of display served to consolidate, legitimate, and naturalize capitalist and (neo)colonialist expansion on a national and global scale, rendering "a huge rural proletariat, in the distant lands" and in the English countryside not only invisible but itself affectively invested in the pastoral fantasy (Williams 2011: 282).[13]

Bakhtin marks out the chronotope of the idyll as a main driver of Western literary history, emphasizing how its many forms are all grounded in "the special relationship that time has to space in the idyll: an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home" (225). The idyll's "organic fastening-down" in distinctly rural environments is endorsed in the family novel and in "provincial forms" that make a "doomed attempt to preserve the dying remnants of little patriarchal (provincial) worlds" (Bakhtin 231). But this fastening-down is also critiqued, for example in the work of Goethe, where "it is [deemed] necessary to find a new relationship to nature, not to the little nature of one's own corner of the world but to the big nature of the great world, to all the phenomena of the solar system, to the wealth excavated from the earth's core, to a variety of geographical locations and continents" (Bakhtin 234). What remains illegible even in such a critical form of the idyll is what Williams emphasizes, namely that

13 Underscoring the importance of pastoral aesthetics for the establishment of pastoral power in the Foucauldian sense, Nolan notes how "a neo-pastoralism helped render 'natural' the violent transformations wrought by agricultural reform" under the Swynnerton plan in 1950s Kenya (2018a: 38).

"the little nature of one's own corner of the world" cannot in fact be opposed to the "big nature of the great world" as if it remains safely separate from it. This "little nature" has to be seen as deeply – and from the very beginning – implicated in globalization and its destructive relationship to the earth.

Lauren Berlant associates the tendency to hold on to familiar genres without grounding in social reality with the affective state of "cruel optimism," arising "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011: 1). Optimism involves the revisiting of a "scene of fantasy" like the idealized rurals offered up by the pastoral and idyll in the expectation that "*this* time, nearness to this thing will help you or the world to become different in just the right way" (Berlant 2011: 2, emphasis in original). Such optimism turns cruel when "the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation" (Berlant 2011: 2). In the relation to the rural, cruel optimism manifested, for example, when, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many people saw the rural as a refuge, even though the virus also struck there, with more limited treatment options.

What makes cruel optimism so difficult to dispel is that taking away the cruelty by exposing why what is desired is actually harmful also means taking away the optimism. As Sara Ahmed clarifies, affect, as "a form of cultural politics or world making" that involves the development, within affective economies, of shared orientations towards something (like the rural), can harden into subjects being "*invested* in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of living death" (12, emphasis in original). Many will go to extreme lengths to avoid experiencing this living death, not only accepting harm to themselves, but also being willing to harm those human and non-human others they feel are keeping their affective investment from paying off. In the context of idealized rurals, this takes the form of seeking to rid the rural of everything and everyone not deemed to belong in the "safe little world" they desire it to be (Peeren 64).

While it is vital to stress the degree to which established, normative affective structures may be resistant to change, it is equally vital to recognize that affect, precisely because it is never completely fixed, may be a resource under conditions of dispossession. Nolan finishes her book by noting that the "global village" is a "complex figure" offering a "depoliticized life" that is not quite Giorgio Agamben's "bare life," but "perfectly coterminous with sensual pleasures, with material nourishment, and with social-political investment in an (impoverished) public sphere" (2018a: 54). Kathleen Stewart, who sees people's laborious attunement to hegemonic affective atmospheres as "produc[ing] hard-won attachments that can be hard to get out of once you're in," also evokes the possibility of a new affective terrain suddenly "snap[ping] into form

like a force of nature, providing comic relief or a horrifying preview" (451). The example she gives notably involves rural peace being disrupted by "teenage trouble" hitting like "a small quake" (Stewart 451). In addition, Stewart insists that, besides institutionalized structures of feeling, there are always other, more intimate affective atmospheres to attune to – "little worlds that some people immerse themselves in, or dip in and out of, or make fun of, or build a light and temporary link to before they move on to something else" (452).

Ahmed, finally, emphasizes that the emotions stuck to particular subjects or objects in affective economies "can get unstuck" since emotions are not properties of a subject or object and "our investments move as we move" (16, 172). This can be a conscious process in "struggles against injustice" that

> are about how we are moved by feelings into a different relation to the norms we wish to contest, or the wounds we wish to heal. Moving here is not about "moving on", or about "using" emotions to move away, but moving and being moved as a form of labour or work, which opens up different kinds of attachments to others, in part through the recognition of this work *as* work. (Ahmed 201, emphasis in original)

The chapters in this volume that engage the horrors and anxieties of the anti-idyll underscore the hard work required to move us into different relations with rurality from those encouraged by the idyll and pastoral. In the wake of David Bell's seminal reading of 1970s and 80s US and UK horror films as speaking to and against the traditional idyll, it has been argued that "anti-idyllic invocations of racialized, sexualized, and classed rurality" – in horror and other genres – "[can] perform an affective management of the countryside as a space of degenerate, rather than nostalgic, backwardness" (Valdés-Olmos 29). Conversely, as certain chapters in this volume show, anti-idylls "can also negotiate a more complex dynamic between a validation of liberal and progressive urban life, and the notion that wealthier, more cosmopolitan and urbanized subjects are no longer in touch with the rustic (i.e. more traditionally normative) rural modes of living" (Valdés-Olmos 29). Thus, while anti-idyllic registers can work to shift one's attachment to the rural, they also often fail to do the work of opening up radically different attachments, not least because they tend to reinforce the idea that only some bodies can comfortably inhabit the rural. One of the central aims of this book is thus to recognize and investigate how different rural imaginations remain ambivalent in the affective attachments they facilitate.

The contributions in Part 1 provide various perspectives on how the rural is being grappled with today, in its intertwined realities and imaginations,

across disciplines and academic and artistic practices. Part 2 explores to what extent rural imaginations from different parts of the world and in different media have been able to incorporate the profound impact of globalization – understood as imbricated in the ongoing, often violent un- and enfolding of colonialism and capitalism – on the rural. Part 3 examines the persistence of romanticizing imaginations of the rural that position it as an escape from globalization, as well as attempts at deromanticization aimed at unsticking the rural from, among others, notions of whiteness, rugged masculinity, heteronormativity, and anthropocentrism. Part 4, finally, focuses on the way farming, as a practice persistently placed at the center of rural life, is being reframed, both on actual farms and in cultural imaginations, in response to the increasingly palpable threat of global environmental collapse.

3 Part 1: Grappling with the Globalized Rural across Disciplines

In 2006, *The Handbook of Rural Studies* appeared, celebrating the post-1970s "upsurge in rural theorization and conceptualization"; the editors' main aim was to "enhance the interdisciplinary 'stock' of [rural research's] creative theoretical and empirical endeavours," and among these endeavors they singled out "engagements both with critical political economy and the 'cultural turn' in social sciences" (Cloke et al. xi). Yet, despite the roots of the cultural turn in the humanities and the *Handbook*'s division into sections on "cultural representation, nature, sustainability, new economies, power, new consumerism, identity and exclusion" – topics also of deep concern to humanities scholars – the interdisciplinary scope of the *Handbook* did not extend beyond "wider social science debates" (Cloke et al. xii). The more recent *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies*, from 2016, similarly defines rural studies as an "interdisciplinary endeavour," while containing almost no work by humanities scholars (Shucksmith and Brown 1).

In the humanities, urban studies has been firmly embraced and enshrined under the broad label of "urban humanities" (Cascardi and Dear; Giamarino et al.; Cuff et al.) and narrower ones like "literary urban studies" (Finch). Rural studies, in contrast, has not established as widespread and visible a foothold, even though the term "rural humanities" already appears in a 1979 handbook on the humanities in Minnesota as part of the description of the American Farm Project, led by Bill Schaeffer at Southwest State University and co-funded by the National Farmers Union and the National Endowment for the Humanities (LeBarron 20). According to the NEH's *Humanities* journal, the project aimed "to bring the humanities to a non-traditional, farm audience"

and to apply historiographic and interpretive approaches to both the lived experience and artistic representation of farming in order to help "farmers to 'gain a deeper awareness of their heritage and themselves as rural people'" (Deegan 12). A similar undertaking – albeit conceiving of the rural as comprising more than farming – is underway at Cornell University; the four-year Rural Humanities Initiative, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, "uses the tools of the humanities to critically approach, learn from, make visible, and support the realities of rural America, particularly in Central-Western New York: its histories, cultures, challenges, and futures."[14] These projects resonate with Paul Cloke's description of the cultural turn in rural studies in that they involve "the use of imaginative texts to investigate representations of rurality" and, in the case of the Rural Humanities Initiative, emphasize "the increasing importance of discursive understandings of rural aesthetics and of rural poetics" (23).

While "rural humanities" has not yet acceded to the status of a widely recognized example of the "hybrid humanities" (Cascardi and Dear 6), there has long been an interest in the rural within several humanities disciplines, notably history – where rural history is an established sub-field (Burchardt; Swierenga) – and (especially English) literary studies, with Williams's *The Country & the City* recognized as a ground-breaking work. Calls for the establishment of new fields like "rural cultural studies" (Carter et al.) and, most recently, "rural media studies" (Hobbis et al.) have also sounded in response to the privileging of research on urban culture and media. Whether these calls will be successful remains to be seen. What we argue for in this volume is less a multiplication of rural-focused fields within established disciplines than a move towards more broadly interdisciplinary research about differentially globalized ruralities that brings into dialogue scholars from the humanities and social sciences, as well as artists and activists.

Our exploration of the rural as differentially globalized takes up rural geographer Michael Woods's concepts of the "global countryside" as the "rural counterpoint to the global city" (2007: 491) and "planetary rural geographies" as the counterpoint to the influential thesis of planetary urbanization, which threatens to erase rural specificity (Wang et al.). Notably, when first outlining the "global countryside" in 2007, Woods associated it with ten characteristics, each supported by empirical research in rural areas across the world, while nevertheless maintaining that the global countryside was still only a "hypothetical space" (486). This may be seen to underscore the difficulty, even in

14 See: https://rural.as.cornell.edu/.

the face of material evidence, of recognizing the rural as a "front of globalization" (to reinvoke Spivak), not just in the 2000s but also much earlier on, as Nolan and Williams insist. Woods has since explored the global countryside and planetary rural geographies as actualities to be understood through the assemblage approach. While attuned to the damage globalization processes can do to rural communities and environments, assemblage thinking stresses the range of possible effects, positive and negative, seen as co-determined by these communities and environments (Jones et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2023). Non-human actors are assigned a prominent role in co-constituting the global rural assemblage "because of the extent to which the distinctiveness of rural localities is represented through or attributed to non-human elements" (Woods 2007: 498). Here, the importance of rural imaginations again comes to the fore: whereas the non-human is equally present in the urban in a material sense, it has less influence on urban than on rural place constitution because it is not generally perceived as a primary component of what makes the urban urban.

In Woods's contribution to this volume, which opens Part 1, he argues that the cultural turn in rural studies may, in some instances, have sidelined rural materialities too radically. To redress the balance, he draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Manuel DeLanda, to conceive of the rural as an assemblage with shifting components to which changing meanings are given through coding, decoding, and recoding (or de- and reterritorialization). In this way, both the rural's material and discursive or expressive dimensions – as well as the ongoing interaction between them – can be accounted for. Taking Trepassey in Newfoundland, Canada, as a case study, Woods shows how it evolved, under the influence of particular globalization processes, from a small subsistence fishing outport to an expanding community centered on an international fish processing plant, only to become, after depleted fish stocks caused the plant to close, a shrinking community having to reinvent itself. By looking at the town's geographies and infrastructures, as well as at photographs, novels, songs, and poems reflecting (on) its history, present, and possible futures, Woods shows that even though Trepassey is in the process of being recoded as a tourist destination, expressively "the old fishing assemblage" remains present and continues to influence (without fully determining) the stories residents tell about themselves and their surroundings as belonging to the rural.

Where Woods turns to imaginative art forms to enhance his understanding of the rural as material and experienced, literary and film theorist Peter Hitchcock turns to rural materialities – specifically that of land – to better grasp the rural as imagined in postcolonial literature. The postcolonial pastoral is seen to challenge "the capitalist logic of land grabbing and extraction" not through a return to idealized pre-colonial or pre-capitalist worlds, but by

"returning to land in its economic figurations," including in the form of ground rent, as theorized by Karl Marx and Henri Lefebvre. This again underlines the interdependence of the material and the imaginary in making (up) the rural. Relating the pastoral as literary form to pastoralist practices, Hitchcock contends, allows it to comprise "living land," where land exceeds the economic to become a "space of transition," an imagined world akin to Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's *Las fronteras* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Where the traditional pastoral "makes land transparent to itself," preventing consideration of its political economy, the postcolonial pastoral Hitchcock traces in Osonye Tess Onwueme's *Tell It to Women* (1997) and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) exposes and challenges this political economy by speaking land in multiple voices and acknowledging the difficulty of escaping the subjectivation effected by land (and landlessness), which extends beyond the beginnings of capitalism and beyond landownership. Only by taking into account land's material(ist) grounds, Hitchcock suggests, can a genre like the pastoral convey the "conflicted imaginary of rural struggle" without naively seeking to return to lands that never were.

The third contribution in Part 1, by human environmental geographer Rowan Jaines, approaches the entanglement of the material and the imagined in the formation of rural landscapes by way of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's poetic take on the rural conceives of it as throwing up, in flashes, dialectical images revealing the material pasts – of land and labor exploitation – covered over by capitalism's *phantasie* of controlling nature. Looking at the Fens in Eastern England, Jaines links the monocultural landscape produced by its drainage, enclosure, and technologization to its status as a "democracy desert" and bastion of state landownership. At the same time, she points out that, while "the *phantasie* of an abundantly productive arable landscape" requires the disavowal of the failures that keep it from full realization, these failures, like the agricultural laborers elided from the historical record, retain a spectral presence. Apprehending these presences becomes possible, Jaines argues, when the Fens are conceived as ekphrastic – a term taken from literary studies, where it refers to "the literary representation of visual art" in a manner capable of questioning representation itself and, on the basis of ekphrasis' etymological meanings of "speaking out" or "telling in full," countering the monological (Heffernan 297, 302). Paying attention to the Benjaminian "moments of danger" in which the Fen landscape tries to tell its story in full allows the *phantasie* of its "natural" and endless productivity to be exposed as fantastical. Crucially, for Jaines, such paying attention requires both a poetic sensibility and a firm grasp on a particular rural area's past and present material and socio-economic relations.

Cultural sociologists Pavel Pospěch, Ondřej Klíma, and Barbora Hubatková examine the rise, in the Czech Republic, of an anti-urbanism that has taken up the image of "the Prague Café" as a "reference to the polluted, profane center from the sacralized periphery." Promoted by populist politicians like ex-President Miloš Zeman and circulating as a widely recognized media discourse, the Prague Café can be linked to the "revenge of the periphery" as an increasingly powerful socio-political force, most notably in Europe and the US. Without denying that rural frustrations about having been "left behind" have material grounds, the authors place the Prague Café within a long-standing cultural imagination of urban elites as distanced from the "real life" – characterized by "real" work, knowledge, and language – that rural folk, strongly associated with authenticity (Pospěch et al.), are taken to exemplify. On the basis of a media analysis, it is underlined how disparaging the "unreal lives" of those imagined as frequenting the Prague Café encourages political and societal polarization, and deepens the rural-urban divide.

Lee-Ann Sutherland, Thoroddur Bjarnason, Menelaos Gkartzios, and Esther Peeren shift the focus from how to study the rural as material and imagined to the material circumstances and imaginations of those doing the studying. During the Covid pandemic, they developed what they call the #RuralGazes methodology, designed to make visible how, in addition to being influenced by different theoretical and methodological approaches, scholars' accounts of the rural (in terms of what is highlighted and what overlooked) are also affected by their personal, cultural, and academic positionalities. The concept of the gaze, referring to "a socially (over)determined way of seeing that is collective and normative," explains how certain ways of seeing become dominant and determinate in particular contexts, including academic ones. Over time, gazes become naturalized, making it difficult to look otherwise or to see where the blind spots are, but strategies like looking in stages, focusing on details, and looking with others can deterritorialize the gaze. The authors adopt the strategy of looking with others in a collaborative autoethnography using photo elicitation. By analyzing their (affective) responses to rural-related photographs – first with hashtags (descriptive, personal, political, and academic) and then in an extended discussion – they show how their different positionalities lead them to variously affirm or challenge the societal and academic gazes seeking to direct how the rural is seen.

The final contribution to Part 1, an illustrated essay by Wapke Feenstra, continues to reflect on questions of positionality and the gaze, but does so from an artistic perspective. Since 2003, Feenstra, who grew up in the Dutch countryside, has worked as part of the Myvillages artist collective to counter the contemporary art world's disregard for the rural. If it came into view at all, it tended

to appear through "the distancing, objectifying gaze of landscape painting" – a distinctly urban, patriarchal, and colonizing way of seeing. In the art projects described by Feenstra, she seeks to subvert this gaze by exploring, in performative and relational ways, how the rural is looked at – and valued – by those who live or have lived there, and how rural mindsets travel as a result of national and transnational migration. The activation of "rural undercurrents" – comprising remnants of rural pasts in the urban, but also rural ways of seeing and knowing marginalized by urban-centered cultures – is accomplished through co-creative practices that include drawing, muraling, eating, reading, singing, walking, picnicking, soil sampling, and farming with local people. These participatory practices foster a "web of interaction" that enables old rural landmarks – material and immaterial – to be recovered and new ones to be created.

With respect to the goals of this volume, the "My" in Myvillages underlines the importance of asking from what perspective the rural is being approached, where that perspective is situated, and what other perspectives it occludes. "Villages," in turn, stresses the pluriversality of the rural and the need, in academic research and art, for trans-local approaches capable of grasping how the rural is globalized in differential ways that nonetheless converge to create a material-imagined "global countryside."

4 Part 2: Rereading Globalized Ruralities

The multi-scalar and temporal movements, expansions, and contractions of the globalized rurals that make up the "global countryside" are tackled in Part 2, in which various contributors reread rural imaginations in a way that attends to the intimate, collective, and always political ways in which these imaginations respond to the violent effects of the *longue durée* of globalization. This mode of rereading is particularly resonant with the one proposed by Williams in *The Country & The City*. According to Williams, although the rural-urban binary performs as a naturalized, a priori, onto-epistemological given, it is, in fact, an affective-discursive *mattering* that "has many meanings; in feeling and activity; in region and time" (2011: 4). Only by laying bare these multiple, changing meanings does it become possible to see what functions the rural (as material-imagined) has fulfilled in the history of global capitalism-colonialism, including in the form of the global village, with which we began this introduction. In Williams's words:

> if we do not see these processes [of change], or see them only incidentally, we fall back on modes of thought which seem able to create the

> permanence without the history. We may find emotional or intellectual satisfaction in this, but we have then dealt with only half the problem, for in all such major interpretations it is *the co-existence of persistence and change* which is really striking and interesting, and which we have to account for without reducing either fact to a form of the other. Or, to put it more theoretically, we have to be able to explain, *in related terms*, both the persistence and historicity of concepts. (2011: 289, emphases added)

This part takes up *The Country & The City*'s theoretical-methodological emphasis on recognizing rural imaginations as holding together the long and slow time and extensive space of capitalism and colonialism with the more fickle, messy, changeable times and narrower spaces of specific locales in the past and present. The chapters *reread* the stories told about different rural geographies and communities, and assert that such stories make visible and invisible, felt and unfelt, the scales and times of globalization as it affects the rural. Put differently, this section asks how the differential imaginations of globalized rurals, and – to invoke Spivak once again – a planetary rereading of them, might help to unravel the dominant and persistent chronotopes of rurality. Such unraveling happens in part by considering the planetary rural as multi-scalar and polyrhythmic, and as comprising the non-human and the vertical, seeing and analyzing "connections not only across the Earth's surface, but into the atmosphere and subterraneanly" or subaquatically (Wang et al. 2023: 2).

The contributors to this section think along with the non-human (dust, cyborgs, monsters, climates, plastic, sponges, crops) and the dehumanized (Indigenous subjects, Black subjects, indentured and indebted subjects, disabled subjects, feminized subjects, AI subjects). They also traverse and reorient the temporal scales of past-present-future, and understand the material and political impacts of rural imaginations across surfaces and between the atmosphere and the subterranean: from Nevadan lithium mines to idyllic space stations, from the deep reaches of the Aegean sea and the plastic seas of Southern Spain, from Regent's Park to dystopian Californian grub farms, from the Dutch capital of productivist farming to rural Argentinean bar-stores, and from a gentrified Cornish town to the indigenized state of Jharkhand.

The chapters here – to different extents – assert that hegemonic stories of globalization and rurality perform as "foundational regimes of truth" (Wynter 119) that are wrapped up in longstanding colonial, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist epistemes of extraction, domination, mastery, and progress. But a planetary reading of the globalized rural, as Wang et al. also assert, allows the rural to appear variously as a space that both contributes to and suffers from environmental crisis; a space of conflict – rural-urban, intra-rural, and

national-regional-global – that also has important affective dimensions; and a space where practices and imaginations emerge in resistance to the violence of globalization. The rural – as distinct from the urban in material terms and as an imagined world – is thus seen to persist as a variegated site fulfilling specific functions, on the one hand in advancing globalization and, on the other, in potentially fostering planetarity.

The first two contributions to this section – by Tjalling Valdés-Olmos and Josh Weeks – emphasize the crucial role of wilderness and frontier imaginations to accentuate how the rural-urban binary needs to be understood within a Eurocentric colonial-capitalist teleology of spatialization. Valdés-Olmos, a cultural analyst and historian, turns his scope to the likes of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Christopher Nolan's SF film *Interstellar,* and the hinterland geographies of the US West to investigate the affective labor – in particular, the sense of historicity – the western frontier rural, the farmstead, and the renegade frontiersman perform in tending to contemporary eco-anxieties associated with the limits of capitalist futurity and the realities of climate change. Analyzing *Interstellar*, he highlights the structural and historical occlusions produced by the film's reiteration of the rural US West within the racialized and exceptionalist affective order of settler triumph and nostalgia that characterizes the cinematic archive of the western genre and the 1930s social realist photographic archive of the US Farm Security Administration (FSA). Further analyzing the narrative resolution of the film, Valdés-Olmos argues that its supposed assuaging of contemporary eco-anxieties through these generic invocations of the rural US West is rather the assuagement of a latent settler concern over the loss of property, hetero-reproductivity, and progress. He argues, thus, that there is an urgent need to better recognize and more radically interrupt the imaginative and affective sliding of settler anxiety into eco-anxiety that contemporary and genre-specific reiterations of US western rurality facilitate.

Weeks, a literary scholar, follows with a contribution that thinks about the (trans)formative function of the Argentinian *gaucho* (frontiersman and cowboy) in moments where the long history of globalization impedes the promises of a settler-neoliberal nation-state. He does this through a comparative reading of two short stories that scale the slowly shifting infrastructures of globalization across two distinct moments in Argentinian history: the rapid urbanization and rural migration that intersected with the popular rise of Peronism in the 1940s, and the decades of neoliberal and capitalist violence culminating in the global economic recession of the early 2000s. In Jorge Luis Borges's "The South," from 1953, the focus is on how the figure of the gaucho was alienated from its indigenous history and materiality in order to be used to strengthen an emergent nationalist history. While the story complicates

this politicization of the gaucho, Weeks shows how it also attempts to give the gaucho an "anti-Peronist makeover" that caters to the cosmopolitan anxieties of Buenos Aires' elites over the influx of non-white rural working-class populations. Thus, Weeks shows, the story reflects a political and intellectual "culture in which indigeneity [remains] perceived as a threat, and in which this threat was transposed onto the working class." In Roberto Bolaño's 2003 "The Insufferable Gaucho," Weeks identifies a parody of the settler colonial tropes of the gaucho and the *pampa* with more transformative potential. Here, the promise of the gaucho as facilitating a legible and stable normativity in the face of global sociopolitical upheaval is more critically deconstructed through a satirical representation of "the white, upper-middle-class citizen who sees financial crisis and the waning of masculinity as two sides of the same coin." Through his comparative reading of the two stories, Weeks suggests that in order to imagine ways out of globalization's violence, past and present, looking back to settler genres of rurality will not do.

Architect Ben Stringer speaks to Valdés-Olmos's and Weeks's analyses of rural imaginations that make legible globalization's rhythmic and scalar alignment with the ongoing history of capitalism and colonialism by exploring the co-constitutive relation between idyllic renderings of the rural and the global intensification of agricultural productive industrialism in "four fictional rural cottage scenes" that span past, present, and future. First, he articulates how the design of London's Regent's Park is informed by a spatial arrangement in which the "global is associated with the city and local with the country." This cottage scene aesthetically and discursively segregates the nineteenth-century coalescence of rapid urbanization, the forced rural-to-urban migration of peasant communities, and the cumulative profits gained through colonial plantation economies with the emergence of English picturesque landscapes. In contrast, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* affirms the complex scalar interweave between local rural-urban and global metropolitan-peripheral relations by imagining the cottage as bringing together differentially fugitive subjects: Parisians on the run from the French Revolution and its abolition of feudalism, and Frankenstein's monster, with his "inferred plantation provenance." Ridley Scott's SF film *Bladerunner 2049* provides the third cottage scene, read by Stringer as an unsettling dystopian imagination – heavy with an anti-colonial potentiality embodied by fugitive, dehumanized subjects – that seems to also critique globalized productivist agricultural futures that rely on idyllic fantasies. Stringer ends with a return to the present, where the 2019 film *Bait* draws out how, in a Cornish fishing town, urban touristic gazes bump up against the lived experience of its increasingly marginalized native inhabitants. Stringer's contribution, in light of Part 2's focus, might be taken as providing

a multi-scalar, multi-temporal rereading of the manner in which the English idyll continues to obfuscate or eliminate subjects who (threaten to) disturb the necropolitical logics of globalized agrarian industrialization.

Resonating with the three previous chapters' analyses of the infrastructural persistence and political vicissitudes that inform globalization's effects in the age of modernity, Joyce Goggin – whose scholarship sits at the intersection of literature and finance – zooms in on how the rise and demise of the sponge-fishing industry on the Greek island of Kalymnos transformed its rural community, focusing particularly on this industry's differentiated effects on men and women. The introduction of the scaphander diving suit in the second half of the nineteenth century allowed sponge fishing to become the main industry of the island, aligning it – and the depths of the Mediterranean – with the rhythms of globalized industrial and luxury markets in ways that had profoundly disabling effects on its economy, community, culture, and bodies. As the chapter turns to the present, Goggin takes stock of the damage: the depletion of Mediterranean sponge beds and new tourist economy have created a "new model of indebtedness," not in the least toward the (subaquatic) environment.

Historian Peter van Dam and cultural analyst Esther Peeren stay with the environmental impact of globalized industrial agriculture, asking whether there is "a place for large-scale, high-yield farming in a sustainable future?" Their chapter investigates how productivist farmers in Hollands Kroon, known as the agricultural capital of the Netherlands, imagine themselves contending with and contributing to discourses, policies, and practices of agricultural sustainability across a variety of scales: local, national, European, and global. Van Dam and Peeren contend that paying close attention to how these farmers negotiate the different forms and scales of sustainability through a distinct ethical positioning (which also has an affective dimension) may provide ways to break the current stalemate in which such farmers feel forced to "act sustainably on the basis of a nature ethics they do not subscribe to." As such, the chapter contributes to this part's aim of rereading the differential ways in which particular rural subjects (in their own perception and that of others) are entangled with the infrastructural scales and temporalities of globalization.

Sumati Dwivedi also takes up issues of scale in her discussion of how Sisir Kumar Das's three-volume *A History of Indian Literature*, in the context of a global literary system centered on national literatures, retrospectively discerns an Indian literature emerging centuries before the country's independence. Within Indian literature, moreover, Das positions regional (*aañchalik*) literature as "a response to western influence" that takes the form of an assertion

of rural (village) life against modernized urbanity. Regionality and (a thematically conceived) rurality thus become equated in ways that obfuscate other dimensions of regionality in literature, including the use of regional languages and forms. According to Dwivedi, something similar happens in contemporary Indian politics, where regional autonomy movements "have mobilized popular tropes of pre-modern rurality – including harvest goddesses and peasant revolutionary leaders – to imagine communities older and more 'authentic' than the nation-state, which is implicated in modernity." Her discussion of the way the goddess Telangana Thalli and the freedom fighter Birsa Munda have been used politically to assert regional identities underscores how Indian rurality functions "as a valued source of legitimacy, a repository of powerful images and tropes" that may be used to contest national and global processes of homogenization. At the same time, the case of Birsa Munda's multiple, contradictory memorialization (as a national and regional hero, as well as an indigenous icon of the newly carved out state of Jharkand) makes clear how such images can be (mis)read across spatial, historical, and political arenas in ways that ignore the disjunction, in postcolonial contexts like India, between agricultural (settler colonial) and indigenous ruralities – a disjunction marked by the slash in Spivak's "bones of the rural/indigenous."

The final contribution to Part 2, by artist and researcher Pauline O'Connell, continues to reflect on memorialization processes in a nation-state emerging from a colonial history. Shifting the terrain to Ireland, O'Connell presents her award-winning audiovisual work *A Woman's Culm*, which offers a critical redressal of the manner in which rural women – especially those in the area of the Castlecomer Plateux – have been structurally and systematically made invisible in Irish endeavors to memorialize the Struggle for Independence. *A Woman's Culm* intervenes in the dominant urban- and male-centered commemoration of the Struggle through a feminist-informed historical engagement with the way culm – a mix of coal dust, clay, and water that, when dried into balls, served as fuel – was forged and used by women in rural coal-mining communities. By playing on the culm ball's resemblance to a bomb, O'Connell's work reimagines the object as able to embody the explosive redistribution and reevaluation of "everyday rural histories and knowledge from bottom-up, inside-out, embodied perspectives" within national and global history. In the chapter, O'Connell reflects on the content and exhibition of *A Woman's Culm*, as well as on the artist's insider-outsider positionality vis-à-vis the local community. This allows her to highlight how her approach to retelling silenced histories has the potential to "resound in and beyond the local or national context" to draw attention, for example, to the contribution rural practices like mining

and agriculture (as unfolding across spatial dimensions – including subterranean and atmospheric ones) have made to the global climate crisis, and to how the rural might be reconfigured to play a role in combating this crisis.

5 Part 3: (De)Romanticized Rurals

The contributions in Part 3 address the persisting sway that romanticizing and homogenizing genres of rurality (Valdés-Olmos), like the idyll and the pastoral, hold in contemporary globalized times, as discussed earlier in this introduction. They make clear how the spatiotemporal infrastructure – or "chronotope," to bring back Bakhtin – of pastoral/idyllic imaginations continues to manage the fantasy of escaping (and even resolving) urban pressures and corruption by making illegible the enfolding of the rural in the *longue durée* of globalization. At the same time, they demonstrate how the deleterious effects of globalization on the rural are or can be made legible in, among others, AI-generated images, online influencer content, films, forms of fuel, and air fresheners. Through detailed analyses of how these objects materially and imaginatively embody rurality, it becomes clear how pastoral/idyllic genres of rurality can be deromanticized and their "cruelly optimistic" sustaining of the rural as a good-life fantasy disrupted (Berlant 2011). The chapters emphasize, to varying degrees, how the appearance of disturbing events and subjects in a variety of rural imaginations impede on the pastoral/idyllic designation of the rural as an affective spatiotemporal locus of normatively gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized belonging that sustains a comforting sense of safety and/or escape. Such moments when the genre's good-life promises, as Berlant would say, experience a "glitch" (2016: 393), even when they are minor, ambiguous or short-lived, are seen to put binary rural-urban epistemes and their affective economies under pressure. At the same time, far from assuming that, in such moments, pastoral and idyllic imaginations lose all promissory significance, the contributors remain attentive to how certain disturbances can be seduced back into dominant rural-focused genres, gazes, and structures of feeling.

New media scholars Natalia Sánchez-Querubín, Carlo De Gaetano, and Sabine Niederer analyze the functions of one of the most popular contemporary invocations of the idyll: Cottagecore. While being critical of Cottagecore's "romanticization of Western countryside living" – which fits into a longstanding settler colonial genealogy of rural imaginations – they also affirm the online aesthetics' potential for managing a sense of "hopefulness that contrasts with dominant feelings of precarity and renditions of apocalyptic climate futures." Through a speculative methodology that combines "automated image analysis

with participatory research and 'evocative prompt design'" using generative AI tools like Midjourney and ChatGPT, the Eurocentric tropes of gender, class, race, nature, and technology that characterize the rural's configuration in online data and aesthetic repositories are mapped. Simultaneously, the authors experiment with AI's capacity to question Cottagecore's algorithmic embedding in dominant aesthetics of rurality and its capacity to produce "unexpected or fringed" alternative visions of the rural as capable of harboring desirable and communal rather than disastrous and isolated futures.

Staying with the trouble of virtual ruralities, media scholar Shao Shao engages contemporary imaginations of rural space and subjectivity produced by Chinese online celebrities (*wanghong*). Focusing on one of the most prolific content creators, Li Ziqi, she closely analyzes Li's videos as well as user engagements with her content on the video-sharing platform Bilibili to question what kind of rural spaces and femininities are presented and how they (re)negotiate normatively gendered "dualisms between city and country." On the one hand, Li's self-presentation remains "closely tied to the construction of idealized, monolithic rural femininities" that reduce rural women to traditional, domesticized "objects of nostalgic desire" in the face of the perceived pressures exerted by globalization on urban subjects. On the other hand, viewers' engagement with Li's videos through the *danmu* interface turns them into "a site where disturbances of the idyll that draw attention to what parts of rural reality the idyll denies or excludes may occur as well." Shao's contribution affirms that attention to medium-specificity and the affordances of (plat)form is crucial to understanding the differential effects romanticized rural imaginations may have on perceptions of the actual rural.

Rosemary Shirley builds on the critical discussions of Cottagecore's and Li's seductive – and therefore highly marketable – romanticized rurals by focusing on the function of consumer culture "in constructing relationships with rural places." With a hefty dose of humor, she teases out the discrepancies between catching the smell of the UK Peak District national park from her backyard and from a package of Peak District-themed synthetic air freshener by Air Wick. By asserting the imbrication of power and ideology in the shaping of everyday human (and non-human) subjectivities through the concept of "breathing spaces" and Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, the reach and function "air" and "aroma" have in their construction of rural space and the pressing obfuscations such olfactory idylls enact are analyzed. Pinpointing the historical co-emergence of a (Victorian) "pneumatic sublime" and a "romantic sublime," Shirley argues that contemporary rural air and synthetic translations of that air are embedded in a multisensorial aesthetic regime that extracts it as a rejuvenating, relieving, healing "wellness" commodity that tends to globalized

anxieties over polluted and/or viral urban air. But, in doing so, such aerated imaginations of rurality also obscure the UK's "chronic underinvestment in rural infrastructures and services," leading Shirley to finally ponder whether we can "see the need for improved health care access in rural places when dominant cultural discourse continually signals the links between access to nature and wellness."

Kate Woodward shifts our attention to genres of rurality operating in the deromanticized register of the anti-idyll. Her chapter starts by questioning the public and academic categorizations of contemporary British folk horror cinema as "the ultimate 'Brexit genre,'" arguing that this anti-idyllic categorization actually sustains a traditional binary understanding of rural-urban relations where the rural remains always already posited as a backwards, xenophobic, and dangerous zone for more liberal, open-minded, wealthy, cosmopolitan urbanites. In her analysis of Mark Jenkin's *Bait* and Lee Haven Jones's *Gwledd* (*The Feast*), Woodward moves beyond this binary-inflected understanding of the anti-idyll to argue that these films' deromanticized depiction of Wales and Cornwall responds to "contemporary political realities" by showing how rural subjects are differentially implicated in the historical, cultural, and economic marginalization of these regions. *Bait* does so by pondering the violence urban tourism and gentrification do to rural Cornwall, making visible how the "fetishization and romanticization" of this Celtic region makes its locals feel like outsiders. *Gwledd*, in turn, points to the cruel promises of progress and wealth accumulation through extraction that some Welsh rural subjects become attached to. As such, it emphasizes that rural insiders can become onto-epistemologically urbanized, albeit not without punishment. Both films, then, deromanticize the rural while also deconstructing the rural-urban binary, something that most anti-idylls neglect to do.

Like Woodward, the authors of the next two contributions – Marcel Strobel and Dominika Mikołajczyk – are interested in questioning the normative understandings of rural and urban belonging that (de)romanticized rural imaginations facilitate, but they do so from a queer studies perspective. Strobel destabilizes the US Midwest – dominantly imagined and politicized as a rural heartland of "averageness" and white heteronormativity that is free from or hostile to queerness – through an analysis of the coming-of-age film *Edge of Seventeen* (1998), which revolves around the Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio, and several semi-structured interviews with former Cedar Point employees (including *Edge of Seventeen* screenwriter Todd Stephens). The amusement park is read as a "liminal" place – "marked by the turnstiles between the world outside the amusement park and the apparently extra-political realm inside it" – that affords subjects possibilities for (re)orientation

and queer becoming. As such, the chapter deromanticizes the metronormative myth of the urban as the only space allowing an authentically visible queer belonging and instead delineates rural spaces like Cedar Point as sites that can "foster the becoming of queer communities."

Mikołajczyk's contribution shows the "sexualized politics" at stake in two contemporary films, *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003) and *God's Own Country* (Lee, 2017), in which the Italian and British countryside are romantically imagined as "co-shaped by Central-Eastern European migrant workers." Both films, she argues, show how these migrants are literally and figuratively put to work to sustain idyllic imaginations of rural authenticity enmeshed in Western European political discourses of rural nationalism, but they also in part affirm these idyllic imaginations through their portrayal of the migrant characters. In *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the nationalist and ethnic politics of hospitality and belonging ensure that the film's Polish migrants have to undergo a "laborious integration" process to avoid disrupting the Italian rural idyll – a process that the film codes not as dispossessing assimilationism but as the epitome of romance. *God's Own Country*, in Mikołajczyk's critical reading, serves as an important counterpoint to Strobel's chapter in making clear how queer Central-Eastern European migrants can be integrated into homonationalist discourses that normatively "re-romanticize" and "restore" the rural – and specifically the family farm – as a space that safeguards traditional, comforting forms of white, patriarchal sociality.

6 Part 4: Reframing Farming

The last part of this volume investigates how farming remains central to conceptions of rurality even as, in many places, "the overshadowing presence of agriculture in rural life has been eroded" (Woods 2011: 77). Woods's *Rural* delineates how this is due, on the one hand, to the processes of intensification, concentration, and specialization that accompanied a post-WWII productivism globalized through the Green Revolution, and, on the other, to increased rural tourism and urban-to-rural migration turning the countryside into a consumption good. Through his notion of agrilogistics, Timothy Morton situates farming processes that contribute to the age of planetary destruction within a deeper history of Anthropocentric rurality that emerged in Mesopotamia around 12,500 years ago when people began storing grain. Much like the idyll and pastoral, agrilogistics is premised on enshrining stability and security. However, rather than separating the rural from globalization, Morton conceives of agrilogistics as placing the rural at the roots of globalization: "the

very concept of 'world' as the temporality region suffused with human destiny emerges from agrilogistic functioning" (46). Others, like Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Katherine McKittrick, and Wendy Wolford, situate the globalization of a destructive agrilogistics at the dawn of Euro-colonial plantation economies (i.e. the Plantationocene).[15] The contributions in this final part speak in different ways to these interlocking scales, spaces, and times of agrilogistics and the Plantationocene in order to critically contemplate the function farming has in cultural imaginations of the globalized rural. Moving beyond rigid rural-urban dichotomies, the chapters reframe farming by moving away from it as an oft-idealized activity – especially but not only in its small-scale forms – to making it legible as an extractive one.[16]

Moreover, the chapters here – much like those of the volume's other parts – contend with the dominant globalized genres of rurality in which the image of the small-scale family farm and farming as equating authenticity dominates, whether what is imagined is a past or present rural. The family farm is not just overrepresented in cultural imaginations, but also in the imagined worlds of the social and political realm (Vogeler).[17] Strategic appeals to deeply ingrained, positively valuated associations of (small-scale family) farming with authenticity – the farmer as hard-working, down-to-earth, and vocation- rather than profit-driven (Bosma and Peeren; Bosma) – and national food security – "no farmers, no food"[18] – are being made across Europe as part of a wave of farmers'

15 Plantations, McKittrick points out, live on "ideologically and materially" across contemporary urban and rural landscapes (3). Now and in the past, they "bridge countryside and the city, not belonging fully to either but allowing traffic between the two" (Wolford 1625).

16 Considering farming as an extractive practice does not entail its homogenization. Sarah Besky delineates some important differences between industrial agriculture and the plantation, mainly in terms of labor conditions. Woods similarly distinguishes agrarian capitalism from plantation capitalism, while presenting both as "variations on resource capitalism" (2011: 59).

17 Because definitions of the family farm are often inconsistent even within a single (trans) national context, let alone across the world, agricultural operations that in no way resemble what most people imagine a family farm to be can nonetheless lay claim to the positive affects stuck to it. Berkeley Hill discusses the inadequate way the family farm is defined in EU policy, while Jingzhong Ye explains how the Chinese state uses the term "family farm" (*jiating nongchang*) not for the smallest farming unit but for "a new type of operative entity in agriculture mainly based on family labours to pursue large-scaled, intensified and commodified agricultural production and operation" designed to displace the type of peasant farming elsewhere designated as family farming (330).

18 "No farmers, no food" has been adopted as the slogan for farmers' protests across countries and is the title of a 2023 documentary directed by Roman Balmakov. Subtitled "Will You Eat the Bugs," the documentary is described as "exposing the hidden agenda behind global 'Green Policies,' the untold stories of farmers forced out of business, the disruption

protests against environmental regulations seeking to constrain (big) agriculture's negative impact on soil, water, and air quality, as well as its contribution to climate change through nitrogen and methane emissions. These protests and the supportive and critical responses to them underscore how farming is increasingly contended in terms of what its future can and should look like – a contention that unfolds on more than just material terrains. For many, farming retains pride of place in the rural's social and cultural imagination. As a consequence, the fact that agriculture is (quite literally) losing ground to conservation, tourism, resource extraction, and energy generation initiatives appears to threaten the rural as a whole.

In considerations of the crisis of agriculture, a pessimistic view can be discerned according to which change will be resisted as "global agro-food systems" remain dominated by "a very strong dynamic towards 'sustaining the unsustainable'" (Buttel 214). There are, however, also more optimistic takes. After delineating the trends "reproducing the unsustainability of agriculture," Frederick H. Buttel proceeds to outline several paths towards sustainable agriculture, including localism and foodshed strategies, environmental regulation, ecotaxation, and multifunctionality (218–224), while Jan Douwe van der Ploeg sees "extended regrounding" – "the reintroduction of nature into the agricultural process of production" – and the "revitalization of food webs" as promising alternatives to the perpetuation of the status quo (269). For Wang et al., the globalized rural of today is not just a space of crisis and conflict, but also one of hope, among others because of the emergence of "more holistic directions" for farming and the "remaking of rural bioeconomies" through, among others, the development of alternative proteins and "regenerative practices" (11–12). The final set of contributions veers towards this hopeful view by delineating practices within farming (past and present), as well as within "farm texts" in literature, television, contemporary art, and film, that envision its remaking as less extractive and destructive for humans, farm animals, other life forms, the soil, and the environment as a whole.

Americanist Maarten Zwiers presents the non-profit Freedom Farm Cooperation (FFC), founded in 1969 by civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer in the Mississippi Delta, as countering the racialized neoplantation agriculture that dominated the region and – with its focus on profit maximization and reliance on pesticides and herbicides – exhausted and poisoned the soil and Black farm laborers. Adhering to an ethics of "interracial humanitarianism" and a "philosophy of cooperative economics," and, in terms of its farming practices,

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this will have on our food supply, and why edible bugs are suddenly being pushed to the fore as a 'Global Green Solution'" (https://www.nofarmersnofood.com/).

moving away from monocropping, the FFC provided an alternative that Zwiers, drawing on Sylvia Wynter, Jean Casimir, and Clyde Woods, conceptualizes as "a counter-plantation project and maroon geography based on the blues epistemology." Although the FFC, which operated as a non-profit, was forced to close in 1976 after getting into debt as a result of not fitting into the regionally, nationally, and globally dominant agriculture economy, its legacy lives on in present-day, Black-run rural and urban farming initiatives. Zwiers's account of the FFC shows its evolution in a specific rural area marked by plantation histories and its persistent legacies as farming methods changed and the civil rights struggle intensified. By outlining how Hamer connected the FFC to African and Caribbean anti-colonial struggles, Zwiers also shows resistance to the plantation logic operating not just locally but at the global scale of the Plantationocene itself.

In her study of the Beijing Farmers' Market, based on fieldwork and digital ethnography, cultural analyst Chen Zhou shows how this market for ecological produce responds to contemporary worries among Chinese urbanites about food safety by offering them a rural imagination that revolves around the idea of an "authentic life." This life has idyllic elements, but it does not fully fit into the "romantic reappraisal" of the rural that some scholars see emerging in present-day China. The ecological farmers supplying the Beijing Farmers' Market espouse an ethics of care within which the farm appears as an assemblage (in Anna Tsing's sense) characterized by an "entangled, more-than-human relationality." Their farming practices are modeled on ideas about the relationship between humans and nature from classic Chinese philosophy, as well as on ancient agricultural manuals. At the same time as opposing the "authentic life" of ecological production to urban pollution, however, the ecological farmers position themselves against neighboring conventional farmers, whom they, in line with the stereotypical view of the Chinese rural as backwards, perceive as unenlightened and complicit with the factory farming system held responsible for several food safety scares. This, as well as the fact that most of the ecological farmers came (or returned) to the rural from the urban, illustrates how, as Zhou concludes, the produce sold at the Beijing Farmers' Market brings into the urban an (imagination of the) rural that is "in fact already deeply inflected by the urban."

Moving from real-life farming practices that challenge agrilogistics to the cultural imagination, David Slot turns to Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction *Hainish Cycle*, arguing that the ways farming and especially animal husbandry are portrayed in three short stories – "Solitude" (1994), "Unchosen Love" (1996) and "Mountain Ways" (1996) – propose various paths towards a mode

of sustainable co-existence between humans and non-humans. "Solitude," set on the planet Eleven-Soro, Slot contends, envisions what Sarah L. Lincoln has called a "fugitive ecology" in which all forms of ownership have been abolished and humans dwell – in accordance with Tim Ingold's thinking on dwelling – in radical present-oriented self-isolation. Whereas "Solitude" focuses on relations between humans and between humans and the environment, in the other two stories, set on the planet O, human relations with a species called ariu are thematized. Analyzing these stories using Ingold's notion of the taskspace, Haraway's notion of the companion species, and Tina M. Campt's notion of fugitivity, Slot concludes that they imagine a fugitive animal husbandry that, in contrast to agrilogistics' vision of human control over all land and all non-human life (as well as some human life), positions humans and non-humans as interdependent and engaged in relations of co-responding from which it is also possible to withdraw.

Staying with cultural imaginations of farming, albeit in a more realistic mode, David Karle and Charles Weak look, from an architectural perspective, at the US sitcom *Bless This Mess* (2019–2020), which portrays a couple of newlyweds moving from New York City to the fictional town of Bucksnort, Nebraska, to run a farm. This rural imagination, the authors argue, moves away from the dominant way in which rural areas and folk have been portrayed on US television – as uncivilized and therefore either to be ridiculed or feared. In *Bless This Mess*, the complex realities of contemporary rural and farming life are engaged. While the genre conventions of the sitcom ensure that this engagement remains lighthearted and skews optimistic (envisioning the relatively quick and smooth integration of the urban couple in the rural community), the challenges of small-scale farming in a context of globalized agribusiness are thematized, as are debates within farming about the environmental impact of tillage and pesticide use. Bucksnort, moreover, is presented through various gendered, classed, aged, and racialized perspectives, and as containing a range of architectures and infrastructures (the farmhouse, the general store, the main street, the barn, and the field), making clear that the contemporary US rural is not lived in a singular way. As such, *Bless This Mess* not only provides a more realistic portrayal of the US rural than most other rural-focused television series, but also questions accounts in the wake of the 2016 presidential election of rural areas as harboring a homogeneous mass of Trump supporters.

In her contribution, visual artist and researcher María Patricia Tinajero explores the potential of participatory art for building connections between rural and urban areas, and between artists and farmers, to promote more

sustainable farming practices in the face of a soil health and climate crisis. The Wormfarm Institute in Wisconsin not only offers artist residences, but also organizes the Farm/Art DTour, which has so far seen nine editions. This outdoor art exhibition is designed to encourage participating artists, farmers, and audiences to forge a new ethical relation to the land that includes reimagining it as not a resource to be depleted but a living system with transformative capacities – displayed in the process of decomposition – that should be nurtured so it can keep becoming and providing food. Through its site-specific installations and performances, which appeal to various senses and encourage different forms of participation, the DTour prompts visitors to question damaging agricultural practices like monocropping and imagine polycultural, regenerative alternatives. As Tinajero contends, "bottom-up participatory art initiatives can encourage more people to see agriculture as a dynamic, co-creative, and mutually beneficial endeavor among humans, soil, plants, and animals."

A similar vision of agriculture to that promoted by the Farm/Art DTour – and the Beijing Farmers' Market – is at stake in the closing contribution by Janna Bystrykh and Clemens Driessen, who discuss the way regenerative agriculture is gaining ground across the Great Plains of the US. The focus is on three interviews – with a filmmaker, a researcher-farmer, and an educator-farmer – that the authors conducted for their experimental film documentary *Great Pla/ns* (2023), which superimposes a soundtrack containing fragments from fifty-seven interviews about regenerative practices onto drone footage of the depleted and flourishing rural landscapes of the Great Plains. As it is to the Wormfarm Institute explored by Tinajero, reframing the soil as a "living complex ecology" that farmers work *with* rather than *on* is central to regenerative agriculture, which is being popularized by books and films, but also risks being commercialized and emptied of its ecological principles by corporate interests. While the authors see the fact that "regenerative" does not have a single, unified meaning as appropriate for a set of practices that emphasize adaptability, open-endedness, and situatedness, for agriculture and rural communities, locally and globally, to become truly regenerative, it is necessary to agree on certain shared principles. The chapter models the "open network of exchange of knowledges across different fields, forms, and geographies" needed to establish these shared principles and put them into practice. This volume, too, is committed to encouraging such an "open network of exchange of knowledges" about the rural and the role its social and cultural imaginations play in how it is shaped and might be reshaped in today's globalized world among social scientists, humanities scholars, and artists – making this chapter a fitting last word.

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PART 1

Grappling with the Globalized Rural across Disciplines

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CHAPTER 1

Telling Stories about Rural Assemblages

Michael Woods

Abstract

This chapter proposes an assemblage approach for conceptualizing rural places. Drawing on the assemblage thinking of Deleuze and Guattari and Manuel DeLanda, it contends that both "the countryside" as an entity and places within rural areas are assemblages of human and non-human components with material and expressive roles, held together in ever-changing configurations. Particular attention is paid to the expressive dimensions of rural places revealed by the perspective, which bridge the material and the imagined and may be engaged through art, music, film and literature. The approach is illustrated by an example of research on a fishing outport in Newfoundland.

1 Narrating the Rural

Researchers have long told stories about the rural, except that we have called them studies, papers, essays, too often hiding behind academic language and pretending that they are different to the stories told by novelists, poets, songwriters, filmmakers, and artists, or the organic stories of rural folk culture. Like all stories, our academic stories are attempts to make sense of the world, to turn chaos and disorder into a structured narrative.

We have wrestled to rationalize the elusiveness of the rural, to solve the conundrum that the "rural" is both something real and materially manifest, and at the same time imagined and socially constructed. The conundrum is part of the "spectralization" of the rural identified by Spivak and discussed in the introduction to this volume, in which a romanticized and idyllized imagined rural has been abstracted from the materiality of a global countryside plundered by colonialism and capitalism. Spectralization has further enabled a disciplinary division of labor, in which cultural representations of imagined rurals – in art, literature, film – have been channeled off as the matter of arts and humanities scholarship, while social science analysis has integrated the material rural into totalizing theories, such as planetary urbanization, that leave little space for rural exceptionalism. With skepticism about the robustness of

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"rural" as a category, continuing efforts by researchers to document and conceptualize the rural may appear akin to fable-writing from some quarters. Yet, the rural still matters, still has potency, because it remains fundamental to the identities of millions of people and to the ways in which they experience and interpret everyday life, forming wells of agency from which counter-narratives and counter-movements to urban-centric globalization, noted by Spivak, have sprung forth. Finding ways of telling research stories about the rural that can bridge the imagined and the material is accordingly a critical challenge for the agenda set by this volume, of understanding the part played by social, economic, political and cultural imaginations in shaping encounters with the globalized rural.

Our research stories are shaped by the prevailing academic paradigms of the time. Early rural sociologists drew on classical sociological theory to distil the essence of rural societies and communities. Geographers documented settlement patterns and land use types. After the quantitative revolution of the 1960s, academic stories required numbers and attention switched to ultimately futile attempts to model indices of rurality and to mathematically define the difference between rural and urban.

The cultural turn in the 1990s swept away such positivism and its conceptual dead-ends. Informed by poststructuralist and postmodernist theory, new stories recognized the contingency and multiplicity of the rural, understanding rurality to be a socially constructed category reproduced in popular culture and lay knowledge as much as through policy proclamations and academic studies. The rural, it was asserted, exists as much in the imagination as in the physical world, and to reach these imagined rurals researchers started to engage with creative representations of the rural articulated in literature, film, television, music, art, and folk tales. From this perspective, there are many stories to be told about many different countrysides, and many different storytellers (see Cloke and Little; Philo).

Yet, for some the cultural turn went too far in ditching the materiality of the rural. There were concerns that the rural as a social construct was becoming detached from its tethers in actual places, and that the emphasis on discourse and social construction risked obscuring the material and structural conditions that shape rural lived experiences, inequalities, and injustices.[1] In response, the focus of academic endeavor again shifted, towards approaches that seek to encompass both discursive and material dimensions of the rural, informed by relational, hybrid, and assemblage thinking (Murdoch; Rudy; Heley and Jones).

1 See Cloke for a balanced discussion.

It is from this point that this chapter departs, adopting an assemblage approach to thinking about the rural, or an "assemblage ruralism," and considering the implications of this approach for the stories that we tell about the rural as academic researchers and how we tell them. As discussed further in the next section, like many strands of social theory the development and application of assemblage thinking has tended to have an urban fixation, with principles exemplified by reference to the city.[2] Yet, there is no fundamental reason this should be the case. Indeed, the ambiguity and elusiveness of the rural – caught between the imagined and the material – makes its especially suited for an assemblage analysis. However, a critical distinction is that while referring to the city as an assemblage works at both the generic and the specific level (i.e. the form of the assemblage of the "city" as an imagined abstract form is not dissimilar to the particular city-assemblage of Amsterdam or Mumbai), there is not an equivalent singular form when addressing the rural. As such, the first section below both briefly describes the principles of assemblage thinking and proceeds to outline three forms of rural assemblage enacted at different levels: the countryside-as-an-assemblage, rural-places-as-assemblages, and assemblages-in-the-rural. It focuses on two key aspects highlighted in the assemblage framework, namely that the components of an assemblage have both material and expressive roles, and that assemblages are given identity and meaning through "coding." Both aspects are important to the constitution and reproduction of "ruralness." The second section applies the assemblage approach to the shifting assemblage of the fishing outport of Trepassey in Newfoundland, Canada, as a short illustration. The final section reflects on the process of researching the Trepassey case study from an assemblage perspective, especially the challenge of capturing expressive dimensions through engagement with a plurality of voices and sources.

2 Approaching Rural Assemblages

Assemblage thinking emphasizes emergence, multiplicity, and indeterminacy in its understanding of the world (Anderson and McFarlane). It is a fundamentally relational approach, locating agency and capacity in the relations between components rather than in the properties of an entity. It also presents such relations as dynamic and ever-changing, militating against settled forms and definitive descriptions. Complexions of assemblage thinking stem

2 A notable exception being Bonta and Protevi.

from various theorists, including Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway, but in this chapter I draw primarily on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and its interpretation by Manuel DeLanda. DeLanda's rendering of an "assemblage theory" is not unproblematic, and my borrowing from it is partial and critical, but his framework is attractive for its clear exposition of the principles of Deleuzo-Guattarian assemblage thinking and for the way that it brings together the material and expressive in a more explicit manner than the new materialism of Latour's actor-network theory or Haraway's cyborg manifesto.

Any entity that can be subdivided into constituent parts is an assemblage, and assemblages thus always exist in relation to each other. Assemblages are components in larger assemblages, and the component parts of assemblages are assemblages themselves. As such, "society is an assemblage of assemblages" (DeLanda 2006: 37). The omnipresence of assemblages that this implies can be a hindrance to the usefulness of the approach, but it is balanced by the methodological benefits of assemblage thinking as a way of exploring diverse human and non-human entities through a standard set of principles (see also Woods et al.). First, assemblages are composed of heterogeneous human and non-human components with material and expressive roles. The material roles contribute to the physical structure and functionality of the assemblage, while the expressive roles are tied to its identity, meaning, and external representation. Material components may also have expressive functions, but expressive components can be non-tangible and performative, including language and music, actions, and emotions. Second, assemblages are constantly "becoming," with components combined in contingent and ephemeral arrangements that are always being remade. Assemblages are always adding, removing, and exchanging components with each other. Third, assemblages are held together by processes of territorialization that tend towards coherence and standardization, countered by forces of deterritorialization that promote diversity and fluidity. DeLanda presents territorialization as a continuum in which strongly territorialized assemblages are characterized by firm boundaries and highly homogeneous parts, while weakly territorialized assemblages lack coherence and have porous or ill-defined boundaries. Fourth, assemblages are regulated, represented, and given meaning through coding, which includes laws and regulations, but also social conventions and acts of quantification, mapping, and representation. Coding is similarly described by DeLanda as a second axis, such that assemblages may be strongly or weakly coded, and go through cycles of coding, decoding, and re-coding. Fifth, assemblages are conditioned by the "exteriority of relations" (Deleuze and Guattari). In other words, an assemblage is not the sum of its parts and its capacities are not contingent on a particular

configuration of components. Equally, the capacities and functions of a component are defined by its relations in an assemblage, but its properties are not prescribed by its attachment to an assemblage. A component may be detached from one component and plugged into another assemblage, in which its properties will be the same, but its relations, functions, and capacities will be different (DeLanda 2006). Similarly, an entity may be simultaneously a component of multiple assemblages, with consistent properties but different relations, functions, and capacities in each. Sixth, with each change to an assemblage there are multiple possible futures that could result, but only one that can be actualized at any time. Possible futures that are not actualized become possible pasts and possible alternative presents. Together, all the possible pasts, possible presents, and possible futures – that is, all the possible forms that an assemblage could take – form a multiplicity (DeLanda 2016).

As discussed in Woods et al., places are assemblages, but investigations to date have tended to exhibit an urban skew. The field of "assemblage urbanism" has blossomed, encompassing work from both Latourian (Blok and Farías; Farías and Bender) and Deleuzian (Dovey) perspectives, albeit subject to critique by neo-Marxian urban theorists (Brenner et al.). For Kim Dovey, as for DeLanda (2006), the city itself is an assemblage and may be analyzed as such, while Latourian-informed studies have more commonly focused on assemblages within the city that are constitutive of urban life, such as housing, transport and sanitary infrastructure, and cultural events (Blok and Farías; Farías and Bender; McFarlane). Applications of assemblage thinking in rural research are less advanced and most examples have tended to follow the latter approach in being concerned with assemblages that are found in rural contexts – from farming systems to land to commodity networks to microfinance initiatives (Herman; Higgins and Larner; Hollander; Li; Rankin) – rather than interrogating rural places as assemblages (as an exception, see Rosin et al.).

Indeed, an "assemblage ruralism" needs to acknowledge that there are three distinct but interwoven ways of approaching "rural assemblages." In the first, *the countryside as an assemblage*, the rural as an overarching entity is understood as an assemblage, comprised by diverse human and non-human components with material and expressive roles. As with all assemblages, the components of the countryside are held together in contingent formations that are constantly changing. The countryside as an assemblage is weakly territorialized, with porous and ill-defined boundaries and internal heterogeneity. Its coherence and identity as "rural" come from coding, through official classifications of rural and urban space, policy documents, and plans, but also significantly from the cultural representations that inscribe rurality with qualities

and values, which are supported by internal codes that articulate expected relations and conventions associated with being rural, but which may take multiple and sometimes contradictory forms. Accordingly, the countryside is a multiplicity with "no single vantage point from which the full panoply of rural relations may be viewed" (Murdoch 274).

The second approach focuses on *rural places as assemblages*, including villages, market towns, valleys, counties, and so on, within the countryside. The mechanics through which these individual places are constituted and territorialized are not dissimilar to those of urban place-assemblages like cities and larger towns (Woods et al.), but they are differentiated by their coding as rural through official categorization, academic works, popular representations, and lay discourses. The coding of place-assemblages as rural reflects the presence in them of material or expressive components that are commonly understood as signifiers of rurality. These may include certain landscape forms, aspects of wild nature, vernacular buildings or traditional cultural practices, but also certain economic activities, particularly farming, forestry or fishing, and the material objects (crops, livestock, barns, tractors, trees, fishing boats) and expressive components of sounds, smells, and actions intrinsic to them. However, like other assemblages, the composition of rural place-assemblages is constantly changing as components are added, removed, and exchanged through interactions with translocal assemblages. Components once expressive of rurality (such as agricultural smells, livestock noise, or dark skies) may be lost or diminished and components expressive of the urban (such as streetlights or traffic noise) may be introduced, with reconfigured relations leading to the recoding of places as more or less rural.

The third approach concentrates on characteristic *assemblages in the rural*. The countryside, like society, is an assemblage of assemblages, as are rural place-assemblages. Many of the constitutive assemblages may transcend rural space, or may be found in both rural and urban contexts, but there are also a multitude of assemblages that are routinely coded as characteristically "rural." These include farming, forestry, and fishing industries, natural ecosystems such as woodlands and wetlands, pastoral landscapes, national parks, farms, forestry plantations, sawmills, country estates, hunting cultures, close-knit communities, village shows, and many more. The coding of these assemblages as rural reflects their expressive functions as components in larger assemblages, yet this is a two-way relationship: assemblages may come to be coded as "rural" because they are commonly present in rural spatial contexts, but equally the presence of a "rural" assemblage in a place is part of what leads to a place being considered as rural.

The identity of rural places is, consequently, contingent and impermanent, attributes that are captured in the Deleuzian notion of multiplicity. With each miniscule change to the composition of an assemblage, with each micro-interaction between assemblages, there are multiple possible eventual outcomes. As such, and as noted earlier, assemblages have multiple possible future forms, only one of which can be actualized at any time. Possible futures that are not actualized become alternative possible presents and possible pasts, with the sum of possible futures, presents, and pasts forming the multiplicity of the assemblage. In place-assemblages, possible futures and alternative possible pasts and presents can have a presence in expressive components that articulate the hopes, fears, aspirations, and nostalgic yearnings of residents. They are necessarily products of imagination and thus are brought into being through literature, art, film, music, and folk stories.

Although several studies of individual rural assemblages have drawn conceptually on Foucault or Latour, I suggest that the assemblage thinking of Deleuze and Guattari, as interpreted by DeLanda, is uniquely positioned to elucidate the complex intersection of these multiple forms of rural assemblage and the centrality of coding to their tangled relations. Foregrounding coding in this way, and by extension treating the expressive composition of assemblages on a par with their material composition, invites new and broader ways of researching the rural than conventionally practiced in rural geography and rural sociology. It requires engaging with expressive components that can be intangible, representational, performative, and imagined, articulated through art, literature, film, and music, as well as lay cultural practices and representations. Such cultural texts code the countryside in ways that can reaffirm or contest official and scientific discourses. Researching the rural through an assemblage methodology thus involves combining inquiry into material dimensions, such as the economy, population structure, and the built and natural environments, with critical cultural analysis of expressive components.

The remainder of this chapter works through this approach with a case study of Trepassey in Newfoundland, undertaken as part of the GLOBAL-RURAL project, which employed an assemblage framework to examine the restructuring of rural places under globalization. The next section briefly outlines a narrative account of the shifting place-assemblage of Trepassey, while the final section reflects on how I constructed the account and especially on how engaging with photography, literature, music, and poetry helped me to understand the expressive components of the place-assemblage and to imagine its possible futures.

3 Trepassey: a Coastal Rural Place-Assemblage

The small community of Trepassey, with fewer than 1,500 residents, sits on the far south-eastern shore of the island of Newfoundland, on the Atlantic seaboard of Canada (Figure 1.1). For most of its existence, Trepassey has been territorialized around fish and fishing as the entities that held the place-assemblage together and gave it an identity. The colonial settlement of Trepassey was brought into existence by English and Irish fishing crews who moved from temporary to permanent residence in the early nineteenth century, and for decades fishing was the sole commercial activity and predominant employment. Fishing shaped the spatial arrangement of material components, with beaches left free for drying catch and shoreline "collars" for grounding boats, while houses were spaced out to provide room for crops and livestock that supplemented the fish diet. A 1954 study observed that "the community itself is typical of Newfoundland outports, with narrow streets littered with the refuse from numerous grazing sheep, goats, cattle and horses" (Newfoundland Settlement Survey 6–7).

Subsistence farming was the limit of local agriculture. As in other parts of Newfoundland, rural identity was encoded not in terms of farming, but dependency on fishing or forestry, sparse population, and above all isolation. Boggy



FIGURE 1.1 Trepassey, Newfoundland
MICHAEL WOODS, 2016

expanses of "the Barrens" surround Trepassey on land, and beyond the neighboring smaller hamlets of the parish it is over 15 kilometers to the next town heading west, and over 30 kilometers heading east, with no roads to the north. The isolation was reinforced by cartographic coding: on government maps from the 1960s, detail along the coast stops abruptly a kilometer or so inland, replaced by blank white space, contrasting with the careful charting and coding of the sea. Yet, for local residents the Barrens were not empty space. They were part of the place-assemblage, coded with vernacular place names that remembered people and events from the community's past or indicated material functions such as sites for hunting or foraging in a striated calendar of natural provisioning.

The seasonality of life in Trepassey also saw the composition of the place-assemblage shape-shift with the migration of fish shoals from the north. In the off-season for fishing, Trepassey men would temporarily detach from the place-assemblage to join seal hunts or forestry gangs, and in poor seasons whole families would move episodically to what they called "the Boston States," Massachusetts. In this way, the community-assemblage of Trepassey was stretched over space, forming, along with maritime encounters with transoceanic liners and the coastal telegraphic network installed in the 1920s to report shipwrecks, global connections that belied its terrestrial isolation.

In 1954, the opening of a fish processing plant radically re-territorialized the economy and society of Trepassey with a new unifying center. The factory introduced industry and "urban" curiosities such as permanent salaried work and paid employment for women. The labor demand of the plant exceeded the capacity of the local workforce, so workers started commuting into Trepassey from neighboring villages, including across the Barrens. The population was boosted too by resettlement from outports closed down and evacuated in the Newfoundland government's program of settlement rationalization. Most integrated easily, but the insertion of a group of protestants from distant White Bay into the previously wholly Irish catholic community created tensions, prompting the stationing of the town's first police officer in 1967.

New housing was constructed in a suburban-style cul-de-sac, with no space to raise livestock or grow crops, the need for subsistence farming obviated by growing prosperity that attracted the attachment to the place-assemblage of a supermarket, a drugstore, a hardware store, liquor stores, a service station, a taxi service, bars, and night clubs. The road to the provincial capital, St John's, was paved for lorries transporting processed fish from the factory, but also enabled residents to make the two-plus hour trip to the city for shopping and entertainment, further integrating Trepassey with global consumer assemblages and eroding its rural distinctiveness.

The fish plant also reterritorialized relations with the sea. The owners, Fishery Products International (FPI), introduced five deep-sea trawlers that fished on the Grand Banks, further out in the ocean than the traditional inshore draggers and schooners, and there interacted with the global fisheries assemblage. For centuries, the abundant fishing grounds of the Grand Banks had attracted fishing crews from around the North Atlantic, but the innovation of factory freezer trawlers in the late twentieth century transformed the capacities of the global fishing fleet. By the 1980s, vessels from 28 countries worked the Grand Banks, from as far away as China, Japan, South Korea, Cuba, Israel, and the Soviet Union. Over-fishing sent stocks into calamitous decline. The effect was recorded in the coding of catch landed at the Trepassey plant, with fewer high-value cod and more low-value groundfish, weakening the capacity of the factory to generate a profit for the FPI corporate assemblage.

In September 1991, FPI announced the closure of the Trepassey fish plant, with the loss of over 650 jobs. At the point of the announcement, multiple futures were possible, including the sale of the plant to another operator and its reopening. That hope was extinguished nine months later when the Canadian government over-coded the Newfoundland fishing assemblage with a moratorium closing the north-west Atlantic cod fisheries to protect the remaining population. The Trepassey plant was disassembled, literally, with the trawlers sold off to Peru and South Africa, the plant equipment to Tanzania, and the factory site to an Italian buyer. With the factory gone, the capacity of the Trepassey place-assemblage to provide employment collapsed and people started to detach themselves, migrating to St John's or to the oil-sand fields of Alberta. Over the next 25 years, the population of Trepassey decreased by 60 percent.

Re-coding of the locality as a development area and the injection of government funding made little difference until the community itself got organized, holding workshops at which they evaluated the material and expressive components of the time and envisaged their preferred future (Figure 1.2). The community bought back the plant site, erected factory units, and launched a promotional campaign to attract inward investment, with partial success. A Norwegian manufacturer of specialist marine lighting was enrolled, but a second unit still stands vacant and other enterprises proved ephemeral. Nonetheless, the place-assemblage of Trepassey has stabilized as expressive components of the landscape, wildlife, and Irish heritage have been commodified for tourism, and cheap property prices and surprisingly good healthcare facilities have attracted retirement migrants. There are still expressive components resonant of fishing everywhere, but they no longer have a material function; they are just echoes of a lost past and a spectral alternative present. Residents I interviewed said they no longer considered Trepassey to be a

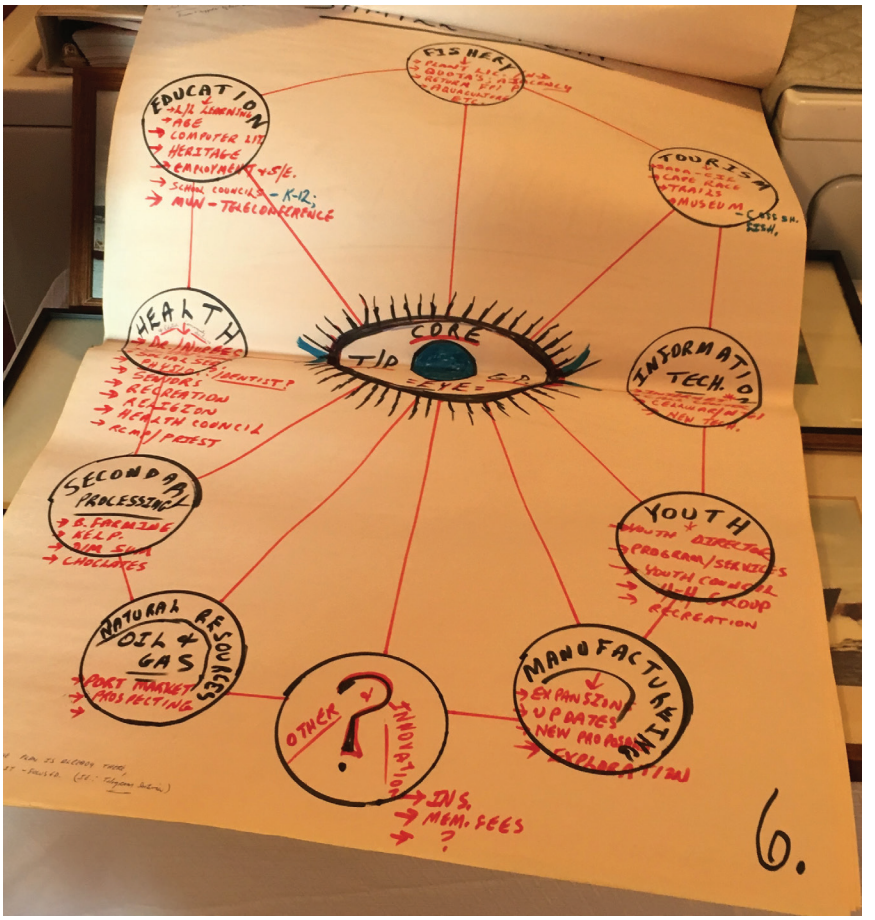


FIGURE 1.2 Imagining possible futures, Community Workshop, Trepassey
MICHAEL WOODS, 2016

fishing community. It is, however, still considered to be rural, with a small population and remote location, but the components of rurality are now understood differently to how they once were.

4 Telling Trepassey Stories

The above narrative about the shifting place-assemblage of Trepassey was constructed from fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2016. This primarily involved conventional social science research methods: interviews with local residents and extensive archival research in the Centre for Newfoundland

Studies at Memorial University and the provincial archives in St John's. Here, newspaper reports, magazine articles, government reports, meeting minutes, brochures, maps, historical photographs, short films, statistics, previous studies, local histories, and other ephemera enabled me to deconstruct the composition of the place-assemblage, to follow processes of coding and territorialization, and to trace the addition, removal, and reconfiguration of material components over time. Occasionally, eyewitness accounts, film clips, cartoons, recorded memories, and the like provided glimpses of expressive components and the intangible emotional and performative dimensions of life in the community. However, to become fully attuned to the expressive aspects of Trepassey and its identity as a rural fishing outport required more than archival inquiries and fieldwork. It required an immersion in Newfoundland culture and ways of thinking, with art, literature, music, and poetry as my gateway.

I had first started to think about Newfoundland fishing communities as assemblages on an earlier visit to St John's a few years before, when I'd bought a collection of photographs by photographer Candace Cochrane. Cochrane's black and white photographs document life in Newfoundland outports before and after the 1992 moratorium. They depict the material components of these place-assemblages – buildings, boats, fish, ice, tools and equipment, the sea, and the barren landscape – but the art of the photograph is to capture more than the materiality of the subject. Through Cochrane's photographs I saw that the expressive components of the outports included the harsh climate, isolation, a sense of resilience, and the practice of community; that fish were both material and expressive components; and that the boundaries of the outports' territorialization were defined by distance and inaccessibility. These outlines of the expressive composition of fishing place-assemblages that I gleaned from the photographs were further filled in by reading fiction. On my first visit, Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993) had reinforced the importance of weather and isolation as intrinsic parts of outport assemblages, suggested something of the mechanics of community interactions, and emphasized the impermanence of places that can quite literally be relocated, with houses dragged across the ice. Returning for fieldwork, I discovered the writing of Canadian author Michael Crummey. His 2009 novel *Galore*, a work of historical fiction with elements of magic realism that tells the story of a remote fishing village over the span of a couple of centuries, gave me a sense of the temporality involved in the evolution of fishing place-assemblages, with the rhythm of seasonal migration balanced with inter-generational continuity and the enduring essential dependency on fish. However, it was Crummey's 2014 novel *Sweetland* that I found most instructive.

Sweetland is the tale of its eponymous protagonist, a former fisherman who shares his name with the fictional island where he lives. The island is the subject of a mandatory evacuation by the government, who have decided that is no longer a feasible community – one of the possible futures that confronted Trepassey in its spiral of decline. Sweetland is the sole refusenik, remaining alone on the island as the other residents leave and the infrastructure is closed down. The novel is a work of fiction, but it is entwined with real events. It opens with a description of Sweetland encountering a raft of refugees out at sea and towing them to shore, becoming a local hero. This is a fictionalization of an actual incident from 1986 (I later discovered that the skipper in the real case was the father of my AirBnB owner). Sweetland tells a government official that he was a fisherman "right up until the moratorium in '92" (Crummey 2014: 11), while his antagonists are twin brothers who represent many Newfoundlanders in having gone to work the oil-sand fields of Alberta without having ever quite detached from their home place-assemblage:

> Six years now they'd been working a see-saw contract in Fort McMurray, three or four weeks on the job, two weeks off to fly home and drink and smoke and snort all the money they'd made. It was a way of life that had done nothing to make them less trouble. (69)

The twins have a dream of turning the island into a heritage tourism site, "authentic" unlike the pioneer villages on the mainland. This would mean commodifying material and expressive components of the lost fishing community: "We could have people out here dressed up in oilskins, take the tourists fishing, show them how to split and salt the cod" (83). Instead, in his isolation Sweetland roams the island, collecting the mundane material components of abandoned households:

> He went freely into houses he hadn't thought to enter in decades, picking through pantries and kitchen cupboards for tinned food, for pickled beets and onion and bottled moose. Combing through closets and drawers for clothes or materials that might be useful, for batteries and tools and utensils. (233)

The impermanence of place-assemblages runs through the novel. With people removed, the capacities of the remaining material components of the island are changed. They are no longer combined to perform functions that are part of the routine of human habitation: as tools for work, toys for play, paths for transit, infrastructure providing water and energy, buildings providing shelter.

It is only Sweetland's defiant presence that prevents the island from breaching a critical threshold and undergoing qualitative transformation (DeLanda 2016) – ceasing to be an inhabited place, a settlement, and becoming an abandoned community, a ruin, an uninhabited island. The place-assemblage of the island reterritorializes around its last inhabitant. Sweetland had expected the island to feel larger with everyone gone, "the way the house had after his mother died," but "it seemed smaller and strangely intimate, as though it had shrunken down to fit his solitary presence" (Crummey 2014: 233). Sweetland's salvaging of goods from his neighbors' houses emphasizes the limits to his individual agency, his reliance on other material components in the place-assemblage to survive. Yet, Sweetland is not the same as inanimate objects; he can exert his desires, make connections, ascribe expressive qualities to components in the assemblage. In the novel, he is portrayed as carrying a self-assigned responsibility to hold the place-assemblage together, not only through material relations, but also through the performative act of coding the island's geography, reciting the names that turned rock, mud, and water into places:

> Most nights he pictured a map of the island and set about naming every feature and landmark from the south-end light to Chance Cove and on to the Fever Rocks, before he did the same thing along the lee side. The litany started at the Mackerel Cliffs and went from there to Pinnacle Arch to Lunin Rock, the Devil's Under-jaw, the Flats, Murdering Hole, Tinker Cliffs, Old Chimney, Gannie Cliff Point, Wester Shoals, Mad Goat Gulch, Upper Brister, the Founder. He took his time, being careful to include as much detail as possible, as though the island was slowly fading from the world and only his ritual naming of each nook and cranny kept it from disappearing altogether. (287–288)

The photographs of Candace Cochrane and the novels of Annie Proulx and Michael Crummey were not directly about Trepassey, but they told me about places like Trepassey and gave me prompts on what to look for, to listen for, to sense, when I visited and interviewed residents. I switched on these sensors as I walked around the town – even on an August day, I could feel the isolating oppressiveness of the weather that makes Trepassey the certified foggiest place on Earth. In interviews, insights into expressive components often came not from answers to my scripted questions, but from asides and digressions, from small talk before and after the recorded interview, from pauses and unspoken emotions.

Some of the interviewees themselves reached for creative texts to illustrate emotions and experiences that they struggled to articulate themselves. One

interviewee, who I will here call Bill, started talking about music. Newfoundland has a thriving music scene, blending influences of Irish traditional music and sea shanties, which found new inspiration in the fisheries crisis. As Bill noted, "take some of the songs that came from 1990 up until now and listen to some of the locals and some of the fellows that have CDs out and you can come up easily with anywhere between fifty and a hundred songs relating how they were impacted by the closure" (interview NFL3, Trepassey, August 2016). The songs are expressive components in the place-assemblage today, but they are especially powerful because they recall both the material and expressive attributes of components in past assemblages, and the emotions that residents experienced as they made the transition. "There's one song I was listening to yesterday, called Jack of all Trades," said Bill, "It's a fellow from St Brides that sings it [Eddie Coffey]. He was everything. In his spare time he was the plumber and he was the carpenter, but he was also a fisherman" (interview NFL3, Trepassey, August 2016).

It was not only music that Bill turned to. In the depth of the crisis, he had started writing poetry as a way of documenting and processing what he saw as the place-assemblage changed around him:

> There's one in particular I'll show you. I never forgot it … It came to me as soon as he walked out of the door. I'm sitting in the Employment Services office. There's a woman in front of me and a man in front of me and they're there with their two little children and they're looking to get the application for relocation money. You know, in terms of compassionate burn-out and feeling where it's coming from, I wasn't able to do nothing for probably an hour, and all of a sudden those words started to come out and I wrote them down. You know it hit me … (interview NFL3, Trepassey, August 2016)

As I left, Bill gave me copies of his unpublished poems. Reading them later, I realized that they say what Bill – who told me that he had delayed replying to my request for an interview as he "needed to consider whether I wanted to relive the pain" – could not say in the interview. Some are written in the first person, some in the third person. They reference both material and expressive components of the old fishing assemblage – boats and rope, the sound of gulls and the smell of fish. Some express anger and frustration at the government, others sorrow at loss. Yet, there is also hope. One poem, entitled "Words from an Old Folk," starts by evoking absences of erstwhile material and expressive components in the present place-assemblage, "The gulls are silent in the cove / The nets lie rotting in the store / The sky's a dark foreboding gray / There's no

one left to have a say," and entertains the uncertainties of possible futures, "The fishery went in'92 / And not long after the young folks too / Footsteps silent, the past now in repose / What's the future? No one knows," but ends defiant: "Take comfort in your memories and dwell not in your pain / FOR THE FISHERY WILL RISE AGAIN."

5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reflected on what it means to research rural places through an assemblage approach that encompasses both the material and expressive dimensions of place. While the recovery of the material aspects of rurality is a welcome corrective to excesses of social constructivism, arguably the most valuable attribute of assemblage ruralism is the insight that it allows into the expressive constitution of the rural. Assemblages of the countryside, and of rural places within it, invariably involve expressive components that symbolize identities and shape our experiences of places and emotional relations to them: sounds and scents, the textures and palettes of the landscape, weather and climate, rhythms of daily life, vernacular architecture, place names, customs and traditions, and so on. Importantly, expressive components blur the realms of the imagined and the real. Many have an actual, verifiable, presence in rural assemblages, but their intangibility means that acts of imagination are required to capture them and to articulate our responses to them, in art, in poetry, in song. Equally, expressive components may start in imagined spaces in literary fiction, or folklore, or film, but may form relations and exert capacities within rural assemblages that have real effects. Imagined ruralities can become attached to material objects in rural assemblages, for example as places are over-coded with fictional narratives and identities from films or TV series to attract tourists, but also through the mundane association of material components with misremembered pasts.

I have taken an example of research on a rural fishery outport in Newfoundland, but the principles may be transposed to other rural settings. Rural places are temporarily configured assemblages of material and expressive components, always changing, with multiple possible futures. Individual components may have both material and expressive functions; a barn, for example, is both a practical part of a farm's infrastructure and a signifier of rural identity. The material and expressive functions of components may reinforce each other, but as rural place-assemblages weather social and economic transformation, material roles and expressive meanings can become increasingly detached. Disused boat sheds and moorings in Newfoundland outports may

not long have the capacity that they once exerted as material components in an active fishing assemblage, but they can live on as expressive components of the community's fishing heritage. Expressive capacities can be as powerful as material capacities in imaginations of possible futures, creating irreconcilable ruptures, as the disjuncture in Bill's poetry between the hope of a fishing revival and the absence of the material components required to make this happen illustrates.

The rural identity of places is not pre-given or essential; it is, rather, an effect of coding that may reflect constitutive components, but which is culturally situated, contested, and impermanent, yet also real and powerful. In order to fully grasp these expressive dimensions of rural place, we need holistic, transdisciplinary ways of doing research that go beyond conventional social science methods. To capture intangible expressive components and elusive possible futures, we need to engage with rural imaginations, with creative works of art and cultural texts offering an entry point for this. Yet, we also need always to remember that the imagined rural is not the same as the material, experienced rural. Analysis of films or television programs or literature or art does not in itself show us the rural as actualized in tangible places, but it allows us to explore the realms of possibility in the multiplicity of rural assemblages and can inspire and inform and attune our minds for empirical exploration of rural place-assemblages as we encounter them in their fullness.

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CHAPTER 2

Land and the Poetics of Postcolonial Pastoral

Peter Hitchcock

Abstract

The question of land in decolonization is never less than vexed. On the one hand, to wrest land from colonial predation is a key integer of postcolonial liberation; on the other hand, the land that is obtained is non-coincident with the land that was lost to colonialism, especially if rural populations assume the logic of accumulation and exchange bequeathed by the force of "property" in colonialism and more recently in transnational capitalism. How does anti-colonial cultural expression, particularly in the representation of peasants, come to terms with the complex manifestations of land in contemporary rurality?

Decoloniality is at once a struggle over land, land as stolen, as grabbed, as commodity source, as desecrated, as contaminated, as historically "settled," as politically neoliberal, and as the very substance of contemporary regimes of ownership and accumulation, with all of the ecological impacts that now implies. Land here takes the form of a materialist injunction over the vexed intersectionality of the country and the city, but specifically in the ways the longue durée of the "agrarian question" mediates the cultural expressivity of land and landlessness in contemporary political economy, which will require maintaining a distinction with territory (or, how we not only mistook the map for the territory, to borrow from Sylvia Wynter, but the territory for the land).[1] While there have been explorations of the postcolonial pastoral (Nixon 2005; Wong), often the meaning of land itself remains non-contradictory and normative, as if the logic of disceptation exists only at the level of description rather than in the immanent conditions of aesthetic change as such. The latter remains of interest to me, not to romanticize peasant anti-capitalism as artistic practice – a further idealism of the idyll – but to read the pastoral as

1 The agrarian question is much debated as a measure of modernity and capitalist development, and examines the complexity of the persistence and variegation of the peasantry within and adjacent to capitalism. Marx certainly engages this debate, although it is Karl Kautsky that gives the issue its name. See Kautsky; Lenin.

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a concrete imaginary where land is a space of possibility even when, or precisely because, it is figured within a rhetoric of possession. How does the latter appear as the nature of nature in the cultural representation of land and in the spaces of hope in its contestation?

The postcolonial pastoral is the scene of transaction, and here I will focus particularly on how land is realized in that process. To begin, the question of land is never far from writing decolonization and several examples come to mind. For instance, from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958):

> They want a piece of land to build their shrine," said Uchendu to his peers when they consulted among themselves. "We shall give them a piece of land." He paused, and there was a murmur of surprise and disagreement. "Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory." They laughed and agreed, and sent for the missionaries … They offered them as much of the Evil Forest as they cared to take. And to their greatest amazement the missionaries thanked them and burst into song … The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them all to be dead within four days. The first day passed and the second and third and fourth, and none of them died. Everyone was puzzled. And then it became known that the white man's fetish had unbelievable power … "We have now built a church." (149)

Here is an example from Mulk Anand's *Coolie* (1936): "He had heard of how the landlord had seized his father's five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and the harvests bad" (11). Another example, this time from Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988): "Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land. On donkey, on foot, on horse, on ox-cart, the people looked for a place to live. But the wizards were avaricious and grasping … The white wizard had no use for women and children. He threw my grandmother and her children off his farm" (18). In her novel *Windward Heights* (1999), Maryse Condé notes: "Guadeloupe was full of mulatto women who had been given a house, a carriage and a few acres of land in exchange for their reputation" (46). And, finally, from Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1980): "In his area there was Bharat Mahato. A heavy shaman. Hearing the manager he said, I'll get t' job done, but I must have four acres of land – ten bighas – without ground rent. Manager-Sir said yeah to this wish" (24).

The concern for land is not adjunct to postcolonial narration, a casual detail of everyday life, but is vital in inscribing what is at stake in opposing colonial predation. Clearly, the position here is not that the postcolonial pastoral is only about conditions of exchange and symptoms of expropriation through land and rent and rented land, but I am fascinated by how these moments of malevolence internally and aesthetically structure actually-existing rurality in globality. To clarify this very unpastoral exchange-based pastoral, one might usefully address a decolonizing Global South, figured in a rural dissimulation of neoliberal value extraction where land, problematic for all forms of accumulation and exchange, is, whatever else it is, an imaginative ground for decolonization tout court.

I have three main aims in what is in many respects a prolegomenon to a discrepant critique on the substance of "the agrarian question" today. The first aspect explores what might seem a basic question but one with significant implications for how one thematizes the combined and uneven development of the world system in the current conjuncture: what is the subject of land? Part of my contention is that, when it comes to cultural critique, committed allies of peasant rebellion and resistance often substitute space for land (and sometimes cartography – Teverson and Upstone, although there are exceptions; see, for instance, Graham). This metonymy builds, of course, on a long tradition of aesthetic spatiality, a poetics of space in Gaston Bachelard's sense as a place marker that artfully and appreciably builds on discourses of the imaginary and of affect. Rather than displace place and space in such theory, here I am concerned to differentiate their import, especially given the dialectical nature of Henri Lefebvre's critique (whose long commitment begins with a dissertation on the Pyrenean peasantry). The subject of land is not the subject of space. Put another way, and one elaborated below: you can imagine space without land, but you can never imagine land without space. This is not a semantic distinction but will be explored as an antinomy in how the subject of land can be thought.

The second dimension of this problematic is to address the substance of land for capital. Again, there is a huge genealogy around this issue, and especially among materialist geographers, that remains provocative for cultural critique, or rather, the kind of analysis that more fully integrates the fate of the rural in what the world can become. Although there is some dissemblance about whether land is fictitious capital, such arguments have purchase on the reproduction of capitalist fictions (like the one that says capitalism is interminable). The materiality of land obviously does not exclude its abstraction, yet a materialist understanding of the fictiveness of

land has lessons for fiction where land is its ground, both as a philosophical *Grund* and as an imaginary.

Third, after philosophy and geography, I reflect on the decolonial literary and its theorization. In a move that resists the Empsonian inclination to provide another version of pastoral (and rejects Empson's argument, in *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, that pastoral puts the complex into the simple or, in other words, represents a dynamic rather than a distillation), I want to reconceive the poetics of the pastoral in order to address the writing out of land as a lot more than casual spatial metaphors, and as, rather, a deeply postcolonial cultural expressivity. Such an approach takes seriously the capitalist logic of land grabbing and extraction, for instance, not to indulge in some prelapsarian soft focus and petty-bourgeois liberal virtue signaling, but to seize the imaginary ground of land, and to struggle for a politics of living land (what Lefebvre calls efficacy – *à l'efficacité*[2]) that would realize rather than refuse its base for egalitarian socialization. On the whole, these brief reflections on the subject of land, land and capital, and the decolonial imaginary do not a methodology make, but they do attempt to enjoin a dialectic of rurality and globality where "fixes," spatial or otherwise, fail to grasp the critical imaginative claims on the substance of land.

At its most basic, the subject of land is assumed to be anthropocentric. Did land have a subject before the human invented it? The question is false in the sense that the logic of science, like spirituality, extends beyond its capacity or age. It is demonstrable, however, that the formulation "the subject of land is nature" hardly displaces the subjective claims of the human, and this is as true for the rapacious colonialist as it is for Indigenous populations whose land has been stolen. When the Indigenous activist Nick Estes refers to "our lands" and the "homeland" "in a struggle over the meaning of land" (47), he registers a forceful politics of anti-colonialism (and anti-capitalism), yet a specific subject overdetermines the question of possession, as "ours," and mediates how identification with the land can be thought (as one that includes pastoralism and nomadism). This does not negate in any way the authentication of claims through citizenship or ancestral inhabitation; it is merely to remark that the subject of land is already at work in its substantiation and, because land goes beyond what the eyes can see and the "I" can name, its subjectivation is very much an imaginary imperative. Legal systems often convert this imaginary – they have to, since law is a language of right with formal procedures that cannot rest only on what a claimant, for instance, believes to be the case.

2 See Lefebvre's "The Theory of Ground Rent and Rural Sociology" in *On the Rural*. I will examine ground rent in this regard below.

For Indigenous communities, to submit to legal process carries the danger of pre-empting restitution based on alternative relations of being with the land. These are all important vectors in the co-constitution of land and are never less than contestable (thus, when we speak of settler colonialism, for instance, it is with some irony since whatever else it is, colonialism is never ever settled – as Estes puts it, reworking Mao perhaps, the Indigenous surrounds the settler [248]). That being the case, the subject of land is a heuristic of sorts. How is it used here?

Capital is an economic relation. Land is also a relation, but in modernity it is one of property with relatively finite attributes caught between distribution and ownership. As a relation, the property of land is infinitely scalable, from all of those countries whose names end in "land" down to the parcel of ground one rents (an allotment) to grow produce. Here, let us suppose the subject is itself *and* is itself according to its place (to borrow from Alain Badiou's reading of Hegel[3]). What if we call this placing not land but *land as relation*? In other words, the subject can be thought of as composed simultaneously as that which is immanent to self but only by virtue of its land placing, a material abstraction of relation in which the subject itself is concretized. Surely there is a subject of land beyond political economy? Indubitably, as long as the property of land as relation is not property per se. If the latter is the case, however, then the subject of property in this schema can only be the subject of subjection (subject to land as property). Furthermore, the subject is not the owner, even the owner vexed by accumulation: the subject of land is only a subject to the extent that their subjecthood is mediated by the property relation of land. When theory attends to what comes "after" the subject, it is grappling with a world beyond being and landlessness, the condition of subjecthood as such. We can fight for land as a battle for freedom from subjection but the land that is gained is not the land that had been stolen and, if land as a relation of property remains, then it is not only the Lord that can taketh away. There is always the land that is not the sea or the air, but the subject of land has a shorter history.

It is important to stress that such an idea of the subject is materially specific and its link to land is suffused with historicity. Of course, there are many theories of the subject, including those, as intimated, that theorize its supercession. Any distillation of its extent may be deemed subjective rather than concrete, yet the subject of land is vital to an interrogative critique of landed labor, working the land, and living land as more than subject to the urban, for instance. The weakening of subject-centered reason is a decolonial desire and continues

3 See Badiou.

in the pointed and political deracination of Enlightenment thinking. The invocation of the subject in the present argument is not a recapitulation but emphasizes that the subject of land maintains an ontological hold on forms of the political precisely because of the economic nexus of property and right. To be decolonized is to sublate the reason of that intersection. On the one hand, it appears that with globalization as a saturation of commodity relations a concomitant consolidation of subject reason has become hegemonic; on the other hand, and paradoxically, as this subject has become more "real" its capacity for *aufheben* has become more centered. The subject of land condenses this potential by forwarding the notion that there is a concept of land that can no longer be reformed. Such a position simultaneously informs a critique of the coloniality of power and acknowledges that a large proportion of the world's rural population is not in fact subject to propertied land; thus, ironically, overcoming the subject of land is a future already lived yet not necessarily desired in the present. This condition is a temporal as well as a spatial disjunction and in part explains why so much assessment of rurality is replete with spectral images and ghostliness. The subject of land is haunted by the political unconscious of propertylessness conjured in the figure of the peasant.

Lefebvre is quite rightly read as a preeminent materialist philosopher of space, but it is important to point out that this conceptual critique pivots on land in its socialization. From Marx, he is interested in a particular if notorious trinity, land-capital-labor. Lefebvre is careful, however, to emphasize social space as more than land as property and indeed to point out that land itself is never simply a function of the economic. If we think of the pastoral as living land, for instance, it is not land bound only by an economic axis, by a measure of productivity, extraction, and exchange. Like the living body, living land is a place of transition and not only transaction, a threshold to be realized rather than being an index of the subject per se (hence, by the way, Lefebvre's appreciation of Rabelais). Living land in this sense is closer to what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui writes out as *Las fronteras*, a border epistemology that builds from Gloria Anzaldúa and is highly critical of identity as territory, here the subject of land.[4] Against indigeneity as only locatedness, Rivera Cusicanqui stresses migration and movement. Yes, land is at stake – treaty aims, as Estes points out, must be honored – but again the land lived is not the land that has been taken or rendered as developmental space. For Lefebvre, this space is understood in the state's articulation of sovereignty. It is the violence of such sovereignty that pastoralism decolonizes or struggles against. This may

4 The point is not to give up territorial claims but is to distinguish the forms of subjectivity that come with its acquisition.

be counter-intuitive because postcolonialism has foregrounded cosmopolitanism, sometimes of the arch variety, despite, for instance, the agrarian questions raised by the Subaltern Studies collective and seen in major land movements, from the MST in Brazil to the Naxalites in India (Guha and Spivak; Wolford). For Rivera Cusicanqui as much as for Lenin, this ultimately means the withering of the state (in Engels, at least, "Der Staat wird nicht abgeschafft, er stirbt ab"[5]). The poetics of pastoralism in this regard is not a substitute for political urgency nor is it its description. It is a mode of refraction as much as reflection that confronts the antinomies of land across modernity.

If the subject of land has a problematic provenance it is largely because its logic of identity is coterminous with capital as relation. The heuristic in one is about the coding of the other. In Lefebvre's research, the political economy of space is tessellated by rural sociology, so that rurality both clarifies and complicates the stark opposition of labor and capital. Even in the work of Raymond Williams, a parallelism lurks, as if the rural is noticeably adjacent rather than immanent. Here pastoralism is integrated through what Lefebvre calls horizontal and vertical complexities ([62] constellations of time/space, or, in an aesthetic register, chronotopicity) and permits comparative critique at different scales, like a world literary or even that baleful piñata of anti-dialectics, totality. Wary of reducing novels to a sociological compendium, their rural stories nevertheless bear the marks of capital in the articulation of social hierarchies and even, as I have already noted, in the emergence of ground rent (the rent paid for the use of the land, minus that paid for the fixed capital on the land). Marx reads Balzac on this point, as do Lefebvre, Pierre Macherey, and, more recently, Thomas Piketty. Here is not the place to ponder what puts the nature in naturalism, yet Balzac did more than make the detail the seat of veridicality – *Les Paysans* (1855), for instance, inscribes surplus and extraction as an organic real of peasant labor and rarely as an itemized cost of living. The organic real is not a faithful representation of reality but is precisely a representation, a mediation shot through with matters of form, context, and, not least, political unconscious. Politics are always at stake and Balzac seems determined to disabuse the bourgeois that the peasants are content in being exploited while at the same time refusing any and all pastoral idyll (the use of the word "savage" in *Les Paysans* has a specific worldview attached). Although Piketty loves the fact that actual rents are recorded (for example, 500, 50K, 60K

5 See *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft*. MEW 19, 224, 1880. The basic idea is that the state dies or withers rather than being abolished, which can have profound implications for social and political formation. Available in English at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/index.htm.

francs), it is Marx (and to some extent Engels) who understands this as both an economic and cultural contradiction of dynamic class conditions. Thus, the substance of land for capital is certainly legible in accounting for rent, taxes, production, and yield (even in "regeneration"), but it always simultaneously seeks a *ratio* for these connections, which is part of what Lefebvre means by "everyday" ("*quotidienne*"). Questioning this reason is for Balzac a false appropriation of the land by peasants. The subject of land decides their illegitimacy.

Contradictions abound. Marx, for instance, details the schisms of interest between landowners and capitalists, whose conflicted meanings over land redouble how agrarians and agrarianism may be figured. Rather than a grid of ground rent, therefore, Marx seeks the space of contradiction in its possibility, and he is careful to distinguish rent from interest in that regard. Just as the class concerns are not in parallel, neither are class fractions (a dynamic also redolent in postcolonial aesthetics). A quarter of the world's population derive their livelihoods from agriculture, but smallholders may supplement their income by renting out land to each other and the landless. The key role of land for capital is what we might call its monopoly of disposition. It is this distinct characteristic that informs its valorization within the capitalist mode of production and shapes how pastoralism is thought in modernity and in its decolonization. Yet rather than focus on the landowner's monopolistic acquisition of quantities of land, Marx emphasizes that the key to its valorization rests in accumulation from ground rent. State law does not eschew protections for the extent of land, but it is particularly interested in guaranteeing ground rent as a principle of private property itself. We know there are vast numbers of informal relations around land that defamiliarize the logic of its provision, yet whenever ground rent features in pastoral procedures a socio-economic reflex at greater scale is implicated and the contiguity between private and privation opens out into local or everyday practices of land estimation and its imaginary.

Why, if we are ultimately concerned with pastoral postcolonial poetics, do we need to understand ground rent? Can't we just settle for bucolic identification with the soil, energetic expressivity in its defense, or specific examples of its cultural syntax, the grammar of agrarianism as it were? All of this is important and indeed pivotal of living land. Landowners under capitalism are creative, however, and what they create is rent in itself, or what Marx calls absolute rent. Such rent, ground rent, is not an illusion but necessitates an imaginary (imagine land as a space of exploitation) to suture its niche in nature as natural. Not surprisingly, the imaginary of landed property spread and intensified with colonial prescriptions, and, while so much of postcolonial autonomy and independence is marked by overcoming such order, the subject of land is reproduced in the process of ground renting (which helps

to duplicate and consolidate class power). The power of rent does not just rest in the surplus possible over and above the cost of production on a given piece of land but, crucially, in the capacity of the landowner to withdraw its participation from the market. The market cannot equalize profits as with other commodities – it is the monopoly over land itself that blocks this circulation. It is easy to think of examples where peasant uprisings, for instance, have seized land from owners bound to the principles of property, or where peasants have otherwise contested the market relations of the land that is worked. The massive protests in India in recent years, like Dilli Chalo and Rail Roko, against market privatization and "corporates" is pertinent to this critique. The repeal of the farm laws was a huge victory, but ground rent can persist in myriad ways, especially if living land is surmised as living wage.

Although there is no space here to elaborate fully the concept of land in capitalism (David Harvey's *Limits to Capital* is a useful reference), in general one can agree with Marx that rents do not grow out of the soil. If, as Marx suggests, surplus does not accrue from the natural force of a waterfall but from its monopolization, it is a basis of profit, not its source, which lies with those having the means to establish such monopoly. Because the nature of land varies greatly, so too does the possibility of relative surplus value, from the market value of what is extracted or grown. How much land capital is required (enhancements through fertilizer or irrigation or genetic modification, or non-tilling, etc.) also varies, so it is best not to think of rent as the reward solely for what Marx calls the indestructible powers of the soil but rather as the reward for the socialization of land in capital as relation. Lefebvre is important here because when he theorizes the socialization of space, he is simultaneously coordinating the function of land as property for capitalism. True, a good deal of land as shared or communal is permissible even under the hegemony of ground rent, yet as Harvey among others has been at pains to show, the value portions of land for the production and reproduction of capital are integral to its existence. Any pastoralism that seeks to sunder such capacity, one signed as it were in the proper conditions of ground rent, is thus not just protesting on behalf of nature or its closest advocates, but about the forms of social life in which land can be thought.

Inexorably, thinking land as relation at once entails confronting the difference in class positions around the drawing of ground rent. Smallholders might use this capacity among themselves to offset the ground rent of others. The monster called agribusiness also incorporates farmers on the basis of ground rent, but it is often seen to pay its own rent with the cost priced into the production process. The unevenness of ground rent distribution in the countryside is an important reason that its axioms persist. The feudal landlord and

the colonizer simplified the figure of exploitation, but now its principle seems to saturate every level of exchange and makes some forms of solidarity more imaginable than others. The double monopoly over land in the imbrication of feudal and capitalist interests noted by Lenin appears diffused by class fractions. Using a strict sense of ground rent, one which favors its absolute form, marks it as a small proportion of economic activity, yet the evidence of its practice suggests a deeper structural presence in contemporary political economy.

When the postcolonial pastoral situates the rural in a transnational frame, including its pivotal ecological dimension, it might consider more forcefully how it is mediated if not overdetermined by property relations, small and large, in its worldview. Rob Nixon has usefully suggested that "Postcolonial pastoral can be loosely viewed as a kind of environmental double consciousness" (239). A pertinent riff on Du Bois, the concept also features as a socio-economic impress in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Of course, in an intersectional identitarian framework, doubling can be extended further, but here double consciousness maintains both a racial capitalist logic and an infrastructural denominator that remains as a political unconscious or second nature. To always historicize is to find a postcolonial pastoral steeped in propensities to ground rent, which we might say is a significant basis for efficacy, or struggle.

While acknowledging the various disputes over ground rent theory, the basic idea is to mark the extent to which a decolonial imaginary is sensitively dependent on a pastoralism primed by an everyday – one composed through the socio-economics of land. I am attempting to resist a fetishism of land that makes it an unalloyed source of value in favor of a critique that accentuates how its decolonial fulcrum rests in forms of socialization, including the labor expended upon it. The coloniality of power obfuscates the conditions of realization in land, so that even now change is registered as the transactional substitution of one master of exchange for another more authentic one. Surely, to place exchange in the hands of the Indigenous, or the peasant, or the landless unpicks the *ratio* of the subject of land? In the Cochabamba Water War, for instance, one notes a struggle against the privatization of what enables land to be lived as clearly preferable to the neoliberal and neocolonial desires of conglomerates like Bechtel. Yet, at the same time, if these appreciable victories maintain the exchange function of value in land occupation and use, a certain propensity to reterritorialization remains, as if the trace of monopoly power in the buying and selling of provision attempts to poison progress made. Other factors obtain in each crisis over land, like the pre-existence of pre-capitalist modes of ground rent, and these elements underline that even if capitalist and colonialist demands are repelled, capitalism will seek some form of co-existence, a mixture of communal and privatized socio-economic procedures. All

those differences in the nature of land from place to place continue to resonate, yet each one is "haunted" by a paradigm of possession whose end seems much harder to imagine than ecological apocalypse. The postcolonial pastoral certainly speaks to the latter (a riposte to the rendering of pastoral as pejorative) but how do its complex aesthetic elaborations demystify the former? How, indeed, does it mark triumphs over dispossession while distinguishing possession itself from capitalist lore?

In traditional pastoral, as form, as content, as worldview, the literary mode often makes land transparent to itself: despite a preponderance of "representative anecdote" (which Paul Alpers borrows from Kenneth Burke for his conceptualization), the land depicted exists mostly by what it is not: the urban, the city, and machinic intensity. The "eclogic" is not the ecologic because the realization in land is not at stake. Even when such pastoral renders the bucolic as banal, the terms of identification do not seem to rest on use. Land *is*, in experience, and it grows tropes of lush sublimity. Joyelle McSweeney skewers this "lie of the land" as "necropastoral": "The term 'necropastoral' re-marks the pastoral as a zone of exchange, shading this green theme park with the suspicion that the anthropocene epoch is in fact synonymous with ecological endtimes" (3). Alpers does make the appreciable point that pastoral need not be agrarian to have pastoral motives yet, as I have tried to indicate in my invocation of the subject of land, such drives have a *Weltanschauung* that can be historically specified, especially if one takes seriously the deep connections between the pastoral as imagined and land as realized (recall that I am using realization not just as the apprehension of nature but as an achieved value in use – pastoralism therefore as an epistemic *and* economic conundrum). If traditional pastoral for Empson represents "a beautiful relation between rich and poor," it is small wonder that it is rightly contested in an agrarian imaginary today. True, there are postcolonial pastorals that appear to extend paradigmatic elitist jaunts into the countryside. V.S. Naipaul, for instance, may resist the naïve proclivities of the colonial traveler, yet conservative pastoralism persists in his panoptic gaze over postcolonial landscapes and his acerbic commentaries about backwardness, decline, and peasant poverty. While I agree with Rob Nixon (1992) that Naipaul substantially "invents postcolonial pastoral" (a sensibility that appears and reappears across his oeuvre well beyond *The Enigma of Arrival* [1987]), here thinking land as struggle and contradiction offers an alternative vision of agrarian aesthetics, a difference in differentiation bound to a decolonial contestation over, as noted from Estes, the meaning of land. The rurality in globality at once refuses the convenience of typology, but are cultural attempts to critique and overcome colonial and capitalist imperatives anything more than a contingent array of dissembling symptoms or the

occasional references to the political economy of the Global South indicated in my opening examples?

The subject of land and capital's relation to land in themselves might seem to suffocate literary expression, but part of my point is to stress the immanence of their conditions to aesthetic articulation. This does not excise modes of pastoralism that appear oblivious to their demands, as if one of the problems of rural sociology is not precisely the use of sociology in that conjuncture, yet a significant discord in the postcolonial pastoral today is articulated by a competing worldliness, one in which rural vision is radically particularized but nevertheless provocatively resonant at a world scale. At a very basic level, the concreteness of ground rent blocks not just identification with the land but living land as a social good (a good that does not exclude the ecological dimensions of its very possibility – destroy these and nothing good can come of land). Put another way, a decolonial imaginary must come to terms with postcolonial pastorals in which the absence of rent (differential or absolute) is precisely the reason for pastoralism (whether or not that is in fact conscious among pastoralists in each instance). Where colonial and capitalist relations are at stake, sensitive dependence on contradictions in the production of land as lived insistently ground what we might call critical pastoralism, a pastoralism where the locality of nature, community, and land use constitute a dynamic cultural challenge. Pastoralism can certainly smooth contradiction, but in critical pastoralism contradiction is enjoined with a decolonial imaginary, one which seeks through every practice at its disposal to make land matter beyond subjugation, extraction, exploitation, and the power politics of exchange value.

Perhaps the only thing more complex than the formal contradiction in ground rent for a decolonial imaginary is the contradiction in form represented by the postcolonial pastoral itself. Here, the postcolonial pastoral is read as an understanding of forms of cultural expression that attempt to defamiliarize the terms of living land during and after colonial accumulation and dispossession. The prospects of living land are not best represented by the long arc from the eclogue to the ecological novel, even as the latter remains for me a critical concern. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, for instance, develops a nuanced approach to Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's illustrated letter to the King of Spain (ca. 1612–1615) as an example of anti-colonial imaging. While the drawings appear to follow a Gregorian calendar, Guaman Poma's tableau marks a temporal and figural disjunction for Spanish rule. How can these chronicles of land use and ritual be assimilated to trade as expropriation? More than what Rivera Cusicanqui terms a sociology of the image (12), this is a representational dilemma of colonial command or what Achille Mbembe calls *commandement* (24). Rivera Cusicanqui counterposes a looking with the body that here I freely

interpret as an aesthetic predisposition to live land otherwise. The chronicle thus looks askance at the curve of coloniality and offers instead a parabola as parable that questions inscription as accounting gain.

By contrast, in the Nigerian epic drama *Tell It to Women* (1997), Osonye Tess Onwueme eschews imaging for a different form of postcolonial perspective; namely, the charged dialogue of peasant women who have the power "to make and unmake the land" (7). Here the pastoral is defined not as traditionalism, since for the women in the play this often means patriarchy and predetermination, but neither does it proffer a conversion myth, where that power over land transmogrifies into the perquisites of modernity, represented through the characters of Ruth and Daisy, for whom rural backwardness needs only a good dose of feminist theory and NGO upgrades. This is, of course, a resolutely feminist text, but one that begins in an extended genealogy of women's labor and land, and is thus wary of an enlightened liberal solidarity. The peasant women do not reject the "Better Life for Rural Women" project (or clean water, or electricity); indeed, they go to the capital to support the initiative. Yet, rather than a pastoral primed by country refuge and urban return that favors cosmopolitan progress (seen in Naipaul's fiction, for instance), they reverse the trajectory. Thus, Yemoja notes, "We have a home. We have a place. Let us return to Idu where we know the texture of the land" (9). The move to carve autonomy from "white man's land" is not without ideological limits and contradictions (as is clear, for instance, from the place of education and literacy in the play), but the critique, presented in dialogic disputation, is about deleterious modes of syncretism and what exchange does to communal identity. On one level, saving the land is principally about preserving a way of life and this, of course, is a long-standing pastoral prerogative. On another level, the play attempts to speak the land in the voices of its women and, while this courts an alienated spiritualism (in an English from afar), the words – in dance, in movement, in song – resist strict sociological comportment and translation. This does not mean, however, that it refuses stark and pointed political statements. Yemoja comments, "even the spaces and places I owned in the village, I no longer have. The freedom I had to till the land and earn my living, the independence I had to feed me and my children, I no longer have. Why? Because here I must look into someone's face to be paid for only what pleases her as my new lord" (100). She is of the land but absolutely rent from it as a condition of living. Yemoja is the "mouth of the Earth," yet even here her words are stolen and the play questions the very texture of that transaction.

Can the agrarian question for decolonization be historicized by aesthetic intonation or does this merely extend cosmopolitan projections of the pastoral? Does realization *with* the land counter realization *of* the land? In truth, a

lot of postcolonial pastoral oscillates wildly between the reassertion of local relations and liberal recognitions of such communities while largely remaining silent on their grounds, epistemological, economic, etc. There is a vibrant segment of postcolonial fiction that defends and upholds the rights of those who work the land in the Global South. Petrofiction, for instance, has consistently taken on the avarice of capitalist extractivism, and writers like Ken Saro-Wiwa and Abdul Rahman Munif, among others, have been justly revered for their efforts. While it would be incautious to claim that oil multinationals are low-hanging fruit for postcolonial pastorals (if not for the metaphor alone), one is rarely surprised they have come to represent the worst of neocolonial and neoliberal economic exploitation as well as symbolizing the will to extinction in fossil fuel industrialism. Land, in its ownership and valuation, is central to oil ontology and, while sea and waterways are not apportioned in quite the same way, the infrastructure of rent logic remains. Like space for land, the metonymy of "oil company" for "capitalist contradiction" can be a decolonial shorthand, but nevertheless it often foregrounds the struggles over land in play.

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) is a realist eco-novel with a biopolitical unconscious. Like Onwueme's play, the narrative is structured by competing discourses over land (and it also uses a chorus). Pexton (sounds like Exxon, etc.) is an American oil company that has conspired with state officials to render a local West African village, Kosawa, an unlivable oilfield. As a salve for poisoned water and diminishing food supplies, the villagers are offered edifying morsels of "civilization" and "prosperity" (these are not subtle references but do raise a basic question about hegemonic ideology and its translation on a world scale). Yet, lest we think that Mbue is setting up an easy binary with a straightforward denouement (restoration is hinted), the relaxed description belies a much more conflicted pastoral agency (the title, for instance, is in the past tense). Konga's idea to kidnap Pexton employees is adopted in the heat of the moment, but the strategy ends badly (four of the villagers will eventually be hanged). In fact, Pexton, like the fossil fuel industry, persists and Kosawa, despite its foundation for the peasant community, disappears, lost to pollution and exchange. Much more could be said about the processes of resistance and change, especially through the story of Thula, the activist known as Fire Lady (who also disappears), but it is fascinating how the sense of land is transformed by the sheer force of developmental rhetoric coupled with on the ground corruption and opportunism. The voices of the narrative fight back and implicitly call into question Mbue's own journey, from Western Cameroon to New York City, as if the writer wants to think coterminous yet conflicted conditions of transnationalism. What this means for land cannot be settled

here, but the settlement in the novel provides a new generation with prospects for migration and middle-class aspiration. The full meaning of compensation is a notable unsaid of the text, as if the dead space of Kosawa is a condition of being a subject of land elsewhere. Different tensions over living land arise, some pertinently signposted by reference to political predicaments in the land of plenty – pipeline protests in the United States, for instance, and the debacle over lead-tainted water in Flint. Perhaps this is a further lesson that the contradictions of the Global South should not be essentialized by geographic reference. But where does this leave a postcolonial aesthetics of land?

Lenin once noted that peasant aspiration, like bourgeois aspiration, is materially contradictory and in the case of the former opposes capitalist predation but only by adopting protocols that essentially strengthen it. Possessing land is powerful, but if that power is interlaced with market price and exchange then the Pextel paradigm can draw on resources beyond the oil on which the people may sit. The subject of land does not have to be named but can be aesthetically interpellated as that which historically situates postcolonial pastoral in its capacity or not to think beyond such a subject. In Mbue's novel, Thula embodies political change and she gets to decide on Liberation Day so that, when the revolution begins, the presence of the military no longer matters: "No one feared them; our bliss made them invisible" (312). "This land is our land," the people roar, and no one doubts the sentiment. They seek reparations from Pexton but to fight the case Kosawa borrows from a hedge fund to pay legal fees (such details remind one that Mbue's first degree was in business studies at Rutgers). At the same time, Thula forms a political party to fight the country's authoritarian leader ("His Excellency"). These are not always complementary processes, but they are far from antithetical. Pastoralism now often offers extended cathexis whereby what must be possessed obfuscates the implications through which that takes place. This is not an argument against postcolonial pastoral modes (especially since these proceed in many ways, not reducible to the political economy indicated here), but perhaps by returning to the land in its economic figurations (the real of rent, for instance) we may yet deepen approaches to the conflicted imaginary of rural struggle, one where "liberation days" are still very much before us.

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CHAPTER 3

Monocultural Montage: Towards a Conceptual Dictionary of the Rural

Rowan Jaines

Abstract

This chapter uses the critical theoretical perspective of Walter Benjamin – specifically his notion of the *phantasie* – to explore the destructive elements of history that flash up in the Fen landscape in the East of England. The simultaneous naturalization and mythologization of social and historical forces that appear as fate in Benjamin's historical method constellate in the drained monocultural landscape of the Fens in an ekphrastic form. The architecture of this landscape is a reflection of a desire for endless production, a representation of nature put to work. In this chapter, I argue that a Benjaminian poetic method allows for a novel reading of the rural. It is through paying attention to images that hold within themselves dialectical crystals of loss and rupture as they flash up that the opportunity arises to crack the phantasie that life can be sustained without labor.

1 Walter Benjamin's Dialectical Images of the Rural

In the summer of 1931, Walter Benjamin was to be found on the French Riviera in Antibes. He begins the collection of fragments titled *May–June 1931* (1999: 469–486) with the resolution to save his remaining paper for a diary project; in his description, this pursuit takes on the appearance of a suicide note. The next entry veers onto a different track altogether. A reverie about Hemingway dovetails into something like a diary proper: a description of days, places, meetings with friends, conversations, and private contemplations. In the latter half of this collection of fragments, Benjamin begins to turn his critical gaze to the countryside around him:

> Every gnat that hums in his ears, every gust of wind that makes him shiver, everything near that strikes him gives the lie to his dreams, but every distance rebuilds them again. They spring to life at every mountain ridge in the dusk, or every lighted window. And the dream appears at its most perfect when he succeeds in removing the sting from movement

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> itself, in translating the trembling of the leaves above him into the top of a tree, the flitting and darting of the birds above his head into a flock of migrating birds. To command Nature herself to stand still in the name of faded images-this is the black magic of sentimentality. But to utter a call that will freeze it anew is the gift of poets. (1999: 474)

Nature appears, in this fragment, as an essential point of contact between experience and an alternative temporalization of history. This chapter pursues this point of contact as a methodological tool that is of particular importance to geographic studies of rural sites and landscapes. The narrativized beauty of a comprehensible nature appears in Benjamin's fragment as *phantasie* (2004: 115). It is present in the dream of a sting that can be removed and the flock of birds whose movements indicate migration. Benjamin is describing the de-formation of apparently natural forms that render the methodological contributions of reflexive consciousness futile.[1]

Phantasie as a concept is explicated at length in the prologue to *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928): it glows with a particular lucidity in the non-urban context of this so-called "diary project." The deformation that phantasie stimulates in the form – "gnat that hums in his ears, every gust of wind that makes him shiver, everything near" – alters not the given form itself but the temporal scheme in which the form exists. This is the "black magic of sentimentality" that encloses forms in the time of human meaning. By which I mean a comprehensible teleological order: indeed, the translation of "the trembling of the leaves above him into the top of a tree." The temporality of complex origin and unknowable ends is covered over by this narrative, and contingency – the ability to call into question the narrative of progress – is foreclosed in its absence.

Benjamin states here that it is the poet, not the sentimental nature lover who holds the potential to touch the phantasie image on its own terms, rather than in the guise of nature. The methodological and epistemic orientation of the poet is receptive to "the objective interpretation of phenomena" (Hanssen 812). Apparently natural forms reveal themselves through the poet's method as phantasie: they "freeze themselves anew" in a dialectical image.

1 The tension here resides in matters of the material rather than of consciousness or subjectivity. By which I mean the impossibility of decoding the translation of still images back into organic forms; this futility can be generative in that the material form is frozen in a temporal constellation that also includes repressed elements from contingent histories and materials. I propose that the dialectical image is the site where these alternative formations and deformations might be located.

This crystalized image pulls the poles of the landscape apart by pausing the teleological trajectory of a phantasie temporality of homogenous origins. In this pause, an oppressed past is simultaneously revealed and re-veiled (Dubow 67ff). Like groundwater, the oppressed past forms a layer beneath the unsaturated zone of empty time; it exceeds the spaces between sediments and accretions. When it reaches the surface, it does so not as it once was, but as a strange new admixture, thick with the material of the moment that has just passed.

Later in his diary project, Benjamin writes of taking a trip to the city of Saint-Paul de Vence with his friend, the writer Wilhelm Speyer. Benjamin describes the city with a droll but characteristically dialectic gaze. His tone changes, however, as the friends linger on the ancient ramparts that encircle Saint-Paul de Vence as it blooms over the Provence countryside:

> In the even light, all the lines that human labour had incised in the landscape emerged more starkly. Hedges and furrows idiosyncratically drew their lines and angles. But one would have had to know all the plants by name in order to be able to decode their geometry. Indeed, faced with this supremely cultivated landscape, the untutored townsman stands baffled, like a Westerner confronted by a page of Chinese script. To think that such ignorance is the only common foundation of the majority of descriptions! In most cases, the further apart these Provincial farms are, the more admirably they are built, and the more you realize how snugly they fit into the landscape and how natural their forms are, compared to the inexorably geometric lines of the groves, beds, and fields. (1999: 476)

With the strange benefit of what Freud would call *nachträglichkeit* – translated as deferred action, retroaction, après-coup, afterwardsness; precisely that "mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of … traumatic meaning to earlier events …" (Freud 282) – the rural flashes up in this fragment as an oppressed element within Benjamin's historical materialism. Benjamin's reformulation of Freud's trauma theory moves away from the interior of the individual towards the production of perspective more generally. In Benjamin's theory of history, as formulated in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," singular linear narratives cover over the plurality of placed experience, much like a monocultural field oppresses the histories of the labor and destruction that were necessary to create it. The revolutionary potential of Benjamin's temporal schema is exemplified in the tendency of these oppressed histories to flash up in decontextualized images; Benjamin's method relies on noticing these flashes and using them to illuminate supposedly familiar phenomena with a dark light.

The assertion that "one would have to know all the plants by name in order to be able to decode their geometry" appears in the current moment as the absence of a conceptual dictionary of the rural. We are used to thinking of agricultural landscapes as too ordinary, too inescapably part of life to be of philosophical interest. Benjamin is explicit about the way this "ignorance" results in an inability to read rural sites: "the untutored townsman stands baffled, like a Westerner confronted by a page of Chinese script." I propose that though we are used to confining a Benjaminian perspective to analyses of urban modernity, we should take the "ignorance" that he speaks of here as a reference to his own confrontation with the "Chinese script" of the rural.

In our current moment, the dual images of the impending climate crisis and the rise of authoritarian political regimes pull the poles of the rural – the "natural" and the technological – into tension. *We are, at present, in a moment of danger*. In the past century, yields of agricultural crops increased more than ever before in human history and, as a result, the twentieth century was a time of great plenty. As a global society, we had more food than we needed, though we did not distribute it evenly. The great wealth and decadence enjoyed by some, predominantly in the global north, was fueled by the introduction of a technological agriculture that has driven degradation of land productivity, water resources, and soil health, as well as biodiversity loss at multiple spatial scales, ultimately compromising the sustainability of food production systems. Native habitats, such as forests and grasslands, have been transformed into large-scale, monocultural agricultural systems. With new pesticides and fertilizers these systems have developed the ability to wipe out all growth in an area, apart from the profitable crop: nature appears to have been denatured.

An oppressed past gestures. Contemporary rural battles simultaneously operate within and against "nature," and outside and within ourselves. They demand a critical analysis of the rural as a site of complex histories and contingent futures. *We are, at present, in a moment of danger*. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, arable land prices have steadily risen in anticipation of predicted growing food shortages resulting from a combination of population growth and climate change. In addition, rural areas across the world have been correlated in geographical research with the growing success of the right-wing, populist, and nationalist movements that have outperformed the established center right and social democratic parties in ballot boxes since 2016 (Manley et al.; Rodríguez-Pose; Coleman; Los et al.).

From Benjamin's observation of "the inexorably geometric lines of the groves, beds, and fields" that he gazes down upon in France in May 1931, a crystal formed within my doctoral research into the Fen landscape of Eastern England. I had conducted over 30 interviews with a range of farm and field

workers, service providers and users, and domestic and migrant residents in the drained area of arable fields between Boston in Lincolnshire and Wisbech in Cambridgeshire. I had trawled through parliamentary, newspaper, and local history archives; gathered census, housing market, and economic data; and I had compiled fat collections of photographs, folklore, literature. And yet I felt myself confined to an amnesic surface in this landscape. No matter how carefully I arranged the fragments I had collected, I could not find a way to speak of a place which was created in the image of those "inexorably geometric lines of the groves, beds, and fields."

In what follows, I discuss the specificity of the Fen landscape, not only the progressive tale that has been constructed to cover this landscape but also the disruptive and anarchic forces that are revealed to be at play when the Fens are viewed through poetic, indeed dialectical images.

2 Reclamation and Rurality

> Water escapes me yet makes me and there is not a thing I can do about it. (Ponge 51)

The Fen landscape in the East of England is a swathe of "reclaimed" wetland that curves from Boston in Lincolnshire, through Cambridgeshire and past Kings Lynn into Norfolk. It shares parts of its history and its contemporary form with other drained wetland landscapes such as areas of Kent, Essex, and Suffolk. Since the introduction of intensive agriculture in the Victorian period, this area has developed an idiosyncratic set of spatial characteristics: the islands and areas of high ground that functioned as settlements prior to drainage retain their island form. Market towns like March, Wisbech, Chatteris, and Whittlesey in the Fenland district in the North of Cambridgeshire now appear as isolated satellite market towns. They hover over a mire transformed from a wetland teeming with biodiversity into an agricultural monoculture. The local economy is organized around low-paid work in food production in fields and factories. There are few traditionally middle-class service roles in this place outside of local government, health, and education. The local authority struggles to fill these roles.

This crescent moon-shaped area first appeared to me on the electoral heat maps following the 2016 referendum, in which Britain voted to leave the European Union. It flashed up as an area disproportionately in favor of leaving the European Union. Later in the research process, this shape appeared repeatedly in thematic maps representing high levels of migration following

the expansion of the European Union in 2007; low educational attainment; children classed as living in poverty; and an employment market dominated by low-paid manual labor in fields and factories. The area also appears in research from the Electoral Reform Society as a "democracy desert"; precisely an area characterized by an undemocratic local government due to lack of opposition. This old landscape kept flashing up as an area defined by a monocultural form not only of an ecological nature; this is an area where political and social life is also subject to monocultural conditions.

Monoculture here is simultaneously the image and its undoing that brings into view the temporality of divine violence – that covered-over element of disordered origins and contingent ends. I propose that the monocultural image demands an aporetic dialectical approach that constellates cessation and movement with the temporality of an interminable trauma that repeats endlessly but without a predictable rhythm. In Derrida's terms, the Fen landscape is understood here as

> a point of undecidability, which locates the site at which the text most obviously undermines its own rhetorical structure, dismantles, or deconstructs itself … (39)

There is extensive evidence of landscape management, including drainage projects from the Bronze Age onwards (Oosthuizen; Pryor). The Romans referred to this sickle-shaped network of wetlands as *Metaris Æstuarium.* The latter word, Æstuarium, describes the area as an estuary and the former, *Metaris*, alludes to pastoral intentions, the full name imagining the area as a zone of arable potential that *will be* harvested. It was, however, the political theology of the Elizabethan commonwealth that drove the first state-initiated large-scale drainage program in the latter years of the sixteenth century. New approaches in natural philosophy, influenced primarily by Francis Bacon, imagined the human as separate from all other living beings in their ability and, following Aristotle,[2] subsequent obligation to understand and control the natural world. This was a period of arcadian aspiration that sanctioned great violence in the name of ends. It set in motion a process of weeding that is active in the present Fen landscape, an ethics of eradication of all life that exists in the present but not in the envisioned future.

2 The neo-Aristotelian notion that the human alone is defined by its rationality – by which I mean the ability to sense the world as it is and make good choices – became hegemonic in the Early Modern period in Europe. This emerged mainly from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ameriks and Clarke).

The drainage and enclosure of the Fens was widely debated and documented during the seventeenth century,[3] but they disappear from political discussion during the Industrial Revolution. The widespread migration of rural workers to the increasingly industrialized cities of eighteenth-century England led to new, large urban populations, who, due to their concentration, could leverage and pressure the government in ways that had not previously seemed possible. The political classes looked back to their classical educations to establish peace in the cities and to continue the production of commodities and capital. Over the course of the nineteenth century, successive governments introduced both democratic processes and a steady supply of cheap food to England's cities. If the French Revolution had shown the proletariat that democracy is not possible without the threat of revolt, it had also reminded the ruling classes that stability is not possible without a constant supply of affordable food. This affordable food requires cheap labor, a quotation of the soil's ability to bear fruit for free.

By this point, the drained Fens had matured into the largest swathe of high-grade agricultural land in the country and, though industrial production methods were introduced to the farmlands of the Fens, democracy was not.[4] The franchise was not extended to landless rural workers until 1918. This disparity regarding the civil rights of urban and rural workers is due, at least in part, to the spatial arrangement of drained English arable land which was often owned by absent landlords and managed by tenants who sourced labor through gangmasters from small, insular communities. Revolt and revolution from these communities was unlikely, and improving conditions for these workers would

3 See Eric H. Ash. It is also worth noting that the area was very much part of the imagined geographies of England and their documented ephemera prior to the Early Modern period, when the area was largely a monastic territory. See Blanton (2005; 2007) for contextual discussions concerning the place of Fen landscape within the English monastic cosmology.

4 In 1867, following widespread urban discontent and political pressure from Gladstone's liberal party, the minority Conservative government passed the Second Reform Act, which is widely understood as an actuation of UK democracy as launched through the First Reform Act in 1832. This second act granted the vote to all householders in the (urban) boroughs as well as lodgers who paid rent of £10 a year or more. It did not extend the franchise to the rural working class. This would not happen until nearly twenty years later with 1884's Third Reform Act, which gave the same rights to men in the counties as were extended to those in the boroughs. However, this was to a large extent a false move. There were still property restrictions on this extension of the franchise and the agriculture-dominated labor market in rural areas like the Fens then as now had not generated a propertied bourgeoisie. Most people who lived and worked in the Fens were agricultural laborers and tenant farmers who were disenfranchised by their lack of land and the franchise was not extended to them until 1918.

at least temporarily raise food prices and spark more instability in the city. As well as practical considerations, there was a monotheistic morality at play in the obscuration of the rural poor's civic interests: the idea of one deity, and one chosen species made in his image, implying that the good of this species may reap the benefits of the natural world without labor.[5] This necessitates a view of rural workers as either less than human, less than good, or both; a view that can be seen in the urban myths of web-toed Fen dwellers, as well as myths of inbreeding, bestiality, and mental abnormality associated more broadly with rural populations. It can be seen in the mid nineteenth-century parliamentary debates, where increasing civil rights for the urban poor went hand in hand with an intensifying conception of rural laborers as of less significance than livestock.[6] There was, it seems, no ethical or political imperative to change the living conditions of rural laborers, and the question of the ethics of the intensification of arable production methods that occurred during the nineteenth century was not raised.

The technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution supported the increasing demands of a rising urban population. These new tools and practices are known as the "high farming" system, referring to the "high input" including but not limited to the intensive use of imported artificial fertilizers, high calorie "oil cake" animal feed, and machinery to sustain the phantasie of very high yields. The Fen region was at the forefront of these agricultural changes and was acknowledged widely during the late nineteenth century as the birthplace of "modern" farming. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, most of this fertile land had been converted to arable, farming wheat and potatoes. The old silt islands housed orchards and soft fruit farms, where cooking apples and plums were grown to be sent to the North of England or used in local jam factories.

The Fen fields of the current moment grow cereals (wheat and barley), root crops (potatoes, pumpkins, carrots, and sugar beet), and brassicas (sprouts, cabbages, and cauliflowers). Thirty-seven per cent of England's outdoor vegetables, twenty-four per cent of England's potatoes, and seventeen per cent of England's sugar beet are grown here. This drained landscape is home to an

5 See, for example, Deuteronomy 8:7–9.

6 Following an 1867 report on the labor conditions of agricultural gangs, Mr Fawcett asked the House of Commons:

> Were not those counties represented in that House? and how was it they had heard nothing of that before? The hon. Member for Lincolnshire came down to that House and made piteous appeals to the Government to save the country from the murrain which was raging amongst cattle. Why did he not tell them of that which was far more frightful – the sacrificing of the minds and energies of a large class of the people in the country?

estimated four thousand farms which employ in total twenty-seven thousand people, pointing to some very intensively managed systems of food provision (Defra). This is a technological form of farming that utilizes a combination of pesticides and fertilizers to develop a monoculture. The crop is valued above all other life.

In the summer of 2018, I walked with John, an ecologist, along the River Nene, from March to Chatteris in Cambridgeshire. He stopped suddenly in the expanse and turned around, scanning the horizon. As we began to move again, he spoke:

> What you see here is a biodiversity desert. This is a man-made remote place. It is weird, because in some ways it is wilder than actual wild places. Even time feels funny, it feels like it is moving slower. There is no *aspect* here. There is no perspective, no height, no timeframe.
>
> When, as is the case here, a place has no biodiversity it is impossible to work out what happened and when. It removes perspective.

John describes a space in which all contingency is crossed out. This is analogous with Benjamin's concept of natural history as precisely a violent process stimulated by the desire to sustain phantasie, that narrativized idea of a comprehensible and controllable nature. Natural history appears here as the forcibly imposed stabilization of phantasie time through an interminable discourse of progress "that knows no holiday" (Benjamin 2005: 260). Indeed, the drainage of the Fen landscape is commonly celebrated as a great feat of engineering, a successful step forwards towards the golden age of farming. It was, however, a process marked by recurrent failure.

The Commonwealth state's drainage projects of the Early Modern period aimed to transform this landscape of interconnected wetlands into a singular landscape of arable productivity. However, the material conditions of this land proved difficult to transform. For example, in 1650, major drainage channels were cut in order to drain the southern fens. These channels formed the celebrated engineering feat of the New Bedford River (also known as the Hundred Foot drain) that runs from near St Ives in Cambridgeshire to Downham Market in Norfolk. By 1673, this land was flooded once again. Whilst the northern silt lands, always more stable, were held somewhat in check by "dreins and gotes," keeping the loamy soils of the wetlands free of water proved more complicated. This soil, consisting of waterlogged, partly decayed plant remnants, is incredibly rich and fertile. However, it decays rapidly when it is drained. Put simply, the drainage schemes dried out this soil and decomposed, shrank, and lowered the water table, making the land liable to flood once more. The more

successful the drainage, the swifter the wastage. Even the advent of wind and, later, steam, diesel, and electric technology struggled to maintain an equilibrium; widespread flooding was common well into the twentieth century.

Not only was the land made more liable to flood but the decay of soil that lowers the land and entices water back onto the surface is literally the destruction of the very rich soil that the drainage aims to make use of. It is very difficult to harness the extraordinary fertility of the Fen soils without destroying them. A nature reserve site manager, Harry, described this to me during an interview in 2019:

> When these soils are drained of water they quickly shrink and when you replace the water with air, it is like putting a log on a fire, it just oxidises away to nothing.

Similarly, when looked at closely, the fêted golden ages of Victorian farming were not a success story. Rather, this was a system of farming with large outlays and high risks; it seems in retrospect that the management of the land using imported fertilizer and pesticides was largely inefficient (Perry). The narrative of success associated with this period is also one of agricultural inefficiency covered over by inflated food prices, a process that increased international imports of cheaper food. In short, a phantasie.

The Fen landscape is still liable to flood. The probability of widespread flooding increases as rising global temperatures raise sea levels and intensive agriculture keeps these soils on a techno-chemical life support system. These soils keep producing whilst they erode and the land sinks and shrinks. The work of picking and weeding these fields is still back-breaking, poorly paid, and managed by combinations of legal gangmasters and illegal slave traders. As in the period prior to the initial drainage schemes, the main holder of this land is the state. The county councils of Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, and Lincolnshire own and lease out the largest County Farms Estates (CFEs) in the country. These council-owned small holdings date back to the late nineteenth century. Between the mid-1920s and the late 1970s, these estates were an integral part of a stability-seeking Keynesian economic project in which state-owned enterprises made work for the population. Between 1977 and 2017, the country-wide acreage of CFEs halved in a wave of disposals. Thatcherism and its austere wake de-regulated the sale of local government assets and allowed local authorities to plug their deficits through the disposal of land and property. Unlike most other areas of the UK, the CFEs of the Fen region did not dispose of any of their land assets during this period. From the inception of CFEs up to the time of writing, Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) – home

to the majority of the New Bedford River – has possessed the largest area of highest-value arable land in the UK.

Due at least in part to the obscuration of data regarding land ownership in Britain, little is known about CFEs as financial assets or state apparatus (Prince). This concealment has been facilitated by a chronic lack of opposition in local government in the wider Fen region. In 2019, the Electoral Reform Society published data concerning both the Councils where the highest number of councilors will be elected without voting taking place, and the Councils which held the highest number of guaranteed councilors[7] for one party before any voting has taken place. Drained wetland districts with large CFEs were disproportionately represented as lacking democratic choice and abundant in "safe" Conservative seats. The report refers to areas hosting councils elected without democratic competition as "democracy deserts"; this phrase resonates with the term "biodiversity deserts" that John the ecologist used to describe the Fens fields. Both images intensify when considered in light of the council ownership of a large portion of this arable land.

The myriad resonances and allusions in this landscape raise methodological questions for geographical research. Primarily, what theoretical and practical tools can be used to understand the ghost of a landscape flashing up on a map? And, more specifically, what methods and means can be used to understand how this constructed monocultural arable landscape appears as an area defined by issues relating to a lack of diversity, not only in its ecological systems but in the social, political, and economic structures that it is home to as well? Are these elements related, or distinct? If they are related, is it possible to locate the cause, or causes? Furthermore, what would be the ethical risks in attempting such an analysis? In short, is it possible to attempt to understand this phenomenon without succumbing to the pitfalls of environmental determinism?

3 "It Was the Closest I've Ever Come to Time Travel"

> … every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each "now" is the now of a particular recognizability. (Benjamin qtd. in Arens 51)

7 In the English "first past the post" electoral system, there are two different ways in which "guaranteed seats" occur. In rural areas, seats can be guaranteed through a lack of opposition, if only one candidate stands for election in a ward. In metropolitan multi-member wards, a lack of competition can result in at least one seat being guaranteed for a particular party, meaning that voters do not have a complete choice.

The Fen landscape resists narrative analysis, as the ecologist John explained to me: "when a place has no biodiversity it is impossible to work out what happened and when. It removes perspective." When perspective is lost, the past is not nullified. The past in the Fens is not gone; it has merely been covered over by the phantasie of an abundantly productive arable landscape. This is a landscape where the past, in Benjaminian fashion, flashes up in surreal montages of images, crystals formed of congealed fragments of time whose organizing contexts have fallen away. A Whittlesey resident, Pete, who had worked on local architectural digs shared one such image crystal:[8]

> One afternoon I was digging in a barrow, near the McCain factory, I found Bronze age lamb bones in a small depression. The archaeologists said they were the remains of sacrifice.
>
> As I cupped them there was a flip. It was the closest I've ever come to time travel.

Pete is referring here to a moment that occurred during the Must Farm excavations (2015–2016), which took place in the brick pits of the Fenland town of Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire. Whittlesey is a town in the north-west of Cambridgeshire, underlain by a subsoil of Oxford Clay. This fact led to the development of brickworks in the town, a contingent industry within the Fen landscape. The rupture in the monocultural fabric of the fen landscape occasioned by the brickworks protected, and later revealed, an exceptionally well-preserved settlement dating to the Late Bronze Age (1000–800 BC). The extensively drained and intensively farmed fields that surround this site mean that the finds here, however rich, are stripped of their wider geographical and historical context; their perspective is obscured. The brickworks had not been subjected to drainage or intensive agricultural management and so the artifacts of the Bronze Age settlement in this place had been held in anaerobic conditions that prevented decomposition. Pete's image is partly of a concealed history preserved in a spatial-temporal arrangement, in this case the brickworks, that simultaneously obscures them.

These histories gesture through images. In the case of Must Farm, in 1999, a row of prehistoric posts appeared from the depths of the quarry, disrupting both time and geography. Pete's image does not only contain the barrow and the dig; in locating himself "near the McCain factory," he identifies the context that is being disrupted as one of food growth, harvest, and processing

8 For a discussion regarding the methods used to harvest these dialectical images, see Jaines (108–112).

by multinational corporations. The image of the factory simultaneously links Pete's image to an unknown future Fen landscape as McCain foods has been instrumental in pioneering a new iteration of monocultural farming known as vertical farming. Plants in this system are grown without soil, in hydroponic greenhouses. Vertical farms are free from the pressures created by weather, isolated from pests, and facilitate crop growth at a wider range of latitudes. The introduction of soilless agri-tech prophesizes the end of an epoch in the Fens, whose rich soils have been coveted and prospected since before the Roman occupation. I propose that images like Pete's remind us that the present-day Fen landscape is not only a product of the monocultural arable arrangement. It is also a manifestation of the prehistories of the dreams that wished it into being, and of the "wish worlds" that it has been part of creating. Pete's image acts as a reminder that the material life of monoculture preserves traces of the histories that it simultaneously obscures.

One way of reckoning with the manner in which oppressed histories threaten the teleology of wasteland to arable in the Fen landscape is through a focus on ekphrasis. This term is used in literary scholarship to denote a verbal description of a visual phenomenon: in other words, a dialectic that operates between two representations. Ekphrasis here is used to indicate a specifically Janus-faced form of mimesis that "stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it" (Wagner 13). Following Cosgrove and Daniels, the analysis and understanding of landscape as a "flickering text" has been used extensively to read complex spatial-temporal arrangements. I propose that the notion of ekphrasis presents specific opportunities for a disenchantment of critical theory through designating rural sites like the Fen landscape as ekphrastic. This is a place which is not only a retelling of other landscapes through visual elements – perhaps most strikingly, it is a reiteration of the drained alluvial planes of the Netherlands – but also a visual recital of notional elements, of dreams and prospects of bountiful crops. This methodological orientation allows us to worry the fabric of entrenched narratives of the rural imagination, in other words to interrogate the recitation of images on which rurality is founded and grounded. It is my contention that this attention to ekphrasis facilitates a thoroughly Benjaminian analysis of the rural, one that interrogates how images of the rural alter the relationship between nature and culture as it operates in place.

The Fen landscape asks us to let go of firmly held assumptions of landscape as process (cf. Bell) and to consider it also as the constellation of points of disjuncture. The ekphrastic landscape of the drained Fen presents an opportunity to consider landscape in its symbolization of what literary critic Murray Krieger

calls "the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships" (5). These relationships are imposed upon landscape's mutable form to "'still' it" and to glimpse "the atemporal 'eternity' of the stopped-action" nature of the layers of visual retellings as they appear in place (Steiner 13–14).

This form of analysis requires a methodological orientation that aims to notice moments in place where this constructed landscape "aspires to the atemporal 'eternity' of the stopped-action painting" (Steiner 13–14). Another way of parsing this is to say that the rural requires a critical poetic method. In the case of the Fen landscape, we can glimpse images that gesture towards petrified histories in the material of the landscape. Walter Benjamin described spatial-temporal configurations like these as "moments of danger." The image of the Fen landscape re-emphasizes that these constellations are not only moments of danger but also moments of critical intervention. It is in images like Pete's that we are confronted with the simultaneously interminable and a-rhythmic – that is to say unpredictable – destruction that accompanies the movements and cessations of agricultural time and the potential for resistance against the "empty time" of capitalist culture that they offer.

4 Conclusion

In his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin interrogates the lost nature of the things that humans attempt to communicate with language:

> After the Fall, which, in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity, linguistic confusion could be only a step away. Once men had injured the purity of name, the turning away from that contemplation of things in which their language passes into man needed only to be completed in order to deprive men of the common foundation of an already shaken spirit of language. Signs must become confused where things are entangled. The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence. In this turning away from things, which was enslavement, the plan for the Tower of Babel came into being, and linguistic confusion with it. (Benjamin 1996b: 72)

Confusion appears in this essay as a by-product of an epoch shift that allowed humans to create a phantasie of an escape from their enslavement to the world of things – that prehistoric existence that bound humans to their bodies and senses through the actions of a temperamental and unforgiving natural world.

Indeed, this inability to know is an integral part of working with oppressed images as they arise. In my participant Pete's description of the Fen landscape a picture of the past flashes up in an instant and then recedes:

> You can sense the past in other landscapes. It is not specific to the fen, but I know it here; not that you can ever really *know* it.
>
> If you go down Thorney Dyke when it is snowing, there is an emotion. I find it comforting. It covers the landscape in a blanket, taking away the manmade things and making it a wilderness.

We can understand the layers of featurelessness that cover Pete's landscape as an image of the reproduction of a loss of context that is imposed on rurality under capitalism: blankness is covered over by a white blanket, an unfolding of abstraction. This can be read as the conception of a contrived and controlled nature that appears in "Critique of Violence" (Benjamin 2007: 236–252) as *natural law*. I am referring here to a mythology that obscures a "more precise critical approach" to the concept of justice and sanctions the use of violence in the name of the phantasmagoria of "just ends." Just as this concept is active in legal philosophy and theology, so too does it ebb and flow in natural philosophy. In the Darwinist parsing of Benjamin's moment, a violence of ends is imagined "as the only original means, besides natural selection, appropriate to all the vital ends of nature" (2007: 239). Following Aristotle, Darwin's human is imagined as the apex of natural development, an achievement realized through a process of the survival of the fittest.

The temporal movement of "natural selection" appears as the manifestation of a seal that moves time forward towards a utopia free from enslavement to the natural world. This seal appears in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1969) – the last major work Benjamin completed – in the form of the class struggle:

> … which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations. (1969: 3)

The transformation to which Benjamin recurrently refers appears as the complex prehistoric origins of phantasie; in other words, not one event in the past but a prehistoric layer that acts in constellation with the present and the future. The Fen landscape exhibits the marks of previous phantasmagorical arrangements both above and below the water table in the forms of Bronze Age barrows and Medieval Cathedrals. However, it is the arable, that mastering of nature to produce grain, that defines the twilight-tinged epoch of the Fen landscape in this era of rapid technological and climate change, new financial products and prehistorical bodily needs. It is this landscape, in a time that has just passed, that alerts us to a moment of danger, the emergence of a prehistoric phantasie as it passes through the material of the present.

The simultaneous naturalization and mythologization of social and historical forces that appear as fate in Benjamin's historical method constellate in the drained monocultural landscape of the Fens in an ekphrastic form: this is a place that has been covered over by representation of the rural in a capitalist modality. The architecture of this landscape is a reflection of a desire for endless production, a representation of nature put to work. It is through the intensification of this ekphrastic landscape, through paying attention to images as they flash up that hold within themselves dialectical crystals of loss and rupture, that the opportunity arises to crack the phantasie that life can be sustained without labor. Even in a world where food might be grown without soil, it cannot be grown without toil.

The Fen landscape appears as a manifestation of the desire to make something from nothing, to not only have the power of genesis but to keep the bounty it produces. The metaphysical impossibility of possessing this self-same nothing is also held in the Fen landscape. The ekphrastic image of rurality that we find in this place is a pregnant silence, a moment of danger: this drained place, this industrial agricultural landscape, offers the potential to glimpse the rural as a site of radical contingency.

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CHAPTER 4

Anti-urbanism and "Real Life" at the Periphery

Pavel Pospěch, Ondřej Klíma and Barbora Hubatková

Abstract

"People from big cities don't know what real life is about" – we have all heard this before. Yet, what do people mean when they talk about "real life"? What makes life real – and why does "realness" attach so easily to the urban-rural divide? Based on an analysis of media discourses in the Czech Republic, we argue that people use the notion of "real life" to make sense of the relationship between peripheries and centers. The distinction between real and unreal allows them to make their experience meaningful and link it to the basic imaginaries of modernity.

1 What Makes Life "Real"?

"Society has a center. There is a central zone in the structure of society" – so begins Shils's famous 1961 essay on center and periphery. Shils argues that centrality is tied to sacredness: the central is central precisely because it is close to the values that the society holds sacred. In this chapter, we discuss an opposite case: in the public discourse of contemporary Czech society, *The Prague Café* has become a familiar reference to the polluted, profane center from the sacralized periphery. Used heavily by populist, anti-elitist politicians but also adopted by media and understood by audiences across the country, the term has become shorthand for cultural and intellectual elites whose beliefs and interests are seen as opposed to those of the common working man.

In today's European countries, this is not an infrequent pattern. The political tensions between centers and peripheries have been discussed by a number of scholars (for example, Borras; Cramer; Wuthnow), and the "revenge of the periphery" has become one of the key interpretative schemes for the surge of populist parties and movements (Dijkstra et al.; Rodríguez-Pose). In the Prague Café case, however, we look beyond populist politics. We argue that, in the discourse, the key element that separates the anti-civil Prague Café from the sacred civil values of the periphery is its relationship to *real life*. The urban elites of the Prague Café are perceived to be out of touch with real life, while people who live in rural areas or outside of the metropolis are portrayed as

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the ones who know what real life is about. While this may sound familiar, it becomes less so when we break down the concept: what exactly makes *real life* real? How exactly does one know that certain experiences are more real than others? The implicit definitions of *realness*, we contend, come alive when attached to areas of everyday experience: work, knowledge, language, and so on.

In this chapter, we provide a cultural sociological analysis of what the *realness* in *real life* stands for in the relationship between center and periphery in the Czech Republic. The analysis contributes to the ongoing debates on the spectralization of the rural, as it unpacks the taken-for-granted categories that uphold the hegemonic "naturalness" of rural life. Drawing on literature on center and periphery, on anti-urbanism, and on cultural sociology, we analyze the country's media discourse about the Prague Café and identify its key roots in the social imaginaries of modernity. Above all, these include the ability to overcome resistance to the external world and to act autonomously in accordance with one's own ratio and experience.

2 Center and Periphery: Social Boundaries in Space and Symbolic Boundaries in Culture

The relationship between centers and peripheries can be described as an interplay between social boundaries set in space and culturally defined symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár). Rokkan argues that, in all European countries, the nation-building process yielded a center-periphery tension between the capital region and peripheral regions, and that this tension was key in the formation of the political system. Jennings and Stoker, moreover, assert that there is a divide between citizens residing in locations that are strongly connected to global growth and those residing in locations that are not. This spatial divide is reflected in the values held: those living apart from the centers hold different values and might feel left out of the political vision for the state (Jennings and Stoker).

Peripheries, and rural peripheries in particular, have been a subject of much recent interest for social science scholars. Rodríguez-Pose points out the power disbalance between centers and peripheries, arguing that peripheries have become perceived as "places that don't matter," resulting in disappointment, distrust, and protest behavior. In a study of rural Wisconsin, Cramer refers to "rural consciousness" as an "identity as a rural person that includes much more than an attachment to place" (17). She adds: "It includes a sense that decision-makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural

communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic" (Cramer 17).

Along with social boundaries, symbolic boundaries play a key role in drawing the line between center and periphery. Shils argues that the center is not a spatial phenomenon, defining it instead as the place of political action and sole holder of the sacred central values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are represented and defined by central elites and institutions, which are perceived as custodians who should uphold society's sacred values (Shils 119). The stronger the authority is in a given system, the more its central values and beliefs are imposed onto peoples' everyday lives. Once we move away (symbolically) from the center, the appreciation for the authority starts to decrease – to a point where tensions between center and periphery start to arise. However, the periphery does not possess the power of political action (Shils 126) and this feeling of powerlessness leads to a feeling of exclusion from the central system and its values.

3 The Periphery and Anti-urbanism

The resentment peripheries hold against urban centers has historically been expressed in various forms of anti-urbanism. In its canonical form, established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, anti-urban sentiments were not aimed at the urban form itself but at the social relations that cities represented: these included ruthlessness, indifference, anonymity, and instrumentality, as summarized in Simmel's classic figure of the *blasé* urbanite. In Europe, this view was rooted in the Romantic tradition and in Rousseau's thoughts on the corruption of urban life. In the US, nineteenth-century thinkers like Thoreau and Emerson popularized the idea of a retreat from polluted urban life to pure, sacred nature and countryside. In both cases, against the backdrop of rapid and chaotic urbanization, a set of binary distinctions emerged (Horgan), contrasting the moral values of the city (indifference, competition, loneliness, ruthlessness, cynicism, etc.) with those of the country (care, cooperation, community, solidarity, sincerity, etc.), with the latter distanced both spatially (out of the city) and temporally (in the past). The metaphor of Babel has repeatedly been invoked (Hummon; Lévy) to refer to the moral shortcomings of the urban population: their pride, confusion, and hubris. Here is Siegfried Kracauer:

> The individuals of the big city streets have no sense of transcendence, they are only outer appearance, like the street itself, on which so much

> is going on without anything really happening. The swirl of the characters resembles the whirl of atoms: they do not meet, but rather bump up against each other, they drift apart without separating. Instead of living connected with things, they sink down to inanimate objects: to the level of automobiles, walls, neon lights, irrespective of time, flashing on and off. Instead of filling space, they follow their own path in the waste-land. Instead of communicating through language, they leave unsaid what might bring them together or pull them apart. Love is copulation, murder is accident, and tragedy never occurs. A wordless and soulless coexistence of directed automobiles and undirected desires … (qtd. in Kaes 187)

While this moral anti-urbanism has not died out, it has recently merged with a new wave of protest from the peripheries against the centers. Following the 2016 Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as president, *The Guardian* published an oft-quoted commentary titled "From Trump to Brexit, Power Has Leaked from Cities to the Countryside" (Beckett). The voting in the UK and US has been described as a protest of rural peripheries against urban centers (Wuthnow), and election maps in many countries of the Global North show a familiar pattern: large cities painted in one color, and the rest of the country in another. Together with the perception of rural life as more authentic (Bosma and Peeren), anti-urban sentiments have activated a defensive reaction (Bell): the rural is seen as vulnerable and threatened by the arrogance, disdain, and power interests of urban elites. These elites are seen as alienated and incompetent (Pospěch 2021), yet at the same time powerful enough to wreak havoc on the rural hinterlands, where true values are stored and maintained.

Anti-urban ideologies and sentiments denounce the artificial, alienated life of the city and sacralize the *realness* of life in rural areas: Recently, the notion of *real life* has been unpacked by Norquist, who studies the proliferation of anti-tech discourses that decry technology as "something other than real life." Norquist's observations on the meaning of *realness* in anti-tech discourses are related to those in anti-urbanism, but there are also important differences. The anti-tech discourses refer to a life mediated by technology as inauthentic because mediation disrupts the link between the self and the world. In anti-urban discourses, this link is considered to be disrupted by a number of different factors, including the corrupting influence of money and power (Conn and Stillwell; Slater). The mediated relationship produces socially incompetent, awkward people, the anti-tech discourse says. The urbanites of the anti-urban discourses are, in many ways, the opposite: highly socially competent, slick,

calculating, and powerful. In both cases, however, the key risk lies in the obfuscation of what is really *real*: the true self.

This may sound strange. Are anti-urban discourses suggesting that urban people have given up on their true selves? How so? Aren't city bookstores filled with books on how to find your true self? Aren't there expensive courses and seminars that promise to help city people find their own, individual and unalienated way of life? Indeed, there are, but the problem lies elsewhere: in *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch observes that the narcissist is constantly in the process of searching – but wherever she goes in her search, she always finds only herself. In their travels, in their work, in their desire for adventure, urban narcissists are not encountering the outer "real world." Rather, they are trapped in a never-ending inner search for their selves. A rural farmer will plough the field because the fields need ploughing. It doesn't matter who does the job; the seasons have turned, and the job must be done. An urban gardener, on the other hand, will keep her garden according to her own personal preferences: traditional garden, Asian-style or permaculture? The urban garden is an empty page, waiting to be filled by the image of its owner. It doesn't demand anything *itself*: it is there to express the urban *self*, to show urbanites who they really are.

There is an implicit anti-urbanist (and anti-elitist) take in Lasch's work: the farmer's field is *real* because it has its own demands and its own logic of the vocation – the Weberian *Beruf* – that one must respect. The urbanite's garden is *not real* because it serves as a clothing rack for its owner's ego. In anti-urban discourses, city dwellers are full of themselves and of their egos. And where else in the Czech Republic would you find more bloated egos than in the country's capital – Prague?

4 Against the Center: the Prague Café

In the Czech Republic, the term "Prague Café" became a popular designation for an imaginary group: the country's elite with high levels of education and cultural capital. The underlying idea is that these people have a lot of free time – perhaps too much of it – which they use to have discussions in the expensive cafés of Prague. The term was popularized by the country's populist ex-president, Miloš Zeman, during his presidential tenure between 2013 and 2023, but it has a longer history. The first known references to the Prague Café date as far back as 1933, when the Czech conservative magazine *Venkov* complained about the cultural patterns "which grew out of Prague Cafés" and led the left-leaning youth away from "real problems of the nation and the state"

(Tabery n. pag., authors' translation). An underlying sense of a dividing line between the real and the unreal is already present here: politicians who understood real problems are contrasted with those who take ill-informed advice from those "who move in the circle of Prague cafés" and who, under the influence of "several tables in several Prague cafes, Masonic lodges, and one social club, do not want to see the reality" (Tabery n. pag.). After the Second World War, conservative agrarianism was replaced by the anti-elitism of the post-1948 communist state – but the figure of Prague Café was retained and given a new content: that of the enemy of working people. Politicians and intellectuals of the Prague Café were accused of not knowing enough about real life and labeled "parasites" and "good-for nothings." Here is the communist daily *Rudé Právo* in 1948:

> We want to raise the levels of awareness of the workers. In every factory, we have workers who are aware and those who are indifferent. The latter need to be made aware. However, there are also notorious fluctuants in the factories, who are not better than elements from cafés and who must be dealt with. We must see where parasitism begins. (Tabery n. pag.)

After the post-war period, the term largely faded away from public discussion, only to be rediscovered after 2010 by those whose political careers were based on fueling the resentment of the peripheries towards urban centers. From these populist circles, the term has entered the country's media as a popular designation for an affluent, educated, out-of-touch elite.

We will argue that the critique of this elite is strongly tied to the popular notion of *real life*. To do so, we will use the tools of cultural sociology (Alexander 2011). Cultural sociology is interested in examining how cultural practices and meanings emerge within public discourses and what hidden underlying structures can be found within such discourses as the one on *real life*. The key setting for public discourses is the civil sphere, a space of solidarity which is essential for maintaining democratic societies (Alexander 2006). In this sphere, the community is culturally defined, with this definition resting on an underlying binary structure of the civil (good, sacred) versus the uncivil (bad, profane). In the case of the Prague Café, we can see a reversal of the symbolic boundary observed by Shils. Instead of representing sacredness, the center, represented by the Prague Café, stands for the profane, the polluted, and the anti-civil. The argument against the Prague Café is moral and its key element is its lack of anchoring in *real life*. The Prague Café refers to a life which is, in a fundamental sense, not real, and therefore not deserving of recognition in terms of the values of civility. Life in the rural periphery, away from the Prague Café, is, on the

other hand, *real life* and should be recognized as such and sacralized within the civil sphere. This anti-urbanist reversal of the Shilsean center-periphery relationship constructs the centrally placed Prague Café as uncivil, thus opening up pathways towards a political exploitation of this opposition.

To understand the idea of *real life* from the point of view of the wielders of the anti-urbanist discourse, we have studied the underlying meanings of the Prague Café as a concept which helps people make sense of the world in which they live. To do so, we analyzed over 400 news articles and TV broadcasts that referred to the "Prague Café", collected using the Newton Media database. We looked at articles published between 2010 and 2023 as it was around 2010 that the term started to become strongly present in public discourse. Our dataset was comprised of articles from a wide range of Czech media outlets and news websites, and we selected these articles based on the relevance score generated by the database. Due to the nature of the political interests fueling the anti-elitarian narrative, populist-leaning media, like the online daily *Parlamentní listy*, are overrepresented in the dataset.

5 Analysis

Underlying the qualities attached to the pure periphery and to the polluted center is a core distinction between the real and the unreal. Thus, the main question addressed in our analysis concerns the manifestation of reality and unreality: What is understood as "real life" and what is it that makes rural life "real," as opposed to the "unreal" world of the Prague Café?

Real work is hard and tangible. The dichotomy between real work and pseudo-work is an oft-repeated motif. The Prague Café is associated with lazy good-for-nothings who do not understand real work and spend their time discussing utopias. Here is a prominent anti-EU commentator, writing for a widely read online tabloid:

> Some naive individuals from the Prague café expect that eventually normal work will be completely eradicated, everything will be produced in computer-controlled 3D printers, and everyone will just repeat euro-optimistic phrases in hipster centers.[1]

1 *Parlamentní listy*. "Petr Hampl: Proč Pražáci Volí Jako Zfetovaní Komedianti." 2018.

The work of those frequenting the Prague Café, in this view, does not produce tangible results and is portrayed as merely playing with words – or, more frequently, as the shouting of empty slogans while organizing demonstrations addressing *unreal* problems, far removed from the *real* problems of the common people. Two "unreal" occupations plentifully represented in our dataset were jobs in non-profit sector and in academia. Real work, on the other hand, is tangible, hard, and makes one sweat: "I have strengthened my physique, my immunity, I was happy to see the results of my work and I slept well, happy and physically tired. A happy redneck,"[2] a journalist for a national daily recalls, comparing his experience to that of those in the Prague Café. Another journalist lauds the rural folk who, unlike the members of the Prague Café, "live in the houses they built, drive on the roads they built in cars they produced, and eat food they have grown."[3] Their hands and nails may get dirty, and their bodies may get covered in sweat, but they make no fuss about it: "Any village woman knows how to skin a rabbit. This won't impress anyone, save for the 'tough guys' … from the Prague Café."[4] One of Cramer's interviewees from rural Wisconsin succinctly points out that there is a difference between those who take a shower before they go to work and those who take a shower after work. A similar line separates "real" from "unreal" work in the Czech context.

Real knowledge is lived, not learned. Realness comes from first-hand experience. When referring to the former mayor of Prague, Adriana Krnáčová, an author claims that she "has spent her entire life in non-profit organizations, [and] came to Prague only because it was easier to find large sums of money here."[5] NGOs are considered out of touch with reality, and working for them is equated to not having the real-life experience of suffering, as is the worry-free life of academia. This quality of being out of touch is identified in the speeches and texts produced by members of the Prague Café: "their articles often seem to me like they are from a different planet, like the writings of diligent students or some Kafkaesque officials who, in an impregnable office, create certain blueprints for a fictional, better world."[6] The experience of people from the

2 Jan Tichý. "Kde se (asi) vzala politická korektnost a proč se hlásím k buranství." *iDNES.cz. 2016.*

3 Martin Koller. "Drahoš, Loutka Cizích Zájmů s Falešnými Brýlemi. Martin Koller Odkrývá, Kdo Všechno Za Ním Stojí." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2018.*

4 Martin Koller. "Analytik: Schwarzenberg Před Pěti Lety Byl Lepší Než Kterýkoli Zemanův Protikandidát Letos. Pro Srovnání Drahoš s Falešnými Brýlemi Stahující Králíka. To Jsme Dopadli, Kníže a Podkoní." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2018.*

5 *Parlamentní listy*. "Petr Hampl: Proč Pražáci Volí Jako Zfetovaní Komedianti." 2018.

6 David Zábranský. "David Zábranský pro PL: Pražské Kavárně Se v Česku Prostě Nelíbí, v Tom to Vězí." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2018.*

Prague Café is perceived as, at best, learned from other elites that they strive to imitate, but they are seen as having lost the ability to think for themselves in the process of this "indoctrination" in higher education.

Realness of experience is, implicitly but necessarily, connected to the experience of deprivation in the under-serviced periphery: "In snow, in rain, in blizzard, they wait for the only bus that will get them to work or to school."[7] This association of real experience with lacking services underpins a discourse of societal polarization. The common-sense stereotype of the spoilt younger generation appears against this background when an author suggests that young people's eligibility to vote should not start at 18, but only after having completed five years of "real work."[8] He rethinks his suggestion subsequently, pointing out that he knows a lot of young people who "even at their age, got a good beating from life, and they had the chance to find out what it's about."

Real language is iconic, rather than symbolic. It unites people and doesn't divide them. "Calling a spade a spade" has become a rallying cry for populist politicians worldwide, and the anti-elitist discourse of *real life* incorporates it. Real language is not clouded in opaque symbolism. Rather, it speaks directly and clearly. Unreal language is symbolic, euphuistic, intricate, and, above all, empty. References to "empty words" and "empty phrases" abound in the discourse on the Prague Café. What is empty cannot have any value: "Intellectual empty talk doesn't buy you a liter of diesel of a kilogram of pork."[9] The distinction between real and unreal language also serves another function: through language, one can discern between what is ours and what is foreign. This opens the door to attacks on imported – and, therefore, unreal – language structures:

> For all their seriousness, "Western snobbery" and "political correctness" appear ridiculous to us. Importing "Western standards" often ends up in a farce. However, these developments have seen some success after all: the bearers of this success are the Prague Café. But attempts to spread this (philosophy) to the whole country don't work.[10]

Real language also plays an important social role. It serves to unite people, rather than divide them. Miloš Zeman, the populist former president, is lauded

7 *Parlamentní listy*. "Přemysl Votava: Už Zase Bubnují, Že Nás Ovinuly Černý Mraky …." 2018.
8 Tomáš Cinka. "Vandrák – Haló Noviny." *Haló Noviny*. 2018.
9 Martin Koller. "Drahoš, Loutka Cizích Zájmů s Falešnými Brýlemi. Martin Koller Odkrývá, Kdo Všechno Za Ním Stojí." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2018.*
10 Jan Tichý. "Kde se (asi) vzala politická korektnost a proč se hlásím k buranství." *iDNES.cz. 2016.*

for his ability to speak in a *real way* which is understandable to anyone. *Real language* is a communicative system which draws people together and makes them think about "what they want to say and whether others are interested."[11] The unreal language of the Prague Café, on the other hand, fails in its communicative function. It doesn't connect people, but sets them apart:

> These are the people who bring constant discord, criticism, and negative emotions among others, all the while being convinced that they are superior to everyone else. So, they are deniers of democracy, who divide democratically equal citizens.[12]

"Instead of coming together, cooperating, helping, and improving the country, they prioritize disputes, hatred, inventing obstacles and problems," an author complains about the Prague Café.[13] Language that is considered real thus plays a constitutive role in the social drama of the civil sphere as uniting people. Unreal language, on the contrary, plays the role of the villain in the social drama (Smith and Howe): it sets people apart from each other and breaks down solidarity.

Real life is not just about you. In their relationship to their collective self, the people of the Prague Café embody what Lasch calls the narcissistic personality. These people have "their arguments and their cliques,"[14] and are obsessed with themselves only.[15] Variously described as self-centered, attention-seeking, and egoistic, they live in a world which appears very real to them, but which becomes laughably unreal when seen from the periphery. Like the narcissist who encounters himself wherever he goes, those in the Prague Café make everything about themselves. The world they inhabit is so thoroughly separated from reality that they lack any other measure apart from themselves. Living in a world populated by images of themselves, members of the Prague

11 Zuzana Koulová. "'Nemůžeme Se Dostat Do Médií,' Řekl Kalousek. A Toto Následovalo. Došlo Na ČT." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2020.*

12 Jiří Hroník. "Bordel u Dáši, Rozpomněl Se Petr Žantovský. Kromě Toho Objevil Německou Kopii Jakuba Jandy a Dostal Opravdový Strach. Hrozí Nám Něco Velmi Ošklivého." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2018.*

13 David Hora. "Zdeněk Troška: Pokud Chcete Žít v Klidu a Pokoji, Volte Pana Zemana. Ten Bude Bdít Nad Námi Jako Nikdo. Halík Páchá Hřích." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2018.*

14 Radek Kraus. "Jandák Promlouvá o Kim-Ir- Senizaci Václava Havla a Dobromyslném Knihomolovi s Ďábelským Obsahem: Snad Nás Venkov Zachrání Před Průserem." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2014.*

15 *Britské listy*. "Kartous: 'Nedůvěra k Médiím u Starší Generace Je Spojená Se Zkušenosti z Komunismu.'" 2018.

Café become "hysterical"[16] and start "yelling, fuming and kicking around themselves"[17] when they encounter the real world. The latter is real because the measures it offers are external to the self. The real world will make your hands and nails dirty, and cover your body in sweat – not because of who you are, but because it does this to everyone in it.

Real values are in decline. The anti-urban discourse of the Prague Café, and the anti-tech discourse studied by Norquist share an underlying civilizational pessimism. Wherever one looks, the real is oppressed by the unreal: its values, its beliefs, its relationships. This constant feeling of oppression is personified in the dramatic figure of the dissident, a historically important one for the Czechs,[18] which, however, has been rhetorically hijacked by populist politicians of the left and right. What links this figure with the anti-urban discourse of the Prague Café is a concern about the decline of the real world:

> But who is it bad for? Simply for nihilists raised in a valueless environment under the influence of nihilistic ideologies prevalent in today's ideological mainstream. Simply for the "Prague café" crowd.[19]

The thoughts and ideals of the Prague Café are seen as prevailing in the "ideological mainstream" – meaning in the symbolic city center, the center of power (Dietz). The people in the periphery do not possess a great deal of power but they know what real values are and they can rationally approach and solve problems and solutions that the elites from the Prague Café spend months pondering with no real solution in sight. As rational people, they feel that the real world is under threat from all sides: "The problem is that if a person's brain starts functioning and they begin to process and compare facts normally, such an individual becomes completely lost in the hipster-corporate-correct world."[20] The skepticism towards current developments thus provokes nostalgia for real values, which are seen as in decline. This nostalgia attaches itself easily to rurality, perceived as representing the better past, compared to the questionable future (Pospěch 2014).

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16 Vanda Efnerová. "Šéf Novin Udeřil: Na Tento Seriál by Se Měla Pražská Kavárna Dívat. Nebo Rovnou Vyrazit Na Nenáviděný Venkov." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2019.*

17 Michael Labutta. "Hospodský Palivec a pražská kavárna – Blog iDNES.cz." *iDNES.cz. 2014.*

18 The country's 1989 liberation from the totalitarian regime was led by former dissidents. Václav Havel, the most famous of the dissidents, became the country's first president after 1989.

19 Oldřich Szaban. "Publicista: S Národem to Není Špatné, Ale s Pražskou Kavárnou Ano. Nihilisté Vychovávaní v Bezhodnotovém Prostředí." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2019.*

20 *Parlamentní listy*. "Petr Hampl: Proč Pražáci Volí Jako Zfetovaní Komedianti." 2018.

6 Conclusion: Real Life and the Sacred Periphery

Our analysis has shown that people use *realness* and *unrealness* to make sense of the perceived split between the elitist center and the lagging periphery. There is real work and unreal work, just as there is real knowledge and unreal knowledge, and real language and unreal language. These distinctions are not ontologically valid, but they are meaningful for their users, allowing the latter to make sense of the world in a way that assigns them superiority. In cultural sociological terms (Alexander 2006), there is a deep binary opposition underlying the discourses about the Prague Café, separating the real from the unreal in a strongly valuated hierarchy.

Alexander argues that underlying binary structures are intrinsic to every civil society. The real-unreal distinction might be observed in different social contexts, such as the anti-tech discourse (Norquist) or the current conflicts surrounding social movements against climate change: climate anxiety, for one, is an example of an emotion often not considered "real enough" by anti-environmentalists. Here, "realness" is subject to a socially approved legitimacy: some emotions are "real" because they are considered legitimate, while others are not (Durnová). In the case of the Prague Café, the factors which are asserted to make something real are more diverse: physical tangibility, first-hand experience, but also the ability to bring people together rather than set them apart. Is there anything that provides a common background to all these ascriptions of reality?

One suggestion comes from Han's work on virtual worlds: for Han, the unrealness of virtual experience lies in its easiness. What is real, on the other hand, is never easy. Real life resists. This appears to be the case, too, for real work and real experience as conceived within the Prague Café discourse: overcoming resistance is a criterion for realness, as long as the resistance is provided by an object. A narcissistic resistance – such as when two cliques of the Prague Café argue about their made-up problems – does not count. To confer reality, resistance must come from an external object. Such a perspective covers some of the notions of realness employed in the Prague Café discourse, and it also links the discourse to power dynamics, by invoking a variant of the Hegelian dialectics of the master and the slave: while the slave achieves self-consciousness through his contact with the external world, and through overcoming the resistance of the latter, the master, whose life depends on the work of the slave, loses touch with reality and eventually becomes enslaved by the labor of the other (Hegel). The story of the Prague Café is loosely based on this model: the urbanite's loss of contact with reality will be her eventual undoing.

Difficulties arise when we attempt to place *realness* on the scale between the individual and the social. On the one hand, we have seen that real language is seen as inherently social, because it links people together, instead of pitting them against each other. This interpretation affirms the Durkheimian notion of language as a quintessential social fact, capable of producing solidarity. On the other hand, a good society can take a bad turn towards becoming *a herd*. Herd-like behavior is a negative trait frequently assigned to the Prague Café: mentions of parroting[21] and indoctrination[22] abound, suggesting that the members of Prague Café are easily manipulated: "The Prague Café, they are like a herd of horses: when you ring an alarm on one side of the enclosure, they will all, like one, run to the other side."[23] Herd-like behavior removes people from real life, because it subjects them to the irrational impulses of the crowd.

The opposite to herd-like behavior is *autonomy*. Wagner considers autonomy to be one of the key "imaginary significations" – underlying myths – of modernity. Within the discourse of western modernity, the value of autonomy does not have to be proven; steps towards individual autonomy are automatically considered valuable, because of what they are aiming at. A dependent, herd-like conduct, on the other hand, is considered uncivil and profane (Alexander 2006). Realness, then, lies in autonomy: one obtains real knowledge through experience with real work. One is expected to use one's own (real) language, rather than a learned, artificial one. One must encounter the world as an autonomous subject does, rather than look for reflections of the self like a narcissist. The emphasis on the autonomous individual, as opposed to the well-established expectation of rural life as communitarian, may seem paradoxical. Yet, it has an inner logic that has been well-described by Silva: those on the periphery feel that they have been mistreated by institutions and left to fend for themselves. Making a virtue out of necessity, they subscribe to neoliberal ideas of individual power and autonomy as they feel they only have themselves to rely on.

None of this is to say that the anti-elite sentiments expressed through the Prague Café do not have political or economic causes. Indeed, much of the frustration and resentment contained in *rural consciousness* comes from a lack of opportunities, economic deprivation, and a sense of political powerlessness.

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21 Olga Böhmová. "Kdyby Tak Větší Část Národa Ukázala Těm Halíkům, Lhářům z ČT a ČRo a Mainstreamu Zdvižený Prostředníček … Režisér Václav Dvořák o Nezpůsobilém Drahošovi a Přátelích Kultu Václava Havla." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2018.*

22 Olga Böhmová. "Normální Lidé Přemýšlejí, Kavárna Papouškuje, Popsal Režisér Dvořák Dnešní Střet. Ale Majdan Před Prezidentskými Volbami Nebude, Na to Je Tu Těch Zfanatizovaných Primitivů Málo." *parlamentnilisty.cz. 2017.*

23 *TV Barandov*. "Týden Podle Jaromíra Soukupa." 2023.

The analysis of the discourse of the Prague Café shows, however, that these sentiments have deeper cultural roots, some of which touch on basic assumptions about modern society. These roots fuel the imaginations of rurality with affective power, making the public emotionally invested in a fight to preserve the "real world" of rurality. The realness that the discourse assigns to the rural experience includes a certain nostalgia for the past, but this past is not necessarily pre-modern. If we – together with Wagner – consider modernity as an attempt to create new "solids" in the unstable world, then cities are seen as failing this task. According to the discourse of the Prague Café, the urban experience is thoroughly unreal and lacks the firmness and solidity that was at the heart of modernity's promise. Against this postmodern backdrop, the rural emerges as a paradoxical agent of "true modernity." The civilizational pessimism which sacralizes rurality as a locus of real work, real experience, real language, and real values therefore doesn't seek to bring back pre-modern times. Rather, it longs for a different modernity than the one we are heading towards.

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CHAPTER 5

#RuralGazes: an Autoethnography of Our Ways of Seeing

Lee-Ann Sutherland, Thoroddur Bjarnason, Menelaos Gkartzios and Esther Peeren

Abstract

In the context of ongoing concerns that rural studies privileges certain perspectives, four mid-career academics from this field developed a methodology, #ruralgazes, to grasp how our personal, cultural, and academic backgrounds and positionalities influence our understanding of the rural. Integrating collaborative autoethnography with photo elicitation, we take (mostly self-taken) rural-themed photographs, assign descriptive, personal, academic, and political hashtags to them, and use these hashtags as a jumping-off point for an in-depth discussion. In the pilot study presented here, we explore how, in response to a particular photograph, we find ourselves looking with and against various academic and social gazes.

1 Assessing Our Rural Gazes: an Experiment in Critical Practice

During the Covid-19 pandemic, four mid-career academics came together online to develop a methodology to assess how our backgrounds and personal, cultural, and academic positionalities shape our rural research, inspired by the long tradition of (feminist, queer, of color) epistemological practices across cultural and social studies dealing with situated knowledges (Haraway; Harding; Lorde; hooks). Under lockdown, we had the unexpected opportunity to pause and critically reflect on our critical practices, in the context of ongoing concerns that rural studies privileges certain perspectives.

In 2006, the Preface of the field-defining *Handbook of Rural Studies* acknowledged the importance of recognizing diversity within the rural, as well as the legitimacy of a variety of approaches to the rural:

> Not all rural areas are the same, even within particular nation-states. Not all rural researchers adopt the same theoretical, philosophical and methodological frameworks for their work, even within particular disciplinary

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> boundaries. Not all substantive issues cropping up in rural areas will show the same face, even where contexts appear similar. (Cloke et al. xi)

What is not acknowledged here is that besides rural issues not being researched in the same way by everyone or showing the same face everywhere, certain issues in certain places are not even recognized as substantive from the perspectives most prevalent in rural studies. Despite efforts to globalize and decolonize the production of rural knowledge (Gkartzios, Gallent, and Scott), rural studies as an inter-discipline still privileges Western contexts (Kurtz and Craig; Woods 2009; Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey). The depth of literature grounded in especially the UK and US continues to position these contexts as the baseline, the "normal" to which other research is contrasted (Lowe), an issue well-debated in other fields of scholarship (see, for example, Ammon). Characteristically, the *Handbook of Rural Studies* was written almost exclusively by researchers working in the Anglophone world (at universities in the UK, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). Other, more recent examples abound. The very influential thesis about the "differentiated countryside" (Marsden et al.) – the notion that diverse sets of actors and power relationships impact the development trajectories of rural places – has been replicated globally, while drawing on the almost unique characteristics of the English countryside (Gkartzios and Remoundou). Imaginaries of "idyllic rural life," too, are very much of English and American rural life, with their specific socio-geographic contexts and post-industrial preoccupations (Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen; Sutherland 2020a, 2020b). In addition, the main language of rural studies remains English, privileging native speakers and research into contexts where English is spoken (Gkartzios, Toishi, and Woods).[1]

Many factors play a role in creating this situation, but here we concentrate on a so far under-recognized one, namely the importance of how the way people doing rural studies see the rural is shaped by their personal, professional, political, and cultural interests and assumptions. It is notable that the field remains dominated by white Western men, with non-white, non-Western, female, queer, and trans researchers less prominent (Stone). Our premise is that researchers' identities and backgrounds – conceived as intersectional (Cho et al.) – are not irrelevant to their research and that it is therefore vital to

1 The fact that many languages do not have a direct equivalent for the word "rural" means that the field itself is defined by a word that remains, in many contexts, untranslatable. The issue of the untranslatability of concepts used in and across academic disciplines is tackled in Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014; originally published in French in 2004), which unfortunately lacks an entry for the rural.

recognize and reflect on how, in addition to the theoretical and methodological approaches we espouse, what we identify as, where we have lived, been educated, and conducted research, and what personal experiences we have had of the rural, help to shape what we notice of the rural, what we think is worth researching about it, and what, consequently, ends up over- or under-represented in rural studies.

To achieve such recognition and reflection, we came together as a group who – although entirely white and all from Western countries – are not native to the UK and not all male, straight or even trained as rural scholars (see Box 1). Together, we developed a method called #ruralgazes that sought to elicit our divergent orientations towards the rural. The aim was to recognize our default positions and the frames we use without thinking, and what these cause us to, alternatively, focus on and overlook.

BOX 1 Positioning the authors

Lee-Ann: agricultural sociologist, born in Canada, PhD work in Russia, has worked in Scotland since 2005. White, married, straight, cisgender woman, native English speaker. No children. Christian.

Esther: cultural analyst and literary scholar, born and educated in the Netherlands, MSt in gender studies in the UK, has worked in the Netherlands since 2006, lives in Switzerland. White, married, straight, cisgender woman, non-native English speaker. No children. Atheist.

Menelaos: rural development and spatial planning scholar, born in regional Greece, educated in Greece (MAgrSc) and Ireland (MSc, PhD). Has worked internationally and for extended periods in Ireland, the UK, Japan, and Turkey. White, gay, cisgender man, non-native English speaker. No children. Agnostic.

Thoroddur: sociologist, born to Icelandic parents in the US, BA in Iceland, MA in England, PhD in US. Has lived and worked in Iceland since 2004. White, married, straight, cisgender man, non-native English speaker. Five children and two grandchildren. Raised Christian.

2 Developing #RuralGazes

Once we had come together as a research group and had agreed on our general interest, the next step was to specify our research questions. We felt intuitively that our research focus areas were based not just on professional interests and theoretical or methodological developments in the field of rural studies, but also on personal motives, whether conscious or subconscious. How could

these motives be brought out into the open, in order to enable us and others to reflect on them and their relation to the shape of the field of rural studies?

To capture the way certain perspectives on the rural, in society and in rural studies, become engrained and difficult to recognize as selective, we draw on the concept of the gaze, as developed in literary and film studies, and psychoanalysis. The gaze is distinguished from the look: whereas the look is individual and standpoint-dependent – everyone sees the world from a particular position, which is never entirely the same as someone else's (Bakhtin) – the gaze designates a socially (over)determined way of seeing that is collective and normative. We are born into the gaze(s) of a particular society – its standard or "normal" ways of viewing – and we also align with an academic field's gaze(s) when we join it.

The gaze, then, comes before the look and influences what we see when we look, how we interpret what we see, and how we feel about it. Laura Mulvey, in her influential theory of the male gaze, shows how Hollywood cinema, through the stories it tells and the way it visually presents them, causes viewers, including women, to adopt a patriarchal perspective. Mulvey builds on the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who has argued that we are all caught in one or more socially constructed scopic fields that direct our individual looks (Peeren 2008: 74). Of the paintings in the great hall of the Doge's Palace in Venice, Lacan says that "there are always lots of gazes behind" (1979: 113), meaning that, as we look at these paintings, we see them through the gazes of, among others, those who thought them worthy of hanging in the Palace and those who made them part of the art historical canon. Such gazes are not universal or objective, but can come to seem so, as they – and the power relations in which they are grounded – are naturalized as part of a society's common sense. As John Urry and Jonas Larsen put it in their work about the "tourist gaze" – a concept that has been taken up in rural studies (Fløysand and Jakobsen; Saxena and Ilbery; Galani-Moutafi) – "one's eyes are socio-culturally framed" and "gazing is a performance that orders, shapes and classifies, rather than reflects the world" (2).

It is possible to become aware of this socio-cultural framing of our eyes, and even to look against the gaze (Peeren 2008). According to Kaja Silverman, its physical situatedness (as emphasized by Bakhtin) means that the look can reterritorialize the gaze: "precisely because the look is located within desire, temporality and the body, it can reanimate and open to change what the … gaze would both mortify and memorialize" (160). The gaze's imposition of normative, fixating ways of seeing can be resisted by consciously looking from the unique place, time, and body you occupy, looking in stages (looking and looking again), focusing on details (often glossed over by the gaze), and looking

with others, which will highlight that not everyone sees the same thing in the same way. These techniques of looking, especially the latter, which is employed here, can reveal how even slight shifts or differences in positionality may cause what is in front of our eyes to strike us differently; this may also allow us to recognize the gazes that normally direct our eyes.

As a group, we were interested in what was highlighted or left out by the rural gazes through which we have been conditioned to look at the rural. In addition, we were interested in collectively examining how each of us, being differently positioned, looks at the rural. Finally, we wanted to explore whether, and if so how, we consciously or subconsciously have been seeking to challenge (our) rural gazes and associated power structures. On the basis of these interests, three research questions gradually emerged:

1. What do societal rural gazes (which, in the Western contexts we are embedded in, tend to look at the rural from the urban; see Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey), and the academic rural gazes of rural studies include/exclude?
2. How do our personal/academic positionalities (including within/without rural studies as an inter-discipline with its own dynamic power structure) influence our relation to these different rural gazes?
3. In what ways are we trying to challenge/change rural gazes and their associated power structures? Are we, for example, trying to convey what the world looks like from within (parts of) the rural or to be advocates of/for the rural? And, if so, of/for what/whose rural(s)?

3 Methodology

Initial ideas for how to address our research questions included playing rural-themed computer games and looking at rural-set films, novels or artworks together. These had in common the notion of collectively looking at the same object and comparing our responses in order to elicit the preconceptions our experience as researchers – and the body of work about positionality and situated knowledges – suggested were there but normally would go unnoticed, and which might show us looking with or against certain rural gazes. In the end, we settled on looking at photographs of the rural that we had either taken ourselves or selected to use in our research practices.

To capture our perspectives on the photographs, we engaged in "collaborative autoethnography," following Chang et al. Autoethnography is undertaken to delve into the lived experience of specific actions or events – the researcher studies themselves, using their own life stories as situated in sociocultural

contexts to gain a unique understanding of society (Chang et al. 18). The researcher actively reflects on their own reactions, perceptions, and beliefs, often in relation to an ongoing process. Autoethnography has its roots in the desire to examine deeply sensitive issues such as death and grieving or sexual assault, where the use of research subjects tends to raise serious ethical concerns. The idea is that an autoethnographic method can enable the researcher to assess their affective responses to a particular situation or idea through their personal experience of it.

Emotion is one expression of affect, but affect is broader, including physiological responses (e.g. blushing, increased heart rate) and more conscious responses (e.g. nodding, leaning forward) (Anderson). In this project, affective responses were readily apparent in our responses to individual photos. It is important to note that affective responses, too, have been considered as socially structured (Berlant; Ahmed; Williams). The gazes through which we see the world are associated with affective economies (Ahmed) that, over time in a particular social context, have stuck certain emotions, desires, and feelings to specific bodies or geographies, including the rural (Peeren 2019).

There are a range of options within collaborative autoethnography with regard to the degree of involvement of each researcher in each stage of the process, whether the researchers respond simultaneously or sequentially to the research context, and how the data is elicited. Our process followed Chang et al.: full collaboration, concurrent analysis of the photographs (with sequential reporting), according to the conversation method. We set boundaries in terms of the topics to be discussed, and specified data processing/storage and authorship agreements.

Our approach integrated collaborative autoethnography with photo elicitation, which is typically traced back to John Collier Jr's 1957 work (Harper). Ethnography has traditionally included taking photos to document researcher experiences, but Collier's innovation was to utilize photos as a research tool for data collection. The photos used in photo elicitation can be researcher- or participant-generated (Richard and Lahman). In our case, these two categories overlap as we were all acting as researcher-participants. This allowed us to avoid the pitfalls of photo elicitation resulting from the researcher being the one who gives photograph prompts or selects the pre-existing photographs to be discussed (Richard and Lahman). That we were all able to select photos and asked to respond to photos selected by others ensured an equal distribution of agency. We found photo elicitation particularly suited for answering our research questions because of its ability to bring to the fore "suppressed feelings and beliefs," "explore participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings," and foster "exploration and extended responses" (Richard and Lahman 7).

We specified that the photos used for elicitation must have some relation to the rural and speak to our work in rural studies. Photos would be chosen by one of us and shown to the others without any information about where and when they were taken or what they showed. This would yield responses grounded in what we noticed at first glance and how we felt about what we noticed. We decided to primarily use photos we took ourselves. This means that what is reflected on is not just how those of us unfamiliar with the photograph see what the photograph shows of the rural, but also how the researcher who took the photograph sought to capture the rural (as looking with or against particular gazes). For one round of elicitation, we used images we did not necessarily produce ourselves, but chose to illustrate our research, either in presentations or publications. In this way, we sought to foreground the way personal choices and professional pursuits come together in how we create and identify images of the rural considered of interest and importance.

To capture our immediate responses in an easily communicable format, we developed the approach of assigning hashtags to the photos – rapidly produced short texts capturing our associations in four different categories: descriptive, personal, academic, and political.[2] These categories reflect the differing ways we engage with the photo – our initial understanding of what it shows, our personal response, our professional response, and how we see it participating in a particular "politics of the rural" in which "it is the meaning and regulation of rurality itself that is the primary focus of conflict and debate" (Woods 2006: 584). With this project, we are not looking at politics of the rural from the outside, but situating ourselves within this politics, which is something that rural studies scholars do not tend to do.

Undertaking any kind of qualitative research – even or perhaps particularly when it involves ourselves – requires ethical reflection. That we all knew each other personally to some degree established a foundation of trust, but how open were we willing to be? Could or should we actively interrogate each other, or similarly give space for each other to share what we were comfortable sharing? What about confidentiality? Who owned the dataset? What if

2 On the history and functions of hashtags, see Karamalak et al. Relevant for us here is the hashtag's function as a form of metadata designed "to help users orient in the bulk of information, categorize (topic marking) it, seek/retrieve what they need" (Karamalak et al. 333). Our hashtags express – to ourselves and the others – how we orient ourselves in looking at the photograph by topic marking it in relation to the four categories. Different from how hashtags are used in the online environment, the aim is not to make the photo accessible to others, but to offer an accessible mapping of what we retrieve from the photo, allowing us to assess how this reflects not just our academic but also our personal backgrounds. In using hashtags for mapping and then considering these hashtags as data in our auto-ethnography, we follow Guyotte et al. (112).

someone decided to leave the group? A clear set of agreements on protocols was debated and agreed prior to initiating the research. These included the specification that we would not extensively probe, but rather seek to have a conversation. The dataset was jointly owned. If someone decided to leave the group, the default ownership of the dataset and that individual's contributions within it would remain with the group. Given that we were all based in different countries and international travel was impossible, our discussions were conducted online, using Zoom. To ensure a systematic research practice, we co-developed a protocol (see Box 2).

BOX 2 Research protocol

1. One photograph is selected by one of us and shown to everyone. Photos are selected round by round (i.e. we did not select all of the photos in advance).
2. Everyone, including the person who selected the photograph, writes down (in silence) 4 **hashtags** in the following categories:
   - **descriptive:** What does the photograph show? How is it framed and what does this framing highlight/leave out? Where might the photograph have been taken? When might the photograph have been taken?
   - **personal:** Does the photograph evoke any particular feelings/memories? How does the photograph make you feel and what elements generate this feeling (i.e. framing/composition/colors/sharpness)? What mood does the photograph convey and what elements generate this mood? What is the most noticeable detail of this photograph when you look at it from a personal/affective perspective?
   - **political:** What political issue(s) regarding the rural can this photograph be connected to? What political narrative(s) of the rural does this photograph support/challenge? Is this photograph a reflection on the rural present/past/future?
   - **academic:** What research topic in rural studies could this photograph illustrate? How does it illustrate this research topic (i.e. in a serious/humorous/ironic way)? What is the most noticeable detail of this photograph when you look at it as a rural studies scholar?
3. Everyone presents and explains their hashtags (in changing order), with the person whose photograph it is going last. Besides presenting their hashtags, they also explain why/when/where they took the photograph and whether and how they have used it in (presenting) their rural studies research. An open discussion follows in which we react to each other's reflections and consider what rural gaze(s) the photograph affirms/challenges.

BOX 2 Research protocol (*Cont.*)

4. The discussion is transcribed and the transcript used as the basis for analysis.
5. Data collection proceeds in three rounds of one photo each, with separate rounds for self-taken photographs and photographs/images selected to represent our work.
6. We evaluate whether saturation has been achieved through a preliminary analysis of the three rounds. At that point, a further round of data collection was deemed unnecessary.

Data collection took place in winter 2021. Following the pilot study, for which we used one photograph, three sessions of approximately two hours each (one half hour per photo discussed) were undertaken approximately one month apart. The sessions were recorded and transcribed in full. Transcripts were

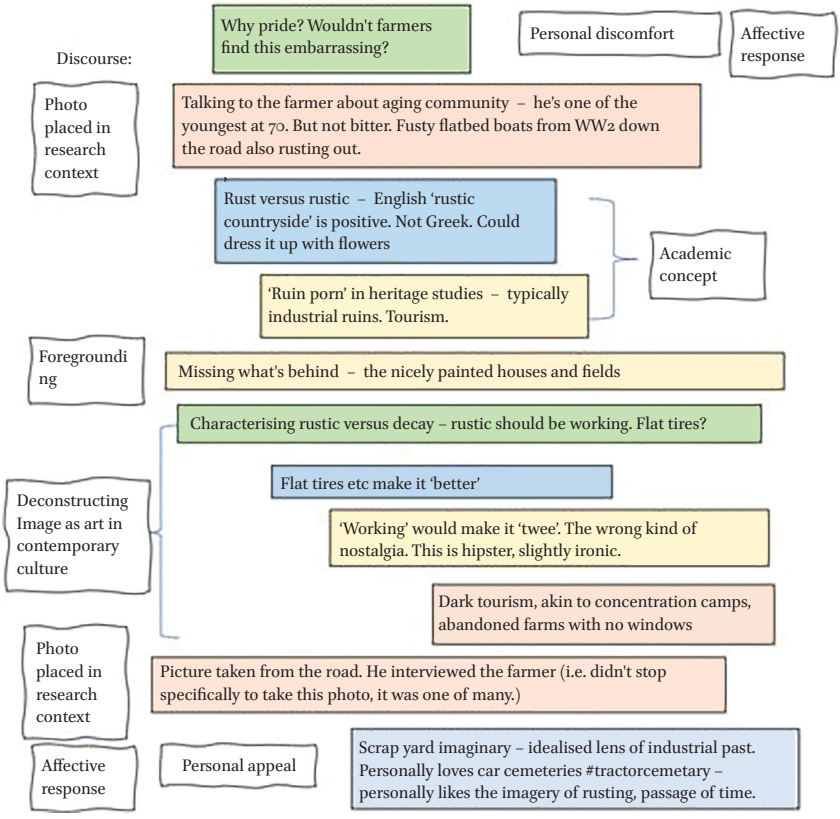


FIGURE 5.1 Example of coding

initially color-coded by Lee-Ann to demonstrate the identity of the speaker, and arranged in boxes to demonstrate when the discussion went in a particular direction and when it shifted. Affective responses and academic themes were highlighted (Figure 5.1). These analyses were then organized by Lee-Ann into table form, to compare the affective responses, the hashtags, what was revealed in relation to the research questions, and what countries were referenced in the discussion. For this present chapter, in which we concentrate on the pilot study, additional analysis of the discussion transcript specifically considered the gazes and looks expressed.

4 Pilot Study: What to Make of a Rusty Tractor?

We pilot-tested our approach on a photo produced by Thor (Figure 5.2), following the agreed protocol. In the ensuing discussion (Table 5.1), we did not seek to address each of the hashtags in turn, instead addressing what we found of interest in each other's responses, focusing on reaching a shared evaluation of how we progressively reacted to and recognized personal, academic, and political interests within the image.



FIGURE 5.2 Pilot study photograph, taken by Thor Bjarnason

TABLE 5.1 Hashtags for pilot study photograph

	Descriptive	Personal	Political	Academic
Menelaos	#rustic	#agriculturalhistory	#retro, #masculinity	#productivism
Esther	#obsolete machinery	#stuckinthemiddle ofnowhere	#leftbehind?	#rural stagnation
Lee-Ann	#deflated heritage	#grandpa'stractor	#downonthefarm	#productivism
Thor	#decline	#ageing, #porn	#marginalization	#selectionbias

Menelaos went first. His initial response was largely professional: recognizing the mechanization of agriculture, the "productivist period" in European agriculture, and the birth of the Common Agricultural Policy in Europe (e.g. Wilson). His political hashtag related the photograph to current political discussions about gender and the rural by pointing to contemporary farming activities being heavily associated with masculinity (Shortall). On a personal level, Menelaos found the image to have rustic appeal – identifying a "romantic gaze" as part of how he looked at it. He chose #agriculturalhistory for the personal hashtag to reflect not only the feelings of the past that the image evoked for him – a melancholic rurality, perhaps – but also to comment on how rural studies scholarship in the West is dissociated from history and humanities; at the time, he was working in Japan, where agricultural history groupings are common within agricultural faculties, something he had not experienced previously.

Esther expressed the challenge she faced in describing the image, unsure of the location and the type of agriculture shown, which caused her to ultimately focus on the age and non-functionality of the tractor. This prompted the descriptive and academic hashtags #obsolescence and #rural stagnation. Politically, she associated the image with common claims arising from rural areas that they are left behind, overlooked, and considered quaint and backwards, but she included a question mark – #leftbehind? – because, as a cultural analyst, she questions the generalization of these claims and their strategic political mobilization by right-wing movements. Affectively, Esther found the image uncomfortable on two levels. First, it evoked summer holidays in the countryside, which she did not enjoy – #stuckinthemiddleofnowhere. Second, she was conscious that as a newcomer to rural studies, she struggled to identify the "right terms" for issues she was confident were being addressed in existing scholarship; she was unsure if #ruralstagnation would be a recognizable term within the field.

Lee-Ann's response identified the first repeated academic hashtag – #productivism – reflecting a shared recognition of productivism as a theme in rural studies firmly captured within its collective gaze. However, for Lee-Ann this hashtag was related to the field behind the tractor – which was well-kept – rather than to the tractor. Productivism in the image was thus contemporary for her, rather than historic, as it was for Menelaos. Her other hashtags and the description she gave of what she saw in the image demonstrated her perception of an incongruity; her belief that tractors of this age are typically seen refurbished in museums, not simply dumped and left – #deflatedheritage. In contrast to Menelaos, she did not see this as an appealing image. Her personal reaction to it dominated her hashtag commentary – recognizing in the image the type of tractor that her grandparents had used, and which she herself learned to drive on. As Esther later pointed out, Lee-Ann placed herself in the image, even, it seems, in her political hashtag – #downonthefarm. Instead of approaching the image through the frame of one or more established gazes, she adopted a distinctly situated, embodied look, expressing direct knowledge of the power and weight of this type of tractor, in comparison to more modern versions. In terms of affect, to her, the productivism she saw embodied by the farm behind the tractor felt familiar and comforting, while the defunct tractor and implement attached left in full view made her uncomfortable.

Thor, as the photographer, then revealed the context. He placed the image in Iceland, where he has conducted extensive empirical research. His comments skimmed quickly over his descriptive hashtag, noting that the photograph could be used professionally to discuss rural #decline. He recognized both the community and the tractor as #aging and disintegrating, aligning the tractor with the local farming community, where the median age is 70 – a cohort continuing to farm "proudly" (as evinced by the well-kept fields in the image's background), while acknowledging that they would be the last generation to do so in the fjord. As the photographer, he revealed that the image was taken in the course of fieldwork in a difficult to access fjord. There was no way for the piece of machinery to be taken out of the fjord, which explained why it was still there. Thor's personal and academic responses were closely linked. At a personal level, he felt discomfort (#porn) at having taken a photo of a deeply personal thing, at having exposed the dilapidated tractor and, with it, the dying community. This discomfort informed his academic hashtag – #selectionbias – which refers to the choice made to focus particularly on the rusty tractor, foregrounding it in an otherwise well-kept agricultural landscape. Selecting and looking again at this photograph in the context of this project confronted him with his performance of his identity as an academic, aligning with a rural studies gaze intent on spotting rural decline (and, by implication, a need for rural

regeneration). It is notable that Thor's political hashtag (#marginalization) resonates with Esther's, but where Esther expressed skepticism about this narrative's mobilization as part of right-wing politics of the rural in various national contexts, Thor's description of the community underlines that in this context rural marginalization is a reality, deserving political attention.

The discussion following the brief explanations of our hashtags focused initially on how the photograph could embody the idea that local farmers were "dying in a proud way," with Lee-Ann seeing a cause for shame rather than pride in the rusted-out machinery on display. As the photographer, Thor could identify what – and who – was present outside of the image as he had framed it: the perspective expressed to him by the farmer who owned it, who calmly accepted that "of course, nobody will live here in the future"; the main road from which the tractor was visible; and the challenging landscape which made it impossible to remove the tractor. Whereas Lee-Ann positioned herself inside the image as a farmer who would take care of the farm in a particular way, Thor positioned himself outside the image as a researcher investigating farming in this specific locale, with a deep knowledge of the broader cultural context, but also uncomfortable with this external expert observer role and the selective view the particular way of gazing at the rural it encourages had him capture in the photograph.

Menelaos shifted the discussion onto the notion of rust, as a striking detail in the photograph. His research into the use of language in rural studies was expressed in his comments about how the rust on the tractor reminded him of the English term "rustic" – rustic as rusty but still attractive, and characteristic of the countryside (e.g. a "rustic village"). He described this as an English viewpoint, noting that "you'd never say that in Greek, obviously."[3] As a Greek academic normally working in the UK (but in Japan at the time), Menelaos could adopt the English gaze and see this image as "rustic" or "idyllic," potentially in an advertisement for a rural AirBnB. Esther similarly saw the appeal of the image, identifying it as suitable for a calendar. Prompted by Thor's personal hashtag – #porn – she introduced the literature in heritage studies on "ruin porn" (Strangleman; Lyons) and mentioned tourist excursions to abandoned factories in Detroit as an example of this phenomenon. Such excursions exemplify the aestheticization of industrial decline, which distracts from critical

3 After the discussion, we discovered that the terms "rust" and "rustic" are not related: etymologically, "rustic" comes from the Latin for "of the country," while "rust" has its roots in Germanic terms referring to a brownish-reddish color. This underscores the important and sometimes misleading role language, and particularly English, plays in determining how we interpret rural scenes.

analysis of the actual workings of particular industries (including agriculture) and the consequences of their decline for those employed in and around them. She stated that had she been driving by this site in Iceland, she would likely have stopped to take a photo of the tractor out of not just professional but also personal interest – admitting to a voyeuristic enjoyment of this type of decay. She thus identified the tractor as a familiar object of both a prevalent contemporary social gaze that frames it as appealing and a critical academic gaze that frames it as appalling (as "porn"). That she felt she, too, would have been likely to view the tractor through the aestheticizing, dehistoricizing lens of the social gaze made her feel uncomfortable, as it revealed a gap between her personal feelings and her academic knowledge.

While Lee-Ann struggled to reconcile the notion that this type of image could be considered attractive – understood as art, even – the discussion delved deeper into the characteristics of the image which enabled this social framing of the scene. Menelaos identified the tractor as a suitable prop for a fashion photoshoot – leading to a discussion of what attributes (e.g. the flat tires, the clear degradation#, the evidence of disuse) made it an "even better" object for various aestheticizing gazes. One social gaze identified here was that of (urban) hipster nostalgia, clearly recognized by Menelaos and considered personally seductive by Esther, who could not only imagine herself taking this picture but also deriving pleasure from looking at it. They described "good" and "bad" forms of capturing the rural in this gaze – characterizing what would be "tacky," "vulgar," "twee," or evoke "the wrong kind of nostalgia." Both were critical of this gaze, and personally concerned that they should not sincerely espouse or affirm it.[4] Thor drew parallels to "dark tourism" (e.g. tourist excursions to sites of negative events, like environmental catastrophes or concentration camps; see Lennon; Light). This discussion led to Lee-Ann's second affective response – recognition that she was out of touch with an influential contemporary cultural gaze that would see this image as appealing.

At this point, Thor changed the topic by adding an additional piece of background: the image was taken from a road. He stated that did not have to go onto the farmer's land – the tractor was on view to any passersby and he had bounded his investigation to what was already in public view. Here, he demonstrated again his discomfort with the voyeurism inherent in empirical social

4 Menelaos returned to his personal attraction to the image in the latter part of the discussion, noting his enjoyment of "car cemeteries," and the extreme appeal of an "idealized lens of a very industrial past." Again, his affective response was worry that the discussion revealed him as falling into the "hipster trap" of finding the rusting and passage of time very appealing on a personal level.

research. Esther probed Thor on the reasons for taking the image. He reported that it was one of many taken in the area, but not for a specific purpose. The act of taking the photo – and especially of framing the decaying machinery in the middle of the image – clearly troubled him. There appeared to be a tension between his desire to show the reality of rural #marginalization (as indicated in his political hashtag) and his fear of being complicit in this marginalization by considering the rural as a site for him to selectively explore for his research (#selectionbias). A similar tension is visible in Esther's response (and to some extent Menelaos's) of critiquing the "ruin porn" and "(urban) hipster nostalgia" gazes, while admitting to their affective pull on a personal level. This affirms the power of the gaze and the need for strategies of looking to counter it. However, because the gaze precedes us, so that we are caught in it, looking against it is prone to generating conflicted feelings. Discomfort, for example, can be attached both to being enlisted by social or academic gazes – as in Esther's, Menelaos's and Thor's case – and to being out of line with them – as in Lee-Ann's case.

Esther then directed the conversation onto positioning, noting the contrast between Lee-Ann's placing herself in the image and the other three placing themselves at a critical distance. Thor suggested that this difference might be related to the kind of academic work we engage in, referencing Lee-Ann's research into what it means to be a "good farmer" (Sutherland and Darnhofer; Burton et al.). Lee-Ann concurred; she was already conscious that she put herself into her study area in a personal way and was interested to see how other academics involved in rural studies positioned themselves differently.

Finally, Thor added another contextual piece of information – that the building visible behind the tractor is a repurposed WWII barracks. Here, we had to call time on the pilot test, leaving this topic unaddressed. A different set of rural studies academics – for example those focused more on rural history – may have foregrounded this feature of the image at an earlier stage and thus have a very different discussion.

5 Conclusion

The experiment clearly led to new insights. We all responded to the image differently and our individual responses also did not stay the same over the course of the discussion, illustrating how the strategy of looking with others, central to our auto-ethnographic photo elicitation, allows both a recognition and evaluation of the gazes we look with and against. Throughout the presentation of our hashtags and the ensuing discussion, we veered between professional

and personal responses, becoming more and more aware that these cannot be neatly separated but bleed into each other, as Thor's related personal and academic hashtags also suggested.

The direction of the discussion was unexpected: although the image was not central to Menelaos's personal or professional experience, because his personal interest in its rustic appeal was shared with Esther (who linked this appeal to Thor's #porn hashtag in bringing in ruin porn) and queried by Lee-Ann, it became the central focus. Another recurring theme was how we positioned ourselves in relation to the photograph, with only Lee-Ann conceiving of herself as potentially the owner of the farm and tractor. The rest of us positioned ourselves either as researchers tasked with the critical, external appraisal of what the farm might reveal about the state of the rural and its politics or as tourists, fashion photographers or urban hipsters, feeling uncomfortable about some of the gazes framing our eyes as we took or imagined taking these positions.

All of us expressed uncertainty about our degree of alignment with the gazes of rural studies: Esther in initially feeling she lacked the ability to describe what she was seeing in a way that would be understood in the field; Lee-Ann in her unfamiliarity with other ways of seeing the tractor than as unsightly in the context of productivist agriculture and the notion of the "good farmer"; Menelaos in his personal attraction to the hipster culture gaze, a characteristically urban-based gaze that it felt inappropriate for a rural studies scholar to adopt; and Thor in having taken and displayed a photo of what he now saw as deeply personal decay in his role as a researcher of the rural, purportedly acting as an "objective" observer, but actually displaying #selectionbias.

As rural scholars, we displayed an evident orientation towards being critical of the dominant cultural gazes evoked by the image and our responses to it, in order to challenge the power relations behind these gazes (of academics versus the people whose lives they research; of hipster culture as an urban perspective on the rural; of the way rural decline may be staged as part of a right-wing gaze). This desire to be critical provoked (in all of us except Lee-Ann) a distancing from the photograph (extending, for Thor, to the taking of it) and tensions between our personal and academic responses.

Our responses also showcase the power of composition – the rusted tractor at the center of the image drew all of our attention, and Thor felt responsible for causing our attention to be focused in this way. Any image is necessarily selective and there is also the medium specificity of photography to consider: a video would likely have drawn more of our attention to the background and context. The photographic image, as taken by Thor, actively framed the

scene through a rural studies gaze that foregrounded rural decay, with a well-maintained field and farm positioned as background, not readily noticed.

The #ruralgazes methodology has illustrated the strange position we hold as academics seeking to better understand and communicate the rural, but yet also to some extent (albeit in different degrees) standing apart from it. Clearly, we bring personal preferences and experiences into our analysis, here deliberately but in our ordinary research practices in mostly unremarked upon ways. We choose to study the rural in various national contexts and with a focus on specific issues. We seek to authentically and responsibly represent what is there, and in doing so, to dig past superficial presentations. At the same time, we are aware of and find ourselves looking with and sometimes against certain academic and social gazes. Our pilot study illustrates the latter is not always easy; even when our professional knowledge invalidates particular gazes, such as the urban hipster or ruin porn ones, we might still be affectively drawn in by them. At the same time, as academics we feel that our desire to illuminate rural life conflicts with our being conscious of the intrusion and power our professional gaze represents. Discussing this ambiguity and the role of our personal positionalities more explicitly as an integral part of our research would allow us, and potentially the field of rural studies, to become more aware of what ways of seeing the rural prevail, what rural issues this highlights and obscures, and how other ways of seeing might be included.

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CHAPTER 6

Rural Undercurrents

Wapke Feenstra from Myvillages

Abstract

This illustrated essay introduces and questions the notion of "rural undercurrents" while describing some of the art projects I have undertaken in the past two decades, including as co-founder of Myvillages (2003). With Myvillages, we have collectively empowered rural and urban communities in different parts of the world to co-create self-representations and share their imaginations and landscapes. Every settlement, my work shows, has entangled rural undercurrents that are part of the land and were created by (rural) migration and the (re)rooting of people. Activating rural undercurrents involves a learning-by-doing curve that awakens an awareness of the cultural layers on which we live our lives.

1 Engaging Rural Culture

With the millennium in sight, I started talking about the lack of engagement with rural culture in contemporary art with some international artists who had also grown up in the countryside, but it was not until 2003 that Myvillages was founded with two female colleagues, Kathrin Böhm from London and Antje Schiffers from Berlin. At the time, Myvillages was an atypical artist-run space, as we did not actually share a studio or workspace; instead, we created a shared space by substantively and virtually connecting the villages, farms, living rooms, and barns where we worked. For me, creating an artist-run space by connecting these different decentralized spaces was heavily inspired by the Dutch self-organized feminist networks of the 1970s and the squatter activism of the 1980s, both of which I was part of in my youth. The grassroots, decentralized creation of chains of solidarity, the implementation of changes in the everyday, and the development of horizontal structures were central to these movements. The fact that Myvillages could finally emerge in 2003 was due to the technical possibilities of that time, such as the introduction of broadband internet in Western Europe and the cellphone, which allowed me to collaborate more remotely as an artist and made international infrastructures and

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networks more accessible. This made it a perfect time to establish an art collective capable of expressing solidarity with like-minded artists; to set up an artist-run space focusing on rural cultures; to work trans-locally; and to question dominant mindsets in art and culture. In setting up the first activities of Myvillages, the feminist slogan "The personal is political" was an important pillar, as we took the villages, families, and rural networks we grew up in and connected them to our art practices. Working in the everyday, and organizing meetings with others while listening, watching, cooking, and creating together seemed a valid and valuable way to begin introducing a long chain of rural mindsets into the art world. From the start, Myvillages was the artist-run space in which I could passionately question the cultural hegemonies of Eurocentrism, urbanism, and patriarchism.

This illustrated essay describes some of the art projects I have undertaken in the past two decades that have empowered rural and urban communities in different parts of the world to co-create self-representations and share their imaginations and landscapes with me – a Dutch artist with a rural background. This practice was then made visible in the institutional artworld through exhibitions, publications, workshops, and events, as the artworld is what I am also a part of. To have and to share access to cultural means is important and art offers space for that. Rather than looking for answers, art can intensify questions by sharing them and relating them to new experiences, narratives, and images. Thus, over the last decades, my artistic practice has been characterized by a learning curve unfolding over a series of slow processes through which I, together with others, re-thought, again and again, the rural as I and they knew it.

Myvillages made me a nomadic artist traveling all over the world visiting farms and villages, but I always came back to the Netherlands. Over the last decade – in the shadow of intensifying climate change – the rural has become more visible and more-than-human-culture has acquired a stronger voice as I encountered and cooperated with new generations of artists and farmers.[1] Dominant Eurocentric perspectives and narratives have come under pressure as international activist movements such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and #MeToo make the urgency of questioning cultural hegemonies

1 See, for example, the work of Indra Gleizde, who has been part of Myvillages since 2021 (https://www.vetgedrukt.com/a-81969986/bookshop/tuning-in-to-the-more-than-human-indra-gleizde/) and the farm Melkbrouwerij, where co-work is being done since 2023 (https://www.melkbrouwerij.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/MelkNoot_inspiratiedocument_online.pdf).

public. Their calls to act, care, and repair are also sounding loud and clear in the Netherlands. Both on a global scale and in locally rooted discourses, pluriversal narratives and unexpected perspectives are shaking cultural centers and hacking leading narratives. This is much needed and at the same time not conflict-free. How to keep the complexity, stay open, and create safe spaces while living in a pluricultural world? In art, we can explore this. Here, I suggest rethinking rural-urban binaries by introducing what I call rural undercurrents.

2 Rural Undercurrents

Let me explain how I came to the notion of "rural undercurrents" before elaborating on how being attentive to the presence of undercurrents facilitates a focus on largely non-linguistic and inconclusive practices, as well as on introducing ways of working that are in constant flux. Every settlement has entangled rural undercurrents; they are part of the land and were created by (rural) migration and the (re)rooting of people. Entanglements are created by encounters with new settings and times: while displaced rural mindsets can remain unarticulated, these undercurrents can also be activated and come to the surface in cultural interactions or art projects. Activating rural undercurrents for me involves a learning-by-doing curve that awakens an awareness of the cultural layers on which we live our lives. Even in metropoles we can activate rural undercurrents, by examining geological and archeological layers or by learning about former farmlands, but also by looking for the rural mindsets transported there by migrants from rural areas close and far. Rural undercurrents are expressed in the everyday through habits, cultural practices, and memories, as rural mindsets, rather than being erased by urbanization processes, linger within the urban.

It was in the Chinese metropole of Guangzhou in 2017 that this again became clear to me. I had brought along a prepared moleskin and some dried beans that came from Beetsterzwaag in Friesland – a village close to the dairy farm where I grew up. The moleskin and beans were part of an art project developed with Kunsthuis Syb in 2016, in which we focused on local skills, activism, and hunting in this Frisian village.[2] To introduce my home country in China, we took the moleskin and beans with us in Guangzhou when we went out in

2 https://www.wapke.nl/collections/detail.php?id=46.

the evenings as a means of striking up a conversation with the locals. Through my interpreter Jinglun Zhu – who spoke Mandarin – we found out that these locals had migrated from different parts of rural China. There, in that metropolis, workers who made bags, clothes, and shoes in workshops during the day could tell me all about life in the Chinese countryside. But no one in Guangzhou was interested in the specific rural knowledge they bring with them. The workshops just need their labor, and the migrant workers hope for a future not connected to tilling the soil. There, far away from home, I became curious about Rotterdam Zuid, a relatively young part of Rotterdam where I have had my studio since 1998 and where you can still find people from generations that came directly from the countryside. As said, I too am a rural migrant and, as a farmer's daughter, I know only too well that the countryside never leaves you. I wondered whether other Rotterdammers felt the same way. That was the start of the Boerenzij art project (Figure 6.1).



FIGURE 6.1 2018 Boerenzij fieldtrip to a local farm with Dutch-Moroccan citizens from Rotterdam-South
PHOTO BY MYVILLAGES

3 Boerenzij (The Rural Side), 2018–2020

Boerenzij (translated as The Rural Side, literally Farmers' Side) is the old, denigrating nickname for the Southern part of Rotterdam, referring to its

population, mainly consisting of migrants from the Dutch countryside, Southern Europe, Morocco, Turkey, and other countries. Rural migration to the South of Rotterdam started over a hundred years ago during the construction of the Rotterdam ports on the south bank of the river Maas. The harbor and greenhouses, requiring a large labor force, attract new residents to this day. All Boerenzij residents live on former farmland, with the soil developed for construction and urban dwelling. After the harbors were excavated, the surrounding polder land was elevated; then, construction sand was added along with rubble from World War Two bombardments and post-War urban development. The remaining farmland could be farmed till the mid-1970s.

In the Boerenzij project, we learned about the geological layers, heard archaeological stories of first settlements, and met farmers and land workers aged over 85 who still have lively memories of the disrupting war and their farming activities on the south bank. In a yearlong trajectory, we met and learned from them, as well as from migrants to the Boerenzij, about their former farmlands, in the Netherlands or far away and left behind because of economic stress, war, or climate change. We held drawing sessions, visited allotment gardens, shared kale dinners, read poetry aloud, and sang songs together. We found that all rural migrants have enriched the Boerenzij by combining their rural mindsets with local soils and urban lifestyles. However, the Boerenzij now faces an intense problem: gentrification. The inhabitants are increasingly being driven out by large capital seeking to transform the South of Rotterdam. The layered micro-analysis of this Southern part of Rotterdam forms part of a wider concern about and investigation into how we can re-root together and learn from our rural undercurrents instead of erasing them. With Boerenzij, I did not aim to produce a purely local art project but rather, in the words of Walter Benjamin when he compares the making of a micro-analysis to the creation of a phased crystal, to expose the structure of a greater dynamic by focusing on a single moment.[3]

4 The Best Place, 2007

How do we value where we live? In the summer of 2007, I parked myself in the rural east of the Netherlands, in the municipality of Hardenberg. Every day, I

3 See Pietsie Feenstra on The Best Place, Hardenberg 2007: https://www.wapke.nl/text/detail.php?id=49.

visited a different place that had been nominated as "The Best Place" by a resident. Flyers had been distributed door to door in advance with a request for nominations. This was not exactly a routine request in an area with a declining population, but nominations nonetheless poured in, with some places only mentioned once, while others were clear favorites for many. I visited the first 14 places suggested and marked each one for a day with a neon sign on a text cart reading "The Best Place." My journey to the best places took place in the real world and was metaphorical at the same time. While there is no objectively best place, when asked, people are able to pick a best place as the place where they most like to be, where they do things, make plans, and look back. The Best Place project is about teasing out the beauty of settling down in the countryside, but also about recognizing that rural life is not always or only beautiful. People do things in their best place, so I invited the nominators to tell me what I could do there with them on the day of my visit. We picnicked, went on tours, made a herbarium, and went to some more touristy places where we were bombarded with information from passersby. The visited places will continue to change and enchant in different ways. That is the culture of these places. To find out what happened there, who lived and worked there, and what encounters we had at the best places, you can read the book made with the people of Hardenberg.[4]

From the book, you can learn that looking for the best place in a rural area with a declining population is a statement about how dwelling and (re)rooting is a verb, not a static situation. For example, I spent a day with a teacher who found a job in Hardenberg in the mid-1990s when she had just graduated and was unable to find work close to home. She missed the polder and the sea air with which she grew up. Her best place was a canal built more than a century ago to transport peat to the West of the Netherlands. It is now used for recreation; rowing fanatically, she showed me how being on the water makes her feel relaxed. This canal would never be included in a tourist guide to the area, but for her it was by far the best place, which is why I put it on the cover of the first distributed art book about Hardenberg (Figure 6.2).

4 https://www.japsambooks.nl/products/the-best-place-de-beste-plek.

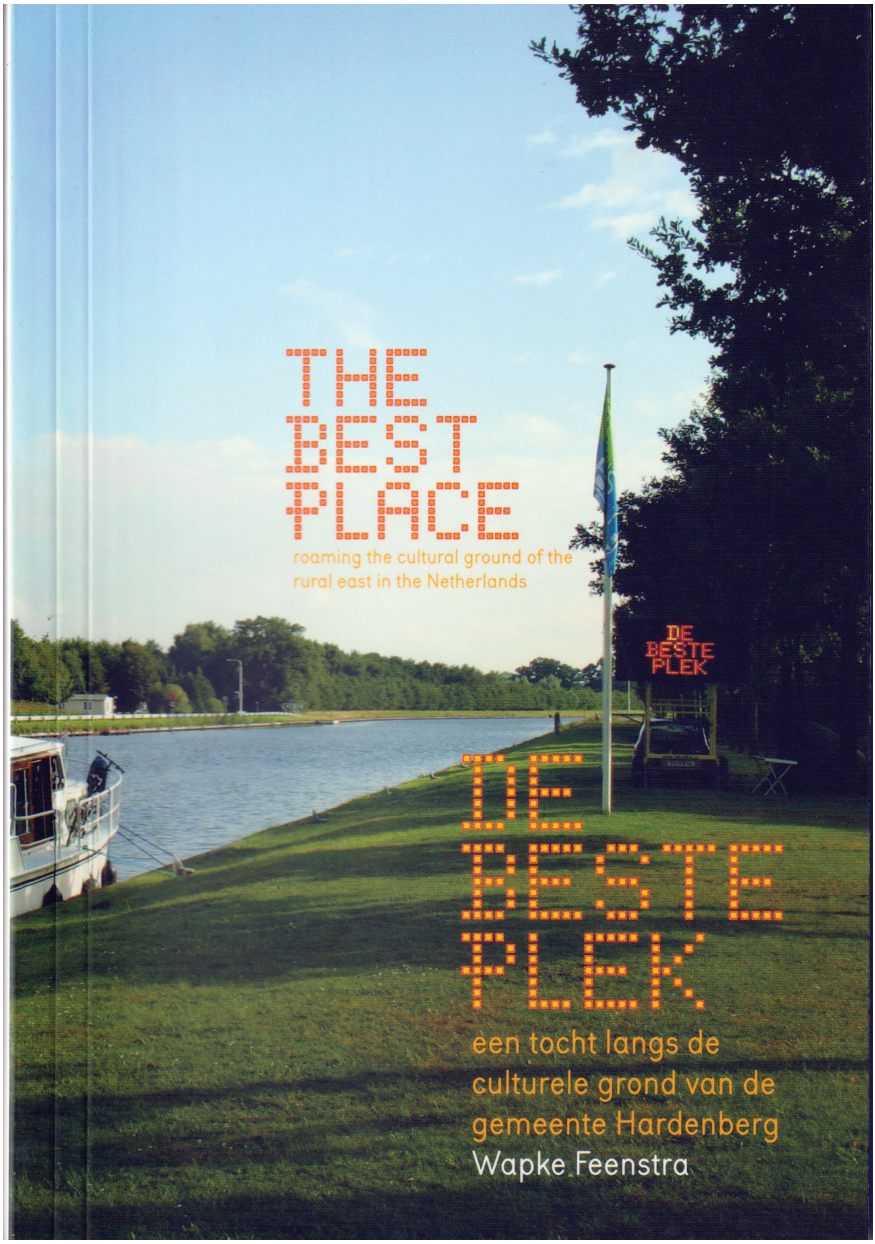


FIGURE 6.2 2007 *The Best Place*. Book cover with image of a canal near Hardenberg nominated as the best place
PHOTO BY WAPKE FEENSTRA

5 Former Farmland, 2007–2009

In 2007, when Zaragoza was in the midst of urbanization, I started digging up some stories about former farmland along the Ebro River in Spain.[5] Farmland is part of everyone's cultural heritage in this area, and this land was being reused as a location for new construction projects and urban recreation areas. All eight farmers that were bought out got a good price for their land and either acquired new land or decided to stop farming (Figure 6.3). The former farmland was covered in construction sand, taking away not just the memory of a piece of land about to be redeveloped but also covering over a wealth of knowledge about land that was worked for generations. In Zaragoza, the former farmland was the fertile soil along the Ebro, already mentioned as agricultural land around the eleventh century, that became part of the Expo 2008 site and the urbanization of Zaragoza, as the city wanted to build fancy offices close to its historical center. The farmland was now more valuable without agricultural activities, so the farmers were displaced to more remote areas.



FIGURE 6.3 2008 former farmland. After the expropriation, the farmer bought agricultural land south of Zaragoza. The land is not suitable for most of his crops, but Swiss chard does well.
PHOTO BY WAPKE FEENSTRA

5 See: www.formerfarmland.nl.

When farmland is appropriated for other purposes, the personal stories and knowledge about the influence of the water and the soil on the harvest no longer seem to matter, but the Former Farmland project sought to counter this. Walks guided by some of the farmers, to which visitors to the Expo 2008 were invited, took us past landmarks such as trees and remains of old country roads. A digital map with stories about the former farmland was also created. Reading out loud or walking alone while reading personal stories of land use encouraged the semiotic reading of certain visible landmarks. While walking and talking, cultural values like the fig tree planted to remember their uncle who died in the Spanish Civil War or the ways of dealing with floods and dryness on plots of land along the Ebro river were highlighted. Former Farmland awakened an awareness of the layered culture of areas being urbanized and the idea of this layering – of looking for rural undercurrents in places that no longer appear rural – has remained part of my art practice ever since.

6 Landmarks

Marking the land with a (new) memory. Landscape as a genre makes it possible, among other things, to gaze at our environment, to objectify nature, and to feel detached from the non-human dynamics that surround us. At the same time, landscapes are never clear-cut. All landscapes are illusionary, ungraspable. For four decades now, I have been dwelling a lot in urban landscapes and there, the way people stare at each other in distancing ways often reminds me of the way rural landscapes are gazed at. One method to stop gazing that I want to introduce here is soil sampling with an auger, which literally makes a mark in the land, a landmark that we can attach to through a different mode of looking than the gaze (Figure 6.4).

In my art projects, space is often made to create new landmarks and to question how we see the evolution of culture in the rural and urban landscapes we work. Because landmarks are made in landscapes, I will first try to define the word "landscape." In the 1960s, I grew up thinking that the piece of land was just there to be farmed or walked over to reach the next field or meadow – and so on. Meanwhile, I looked at the beautiful skies and moving clouds that often came from the North Sea. It was only later on, visiting museums as a young student to see the works of Van Gogh and the painters of the Hague School that I learned that landscape is also a genre that can channel indefinable feelings and narrate our relationship to our environment. In Ton Lemaire's book *Filosofie van het Landschap* (*Philosophy of the Landscape*), he explains how landscape emerged as a genre in painting around 1450 "when



FIGURE 6.4 2007–2024 soil sampling leaves a mark in the soil and breaks the horizontal gaze on the landscape
PHOTO BY WAPKE FEENSTRA

Petrarch – commonly regarded as the first modern European in the history of European culture – climbed Mont Ventoux," and how five phases in the development of western landscape painting can be distinguished: "*mapping the space, settlement, isolation, reconciliation and deracination*" (Feenstra, Feenstra, and Myvillages 59–60, emphasis in original). This last phase is still active because although, according to Lemaire, deracination started in 1870 and first developed in parallel with industrialization to further objectify and uproot the then existing landscapes, the current phase of deracination has caused the landscape genre to become even more uprooted.

Since the word "landscape" finds its origin in the Dutch word *landschap* – and the international popularity of this word derives from Dutch and Flemish painting[6] – landscape should be seen as a specific cultural construction. In Dutch, *landschap* denotes at the same time the imagination of the land and the land itself, bringing together and intertwining physical and mental sensations. When walking through a landscape, our bodies can be triggered by landmarks, and the landmarks in turn are brought alive by our senses and the

6 https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/landscapes/background1.html.

inner landscapes we carry with us. Memories can linger in neighborhoods and on the land. We can feel the energy of these memories as we walk in urban or rural landscapes, where landmarks provide visible or otherwise sensible points of navigation.

Working in rural areas has made my art practice much more performative and relational. All my art projects have emerged where persons, bodies, and locations meet. Being somewhere and spending time with people from there is an essential part of my way of working (Figure 6.5). Here, I would like to quote Mike Pearson (1949–2022), performance artist and Myvillages colleague since 2003, who states that any performative action can activate landmarks, as long as "it offers conceptual and analytical approaches that work horizontally across the terrain and at the same time vertically through time: performance becomes a topographical phenomenon of both natural history and local history" (3). For Mike, even a scar on his knee, which resulted from playing in the village street when he was a child and which he showed during a performance at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht in 2002, is a landmark.

During my research about the Northern Netherlands for the book accompanying the Landmarks project, *A Photographic Portrait of a Landscape*,



FIGURE 6.5 2017 Huangbian Bag. Oral history and co-design gathering in the streets of the Urban Village of Huangbian in Guangzhou, China
PHOTO BY TIMES MUSEUM GUANGZHOU

co-authored with my sister Pietsie Feenstra, I photographed the creation of landmarks by drilling for soil with my father on our family's land (Figure 6.6). The photos mark the last time I engaged in soil sampling while walking the farmland with him. After he died, in 2007, I started examining soil with land workers around the world. I am particularly interested in what we experience when standing on land that is being worked; how the fact of physically standing on the soil can activate the subcutaneous knowledge that all those involved in the soil sampling event carry in our bodies and minds. The aim of the gathering is to learn more from those who, throughout the seasons, connect to the soil, or from a geologist while looking at the stones found on the land, and in this way to become more curious about what is going on in rural areas. Revisiting landscapes together is often the start of an art project for me. As more encounters are organized and more people get involved, we widen our circles of rural knowledge, make trans-local connections, and create new memories together. In the encounters, we enable the landscapes to be experienced in different ways than through the distancing, objectifying gaze of landscape painting (Figure 6.7). We not only create new landmarks in Pearson's broad sense of the term, but also a web of interaction, developed and encountered over time to expose the different layers. This is what I call activating rural undercurrents. We create landmarks, literally with an auger, and symbolically by gathering on



FIGURE 6.6 2007 together with my father, Eerde Feenstra, we sample the clay soil of the farm where I grew up.
PHOTO BY WAPKE FEENSTRA



FIGURE 6.7 2019 Boerenzij (The Rural Side) plein air drawing session on a balcony with panoramic view of the Rotterdam harbor
PHOTO BY MYVILLAGES

the land in a time- and location-based cultural act. We dig where we stand with those who are there and connect, to each other and to the land.

7 Rural School of Economics

The representation of the rural in contemporary art was a point of interest in the founding year of Myvillages and has remained so. I have always understood making the countryside visible in art as co-creation. In all my collaborations, seeing each other is a main goal and the journey towards that goal never ends. The emancipation of rural imaginations in Western European art, of which Myvillages is a part, must above all seriously reconsider how we value what we see. This is not an easy task, because rural visibility cannot be seen separately from social media dynamics, climate change, geopolitical wars, and (de)colonial historiography. The economic and ecological visions of the rural, and the steps we take towards realizing or challenging them, will always depend on our valuation. This valuation is about how we (want to) see each other and is connected to our daily actions. Accordingly, a new infrastructure has recently been set up within Myvillages, the Rural School of Economics, the main motto of which is: "How we see the rural is how we want to relate to it."[7]

7 See https://www.ruralschoolofeconomics.info/.

Seeing is a domain where art can add critical skills and be emancipatory by showing us how to make space for other visions, and for multivocality. With the Rural School of Economics, we are building a platform for sharing practices and networks that also includes younger generations of makers. This means opening up to other people taking the lead and changing the way we work. I founded the school with Kathrin Böhm in 2020 and we hope it will become self-organizing in the near future, generating work on rural and economic issues through a grassroots approach. The Covid-pandemic and later traumas and travel restrictions related to the war in Ukraine have made us even more aware of the need to develop new ways of working, sharing, and exchanging with artists, rural places, and communities. In this context, I want to relay, finally, a story from the village of Pushkino, located in the Tver Oblast region of Russia.

8 Pushkino Style, 2019–Ongoing

In 2019, I arrived in Pushkino with the Moscow-based curator Georgy Nikich – with whom I have worked on the Made in Zvizzchi art project ran by Myvillages in another Russian village since 2012. We were there with Anastasia Kamienski, who had heard good stories about this village from friends and thought it would interest us to go there. That day, we were all new guests in the village, taken on a tour by a schoolteacher. After giving a lecture in the school about my work in other villages, I asked the children and adolescents to tell me about their Best Place in the village. We did a drawing session, and they pictured the spots they would recommend (Figure 6.8). Most of the Best Places were in nature, but there were also some close to the housing blocks. The choices depended mainly on their age (they were between 8 and 16), which determined how far they could go on foot. We also talked to a young man who grew up in Pushkino and recently returned to the village to set up a workshop making a type of local harp called a Gusli. His Mir Gusli (World of Gusli) workshop was identified as a Best Place by the older boys in the school, as it was a popular hang-out to play music together and learn new skills. I was given a Gusli as a present and we decided to work with Pushkino. In the winter of 2019–20, I asked the children and adolescents from Pushkino to design a wall painting with me for a grey Soviet-style housing block in the village. I wrote in the grant proposal and spoke to the curators about my longing to make a "new landmark" together that would highlight what it is like to grow up in this rural place and would be an addition to the existing visual landmarks in the village like the church, village hall, and school.

Landmarks are seen as historical orientation points. They can be materialized, but they can also, as noted earlier, take the form of a point of view or an



FIGURE 6.8 2021 co-creation of a map of Pushkino in the Tver region, to show some (new) landmarks in the village
PHOTO BY MYVILLAGES

encounter. The main landmarks proudly shown off in Pushkino during our first village tour were promoted by the region or state, such as a local war monument in the cemetery. Encounters on the street revealed another, less tangible landmark, as adult men showed how they think they own Pushkino's history by correcting the female schoolteacher conducting the tour. This manifestation of patriarchy is of course not only typical of rural Russia – I know it from spending my youth in a small village and in my life as a female artist mansplaining is also always around. Who is allowed to speak and claim ownership of a history reveals a lot about the undercurrents of a place.

Making space for other voices and marking the village with these new landmarks is what we did in the Pushkino Style project by co-designing and realizing the wall painting on the housing block in 2021. The elements included in the mural were all mentioned in an audio-tour made by a group of schoolchildren to introduce the village to the visiting artist and workshop leaders. Due to Covid, I was unable to come, but with local cultural worker Anastasia acting as project leader and curator, young men operating cameras, and artists coming to the village for the weekends, we could work together at a distance, both on

the mural and the film *Pushkino Style*, which shows the making of the mural through a process of walking, talking, and plein air drawing together in some of the Best Places chosen.[8]

In late summer, I was able to go to Pushkino to meet the artists that visited the village and make the final design for the wall painting. It was designed so that we all could make copies of it – if needed. Since then, more wall paintings have been made with and by youngsters on housing blocks and bus stops, creating visual markings of their youthful perspective on the village. This practice of landmarking can be supported by me at a distance through digital meetings with the project manager.



FIGURE 6.9 2021 Pushkino Style. The first mural shows what is important for the young people and children growing up in the village of Pushkino.
PHOTO BY MYVILLAGES

9 Back to the Boerenzij

Seeing each other according to the artistic practices outlined in this chapter involves the channeling of a complex, diverse flow of rural and urban mindsets. Together, these mindsets make a city or village. More attention to the rural mindsets that are present in rural and urban areas is urgently needed because urban culture and mindsets predominate in Western European

8 To learn more and watch *Pushkino Style*, see https://www.ruralschoolofeconomics.info/places/pushkino.

culture. The interdependence of cities and the countryside is thus obfuscated. How can we co-create new visions of the Earth that challenge the binary narratives based on the current divisions? It is, in my view, precisely the domain of art that can elevate and sharpen the cultural layers that call on us to "go back to the land." Art can offer embodied experiences of places if it engages in digging and walking in and talking and listening to them. We can activate rural undercurrents through art that questions where we stand on the land, thus creating an awareness of cultures as multi-layered. In all my art projects, there is an attempt to stretch cultural space in order to abolish centralizing cultures and monocultures, and to stimulate an awareness that the urban and rural are intertwined. Acknowledging this will undo binary thinking and let us act together, across rural and urban spaces, towards a sustainable future.

The Best Place, Former Farmland, Landmarks, and Rural Mindsets are only a few of the ways in which I have explored the spatial and cultural layeredness suggested by the notion of rural undercurrents. In the Boerenzij project, we listened for stories of the current and upcoming re-rooting of refugees and migrant-workers, came to know more about colonial histories, and learned new skills in allotment gardens and workshops. We brought people into contact with each other with kale dinners and kitchen table discussions, where the exchanging of farmer knowledge and the learning from rural backgrounds were enacted by asking participants to draw a map of their village and then discussing these maps together. With public drawing lessons on the harbor quays and in allotment gardens we returned to the tradition of plein-air landscape painting that was in vogue in the period when industry and the Rotterdam port were growing, with the aim of capturing the changing urban landscape of today. In a geological animation, moreover, we dug even deeper into the ground to go beneath the urbanization superimposed on the clay upper layer, to a meters-deep layer of peat. According to the archaeologists and construction researchers, there are sand hills and, in between, small layers of clay and peat under the Boerenzij. At 8 meters deep, we bump into the solid 25,000-year-old rocky layer where mammoths actively grazed – a layer that is much needed today to stabilize the huge buildings erected on the South Bank.

In the winter of 2019–20, in art center TENT on the North Bank of Rotterdam, a collage of the rural undercurrents of the Boerenzij was shown to celebrate the rural side of Rotterdam (Figures 6.10 and 6.11). A geological animation and a film in which residents of South Rotterdam share their rural knowledge and memories were screened, while a wall-sized panorama showed the drawings that the participants had made, next to a collection of





FIGURES 6.10 AND 6.11 2019 Boerenzij (The Rural Side) exhibition hall overviews in TENT Rotterdam
PHOTOS BY AAD HOOGENDOORN

rural objects lent by Rotterdammers. The exhibition was an open invitation to the public to think about the ways in which rural knowledge and culture are present in and under the city. As Kevser Güler notes in the book made about the Boerenzij project:

> Wapke Feenstra and the residents of Rotterdam-Zuid together develop an image of today's complex city culture, dismantling the urban-dominant conditions of history-telling and representation while listening to micro-narratives that reveal the layers of experiences which form when people live in and take care of a space. (173)

Boerenzij calls for the recognition of the rural undercurrents in an urban culture. It asks for a critical awareness of the unquestioned, naturalized way in which rural culture is being urbanized worldwide. To create this awareness and to achieve a real cultural shift, it is important to draw attention to global issues by unraveling the layers of the places that we live in, and to shape new visions of how we want to see the rural on the basis of this unraveling.

In this essay, I have suggested ways of exploring rural undercurrents in togetherness, to learn to re-root and gain a deeper understanding of the places where we dwell and work. Contemporary art can facilitate these explorations and create new forms for them as it takes place in the now. Not only do we literally occupy the geologically stratified crust of the earth as we practice art, but the culturally interdependent urban and rural are also part of the mundane, everyday dimension of the places we occupy as artists, art schools, and art institutes.

The described art projects show how the realization that every settlement is characterized by entangled rural undercurrents can be brought to life through performative interventions such as making landmarks or organizing translocal knowledge exchanges on the streets, on farms, and in villages. And how the representation of rural undercurrents in exhibitions, books, and films can make them visible visibility in urban-centered art platforms. Yet, the making visible of rural undercurrents and the provision of access for rural people to art platforms is not the end goal; a collective questioning of how we see the rural and how we can repair rural-urban divisions requires a more comprehensive cultural shift. Despite the increasingly strong awareness of the need for decolonization and countering climate change in European contemporary art, the urban gaze on art and culture is still the leading perspective. It is high time to change our cultural narratives and de-urbanize our museums. I can now live with the fact that my childhood in Friesland on a remote dairy farm in the 1960s and 1970s was framed in the art world of the 1990s as "coming from a cultural desert" because this is a thing of the past and there is more and more recognition of the knowledge and culture of rural and indigenous communities. But we still urgently need to make a more radical shift towards valuing, next to the urban, the rural and the indigenous as equal, and perhaps even superior, sources of knowledge for navigating the future.



FIGURE 6.12 2019 Boerenzij (The Rural Side) plein air drawing sessions in an allotment garden
PHOTO BY MYVILLAGES

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PART 2

Rereading Globalized Ruralities

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CHAPTER 7

Rural Historicity in Popular Speculative Futurities: Eco-anxiety as Settler Anxiety

Tjalling Valdés-Olmos

Abstract

This chapter explores the affective management performed by settler colonial genres of rurality, specifically those pertaining to the US West, in tending to contemporary forms of eco-anxiety. It does this through a close analysis of the SF film *Interstellar* (2014), exploring in particular the sense of historicity the western frontier rural – including the farmstead and the frontiersman – manages in relation to the film's dealing with climate crisis and humanity's envisioned future. *Interstellar*'s supposed concern with climate change is exposed as underpinned by a latent settler concern over the loss of property, hetero-reproductivity, and progress.

1 Three Vignettes: Western Rurality in Times of Capitalist Crisis

During the summer of 2021, Amazon-founder Jeff Bezos and his New Shephard rocket shot into space in a bid for extraplanetary colonization and space travel. Bezos had previously boasted about the need for continuous growth and innovation in the face of humanity's potential demise, revealing how his imagination of outer space is heavily informed by a settler colonial-cum-capitalist teleology:

> I'm pursuing [space travel] because I believe, if we don't, we will eventually end up with a civilization of stasis … the Solar System can easily support a trillion humans … And if we have a trillion humans we would have … unlimited sources. By the way, I believe that … we will move all heavy industry off of Earth and Earth will be zoned residential and light industry. (qtd. in Dopfner: n. pag.)[1]

1 In envisioning his own project of extraplanetary colonization, Elon Musk taps into a similar narrative that is reminiscent of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: "You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great – and that's what being a spacefaring

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After Blue Origin's New Shepard shuttle landed in the arid Texan landscape, Bezos stepped out buoyantly, wearing a cowboy hat and matching boots.[2] While Bezos's sartorial choice can be seen as a nod to his Texas roots, the aesthetic framing of the entrepreneur as a literal space cowboy stepping out of his shuttle into the desert mesa, with mountains edging on the horizon, clearly positions him as one of the rugged and virile subjects that are idealized in settler colonial imaginations of the rural US West: the cowboy, or frontiersman, who discovers "unknown" territory and expands America's frontier.[3] The narrative and aesthetic tropes and motifs from the Western genre that appear in Bezos's (self)representation – most importantly, the frontiersman, the frontier landscape, and the pursuit of progress – speak to the manner in which ideological structures of US American settler coloniality continue to be intimately felt and culturally (re)negotiated or, in other words, how they reinforce a "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977) historically related to the cultural imagination of the rural US West. Given Bezos's popularity and influence – he was an invited speaker at the UN Climate Change Conference in 2021 – one might ask: what kind of affective management do these settler colonial imaginations of the region perform in the ordinary present of crisis? The appeal of leaving Earth and colonizing space remained very much alive, after all, in a year where Covid-19, global warming, environmental catastrophe, and social injustice further deteriorated everyday fantasies of the good life.

Meanwhile, a myriad of fulfillment and distribution centers, mines, factories, and industrial plants mark the everyday landscape of the rural US West. Take Bezos's Amazon Fulfillment Centers, where thousands of products are stored, picked, packed, and shipped by temporary workers paid minimum wage. Or the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center (TRIC) in rural Nevada, where Elon Musk is constructing his Gigafactory 1, a lithium-ion battery and electric vehicle component factory that serves, among others, Tesla Motors. Musk has

civilization is all about. It's about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past" (www.spacex.com).

2 To see Bezos in his space cowboy gear: https://images.app.goo.gl/zkQmUf4tizzTjs1z7. Blue Origin, LLC is a "privately funded aerospace manufacturer and sub-orbital spaceflight services company" that was established in 2000 by Bezos (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Origin).

3 Bezos is known to regularly reference settler colonial and western frontier imaginations in relation to both Amazon and his own celebrity text. Ben Little and Alison Winch show in detail how, on top of Bezos's Blue Origin discourses, his continuous references to his and his family's origins in Texas ranch culture, and his invocation of Manifest Destiny ideology in formulating Amazon's mission and ethos draw on and are "embedded in the semantic structures" of US settler and frontier imaginations (104).

said that, once completed, the Gigafactory will be the largest building on the planet. Its lithium-ion batteries are used in electric cars, including Tesla's, and are hailed as the environmentally friendly alternative to vehicles (and other technology) running on fossil fuels. In what the *New York Times* has called a new gold rush, global powers like the US, China, and Europe are fighting for control over minerals that would "help countries achieve economic and technological dominance for decades to come" (Penn and Lipton n. pag.). The costs of mining materials like lithium have proved disastrous to land, water, wildlife, and – often Indigenous – people in countries such as Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and China (Wade). As this neocolonial race for minerals endures, plans to open a second lithium mine in Nevada by Lithium Americas – whose major shareholder is Ganfeng, a Chinese company – continue amidst protests by Native American tribes, ranchers, and environmental groups. Moreover, although the TRIC and Tesla's battery factory have brought an economic influx to the state, as well as high-paid tech jobs, the arrival of the factory and the massive tax credits given to Musk's company have depleted "public services, resulting in potholed roads, overcrowded schools and insufficient affordable housing" (Carroll n. pag.).

The rural US West can thus also be considered as an integral node in the infrastructure of global capitalism that emerges out of a shifting demand for consumer goods and technology prompted by a collective anxiety and fear regarding global warming and environmental catastrophe. While these rural hinterlands are intrinsically linked to the demands, desires, and fears of transnational urban communities and spaces – its landscapes characterized by "factory farms," "massive logistic complexes," "power regeneration," and extractive industries (Neel 17) – such "extractive zones" (Goméz-Barris) are also often ignored and disavowed in popular imaginations and understandings of the rural US West.

Architect Rem Koolhaas's recent work on the rural seemingly addresses this disavowal of the rural as relatively isolated from the structural workings of urban and global capitalism. In the opening words to the pamphlet accompanying his highly anticipated 2020 collaborative exhibition at the NYC Guggenheim – titled *Countryside, The Future* – he poses critical questions regarding the contemporary insistence on ignoring the rural. He warns his audience about the dangers of considering the countryside as nothing more than a "back house for urban civilization" that services the majority of humankind living in "2 percent of the earth's 'overpopulated surface'" (Koolhaas 3). He further reflects, albeit briefly, on the environmental costs at which this exploitative designation of the rural has come. The pamphlet articulates an anxiety, worry, and general angst regarding the unsustainable, and even dystopian, future into

which "we" are heading by solely focusing on the project of what Koolhaas terms "Total Urbanization" (2–3). In his insistent invocation of a "we" that is facing this "Total Urbanization," he asserts the need and desire for this "we" to rediscover the countryside as a "place to *resettle*, to stay alive; enthusiastic human presence must reanimate it with new imagination," so that it will become a "base from which to make the world a better place" (Koolhaas 3, emphasis added). It is in this "we," and in the implied exodus from urban to rural space, that one can read Koolhaas's idealization of urbanites as rational, enlightened subjects of modernity called upon to lead the way to a *resettlement* of a disavowed and forgotten non-urban space that has a distinctly colonial flavor.

The pamphlet reveals a predilection to fall back on a settler colonial grammar when imagining humanity's way out of crisis through the rural. This disavows the fact that rural communities might actually have experience with managing the violence and crises of globalization, and that they historically and presently have a stake in thinking and imagining their futures and that of the environment they live with. In light of this disavowal, it is unsurprising that Koolhaas dedicated a large display section on the Guggenheim's uppermost floor to the TRIC as an example of how he envisions the future of the countryside. In the pamphlet, the architect professes his admiration for the TRIC:

> Nature, unmolested. Rolling hills covered in light green vegetation, wild horses run in the distance. … TRIC, … a corporate utopia of instant permits here that enable a brave new architecture to be realized in record time, without bureaucratic interference. … We are programmed to think that any 'next' architecture can only be the outcome of a struggle. … [But] because it takes place in the countryside, this is a *stealth revolution* … TRIC: *a rare virgin birth*? The buildings here are not for humans but for things and machines. … It is post-human … There is *nothing*. (Koolhaas 272–273, emphasis added)

As Felicity D. Scott points out in her analysis of the exhibition, Koolhaas unironically praises the TRIC's "virility" as a project that recolonizes an empty, "unmolested" land as part of what he imagines as a post-human future dedicated to things and machines (n. pag.). The rural is perceived by Koolhaas as a space where "there is nothing," and where a "stealth revolution" falsely implies that radical change is happening without struggle or opposition, and outside of urban and state – and thus non-human – oversight (when in fact the TRIC is a huge beneficiary of federal tax programs). Koolhaas occludes both the human desires that drive the establishment and expansion of sites such as the

TRIC, and its material costs, which threaten the livelihoods and environments of many, including Indigenous Americans (the Nevada Shoshone and Paiute) in the region. Moreover, designating the TRIC as offspring of a rare virgin birth feminizes the rural US West through a typical settler colonial understanding that poses the land as an essentially "feminine" and "mothering" Other (Kolodny 4), a bounty ripe for the taking by capitalism's imperial agents (the actual subjects whose interest is predominantly being served in this highly technologized space).

Koolhaas's *Countryside, The Future* is then not so much a turn to the rural as a recalibration and reimagination of capitalism's and colonialism's spatiotemporal scales and rhythms. If anything, in its admiration of the TRIC it refuses to critically examine or change the imagination of the non-urban US West as anything more than a highly gendered, sexualized, and racialized space of extraction. The above vignettes – from Bezos's Blue Origin launch to Musk's Gigafactory 1 and Koolhaas's *Countryside, The Future* – show how the genre-specific promises of the western frontier continue to shape contemporary answers to the sociopolitical and environmental crises capitalism produces. The centering of the white pioneering subject, the sexual, gendered, and racialized tropes used in imagining non-urban space (including outer space), and the spatiotemporal construction of the rural US West in popular narratives regarding climate action and crisis can be seen as affectively managing a set of anxieties associated with the threatened future of global capitalism. Attachments to these ruralities are, to use Lauren Berlant's term, cruelly optimistic: for example, while this imagined rural US West is promised as a frontier of sustainability and hopefulness, the material impact "green" technologies – e.g. ion-lithium batteries and electric cars – have on rural environments and people (locally and globally) actively obstructs the possibility of the less destructive futures people might desire. The imagination of green, extraplanetary, and posthuman futures involves a turn towards an older settler genre of rurality that occludes the history and the present of widespread pollution, environmental ruination, and socioeconomic precarity, as well as the onto-epistemological erasure of Indigenous Americans that these much-heralded projects both necessitate and produce.

In what follows, I further investigate this contemporary reliance on historical genres of US West rurality through a close analysis of the SF film *Interstellar* (2014), asking: how is settler colonial desire reanimated in times where capitalist violence and climate change continue to actively impede on fantasies of normativity and progress? The first part of my analysis is particularly concerned with the sense of historicity the western frontier rural – including the farmstead and the frontiersman – manages in relation to the film's imagined

negotiation of climate crisis and humanity's envisioned future. The chapter draws out the structural and historical occlusions produced by the film's reiteration of the rural US West within the racialized and exceptionalist affective order of settler triumph and nostalgia that characterized the 1930s social realist photographic archive of the US Farm Security Administration (FSA). In the second part of my analysis, which is concerned with the narrative resolution of the film and its genre-specific use of western frontier rurality, I argue that the supposed concern with climate change – the film's engagement with eco-anxiety and its contemporary realities – is more so a compounded and latent concern over the loss of property, hetero-reproductivity, and progress.

2 *Interstellar*: Farm at the End of the World

Directed by Christopher Nolan, *Interstellar* is set in a not-too-distant dystopian future and follows Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), a former space pilot and engineer who has been forced to take on a job as a farmer. Together with his young daughter Murph (Mackenzie Foy), his teenage son Tom (Timothée Chalamet), and his father-in-law Donald (John Lithgow), Cooper lives on a farmstead in rural Colorado where he grows many acres of corn. With an ongoing blight and continuous dust storms that have made food extremely scarce, the US – much to Cooper's dismay – has turned away from scientific innovation and space exploration to make farming its prime socioeconomic focus. After mysteriously discovering a binary code with his daughter that leads him to a covert NASA base hidden in the boondocks of the US West, the rugged renegade leads a team of astronauts off Earth as they travel through a wormhole in search of a new home for humankind.

Despite its non-linear narrative structure, *Interstellar* upholds a normative teleological conception of time in which the rural US West plays an important role. The film opens with a close-up of a dusty bookshelf (Figure 7.1). The camera slowly glides along the books to where two miniature spacecraft models sit on the shelf's edge. The soft light and long shadows, the dust falling down against the light, and the array of inert books and toys conjure a sense of tranquility and stasis. It is as if the viewer is gazing upon the past: encapsulated, still, and gathering dust. The books connote a sense of historicity that is then transferred to the miniature spacecraft models, as if the technology on display here also belongs to a bygone moment. As the title of the film appears and then slowly fades to black, the voice of an anonymous narrator cuts through: "Well, my dad was a farmer." A talking head shot depicting an elderly white



FIGURE 7.1 Screenshot from *Interstellar*

woman – who towards the end of the film is revealed to be the older version of Murph (Ellen Burnstyn) – follows. The woman looks slightly to the side of the camera as she tells an unidentified interviewer: "Like everybody else was back then." The scene constructs the rural as a nostalgic childhood home (Williams 1973). Moreover, the past tense in which (the thus far anonymous) Murph narrates prompts the audience to frame what they are about to view as an historical experience; together with the opening shot, it facilitates a temporal focalization of a diegetic present tense looking back on a past.

The next scene starts with Cooper, in the diegetic past, being woken from a nightmare by a young Murph. He slowly gets up as soft morning light shines through his bedroom window. A vague outline of the landscape can be spotted. Cooper moves closer to the window to reveal a dirt-road running along a cornfield, with a single electrical pole standing on the side of the road. Through a long shot, an expansive rural landscape of miles and miles of corn comes into view, accompanied by a faint golden hue of first morning light appearing behind the hills that sit on the horizon. The soundtrack swells to a hopeful climax. The shot establishes the rural as peaceful and quiet, idyllic in a general sense. But with promises of progress beckoning on the dawning horizon, it also invokes this rural more specifically as a frontier idyll: a domestic safe haven from where the "proprietorial subject" (Bhandar 163) can envision the future.

Elderly Murph's narration, however, cuts back in to disrupt this comforting understanding of the rural: "The wheat had died." Her words are trailed by a close-up of cornstalks wavering amidst a starting dust storm. "The blight came and we all had to burn it. And we still had corn. We had acres of corn." The film cuts back to Murph, "but, uh … mostly we had dust." This is followed by various talking head shots of other anonymous elderly narrators, filmed with



FIGURE 7.2 Screenshots from *Interstellar*

an identical chiaroscuro lighting (Figure 7.2, top left).[4] After Murph speaks, an elderly white woman continues, "We wore little strips of sheet, sometimes over our nose and mouths so we wouldn't breathe in so much of it," as we see Donald sweep dust and dirt off the porch while ominous dark clouds gather in the background (Figure 7.2, top right). Another older white man recalls: "When we would set the table we always set the plate upside down … glasses or cups, whatever it was, upside down," followed by a shot of a dusty kitchen tabletop and plates being placed upside down (Figure 7.2, bottom left and right). Together, the imagery of the rural farmstead encumbered by climate change and the elderly narrators' memories of the overwhelming presence of dust construct a dystopian image of the frontier idyll under threat. Moreover, much like in the genre of the Western, the environment and the climate appear here as an Other, a wilderness, that threatens the settler colonial Self as symbolized by both the rural domestic property pictured and the white narrators reflecting on their harrowing experiences.

The particular intimacy that is generated through the chiaroscuro lighting and documentary-style narration, together with the older age of the interviewees, affirms these characters as authentic historical narrators. In actuality, the interviewees that follow Murph are subjects from Ken Burns's documentary miniseries *The Dust Bowl* (2012).[5] While one might read the inclusion of

4 The interview scenes are also all filmed in a different aspect ratio than the rest of the film.

5 Burns's documentary explores the Dust Bowl, a human-made ecological event caused by nineteenth- and twentieth-century white settlers who conducted extensive deep plowing of

testimony material from Burns's documentary as "a historical metaphor" that makes legible precedents of climate change and the Anthropocene (Jenner 104), the narration provided by the documentary's witnesses is indistinguishable from that of the fictional older Murph. The film's use of historical narrative here is then primarily affective in function as it manages a sense of historical authenticity. This temporally orients the viewer in order to evoke a futurity that implies humanity found some way to overcome the environmental menace threatening Cooper, his family, and his rural property in the film's diegetic past. The feeling of "historical embeddedness" (Berlant 2011: 66) establishes a sense of being able to look back on climate change as something that has passed. Situating the threat of climate change in the rural, an area popularly understood as spatiotemporally backwards, further strengthens the notion that this threat belongs to another space and time than that of the intended urban viewer. In other words, from its very first moments *Interstellar* attempts to temper an eco-anxiety – a "generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse" (Albrecht qtd. in Panu 4) – by proposing that the viewer's present-cum-near-future of environmental doom is manageable if not solvable.

A particular optimism thus inhibits the dystopian narrative early on, and the film's subsequent depiction of the rural US West can be read as part of the "triumphalist narrative framework" (Kollin 8) characteristic of western frontier fictions. Triumphalism is historically embedded in dominant national discourses about the western frontier, most importantly Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "frontier thesis," which argues that "American individualism and democracy were shaped by the experience of the western wilderness in a dialectic of man and an 'environment which is at first too strong for him'" (Turner qtd. in Borden and Essman 35). Turner's argument that the experience of settlers and rural life on the frontier engendered traits of resilience, resourcefulness, individualism, and inventiveness contributed to a popular understanding of the US West and its people as a blueprint for US national exceptionalism, and legitimized the nation's push for capitalist progress and colonial expansion.

Interstellar draws on another, related seminal imaginary of the rural US West to facilitate its sense of hope and triumph in the face of environmental doom. In its dystopian imagery of dust-swept rural towns, ruined farmsteads, and worn-out rural folk on the run, the film again harks back to the Dust Bowl,

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virgin topsoil in the Great Plains. The Dust Bowl was characterized by severe drought and dust storms that affected large stretches of the US West and Southwest, and that, together with the effects of the stock market crash of 1929, ushered in the Great Depression, leading to the mass migration of tens of thousands of rural families in the 1930s.

specifically evoking the social realist work of photographers Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange, and filmmaker Pare Lorentz, who – under the supervision of the US Farm Security Administration (FSA) – captured the human despair across the region during the 1930s. While many of the photographers employed by the FSA also took pictures of people of color, the FSA's director, Roy Striker, chose mainly portraitures and pictures that depicted the Great Depression's main victims as white Americans. In "Whitewashing the Great Depression," Sarah Boxer traces the history of how the FSA's "preeminent photographic record of [the 1930s] eclipsed people of color and shaped the nation's self-image … that the soul of America, the real American type, is rural and white" (102). In referencing this archive, *Interstellar* – both in its depiction of rural quotidian life amidst oppressive conditions and in its muted coloring – strips away a sense of artifice that "replicate[s] the appearance of genres closely associated with the everyday and the ordinary" (Hallam and Marshment 108). This creates a strong juxtaposition between human and nature, as the film's social realist focus on capturing the hardships endured by white rural folk amidst precarious environmental conditions reaffirms a sense of racialized human exceptionalism and highlights traits of resilience and strength. As such, the film also plays into the nostalgic national metanarrative of the frontier – as posited by, e.g., Turner and Theodore Roosevelt – as a space shaping the essential characteristics of the American people: mobility, optimism, inventiveness, individualism, toughness, and resourcefulness.[6] Both the social realist imagination and the Western's frontier imagination centralize a story of resilience primarily associated with whites and, in turn, occlude the particular structural dynamics that cause the genocide of Indigenous people, mass displacement, and climate disaster in the first place.

As implied by the above-discussed temporal focalization and triumphant narrative, *Interstellar* suggests that its subjects have (safely) moved on from their dystopian rural past. Ann Laura Stoler poses that movement forward

6 Roosevelt and Turner shared ideas about the (white) national identarian significance of the frontier and westward expansion that built on a long tradition of European settler colonial thinking (Slotkin). In addition, both Turner and Roosevelt sought to sediment the frontier affectively as a *geography of optimism* in the face of its anticipated disappearance as agrarian property: "To [the material problem of the disappearing frontier Turner and Roosevelt] offered a conceptual antidote: an interpretation of the frontier past that might serve as the source of some saving wisdom which would allow an essential part of the frontier past to survive in the postfrontier future. [Their] portrayals of the frontier show a division of sentiment between nostalgia for the lost world of the frontier past, and an optimistic determination to see the progressive dynamic of the frontier carried forward into the new century" (Slotkin 609).

towards a better and more civilized future is, per the Euro-American colonial imagination, secured through a "rough and rugged cohort" of white masculine imperial agents (27). Turner's frontier thesis, building on the yeoman farmer ideal of Jeffersonian democracy, also romanticized the white masculine pioneering farmer as a purveyor of American civilization. Cooper, the hero of *Interstellar*, appears as a contemporary invocation of these idealized masculine subjects that historically and imaginatively roam the frontiers of the US empire: the pioneer and the renegade.

These tropes are particularly important in terms of how the film merges techno-utopian elements of SF with leitmotifs from the Western to facilitate a fantasy of the good life that caters, ultimately, to hegemonic sensibilities geared towards unambiguous narrative resolution. As mentioned before, Cooper lives in a rural society that has disavowed scientific innovation and space exploration in favor of large-scale sustenance farming as the manner of attempting to ward off ecological collapse. In a conversation between Cooper and his father-in-law Donald, the latter intimates that the current rural society, which encourages farming and a more conservative way of life, is the result of a highly urbanized past – alluding to the audience's present – in which consumerism and a dangerous desire for technology and progress led to the crisis humanity is now facing.

Cooper – who was an engineer and pilot in this past – lamentingly responds: "we have forgotten who we are … explorers, pioneers, caretakers. … We used to look up at the sky and wonder about our place in the stars. Now, we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt." Here, the film positions Cooper as a heroic subject dissatisfied with and unwilling to give in to a way of dealing with crisis that is unspectacular and mundane. As Shannon Winnubst argues,

> out of crises come heroes, those who meet crisis with courage and, in true superhero form, wrangle it, manage it, and lay it to rest. Crises makes our adrenaline flow, giving us the hyperaesthetic stimulation that makes life meaningful in the overdeveloped world: may we all have the opportunity to be Superman – or, at least, to catapult him into action. Crises feeds our craving for spectacle, complete with its clear narrative arc of beginning, middle, and end. (15)

Contextualizing Cooper's lament as a dissatisfaction with the loss of a time and place in which the techno-pioneering spirit was appreciated – in which he was able to be seen and valued as a hero – anticipates the film's movement towards spectacular individualized resolution and away from a "staying with

the trouble" (Haraway 1) that entails the always unfinished work of looking down and back to "our place in the dirt."

At this point in the film, Cooper is clearly frustrated with the lack of a scientific vision that, according to him, could resolve the crisis humanity is facing. As Yvonne Tasker writes about the cinematic Western, the hero "is often cast as a figure who lacks a place within the community for which he fights" (77), trying to restore order to a world from which he feels somewhat alienated. In the film's US, it is not just Cooper who has been sidelined; NASA – the prime harbinger of Western science, technology, and innovation – has been forced to operate covertly, its base hidden from state oversight somewhere in the wilderness of the US West. In effect, the film situates Cooper and his understanding of science and technology, which is normative in the world of many viewers, as a rebellious but righteous force that, as Jonna Eagle poses, "draws upon a long-standing inclination to align the Western and its hero against institutionalized forms of authority" (98).

In this sense, the film reflects the manner in which figures like Bezos and Musk also tend to be situated and situate themselves as renegade pioneers in opposition to institutional and legislative bodies in their pursuit of capital accumulation, while upholding the narrative that they are invested in providing a better and safer future for humanity. By making the dystopian rural epistemologically backwards and unable to restore normativity, and by portraying Cooper as an Enlightened renegade seeking to protect Western neoliberal modernity, the film constructs an imagination of futurity that vacates the rural from meaningful political potential and reinforces attachments to masculinized lawless subjectivities that move humanity into US exceptionalist visions of settler futurity.

Skipping over some of the plot, Cooper – as anticipated – eventually is able to save humanity. Some decades have passed since humanity left a dying Earth behind and Cooper finds himself, through some spacetime anomaly, waking up on one of the space stations not a day older than when he left the dystopian rural US West. Mirroring the opening scene in which Cooper awakes and walks towards the window observing the tranquil but threatened countryside, on the space station he observers a techno-utopian idyll (Figure 7.3): an upwards curving territory which, from back to front, features lush green pastures and farms, a residential neighborhood, and kids playing a game of baseball. Unlike the opening scene, the rural is now situated as a fertile backdrop; it is an idyllic-looking *over there* that services the (sub) urban core.

In this imagination of the future US rural, *Interstellar* mimics Rick Guidice's artistic renditions of the O'Neill cylinder (Figure 7.4), a speculative space settlement concept proposed by the American physicist Gerard K. O'Neill in his



FIGURE 7.3 Screenshot from *Interstellar*

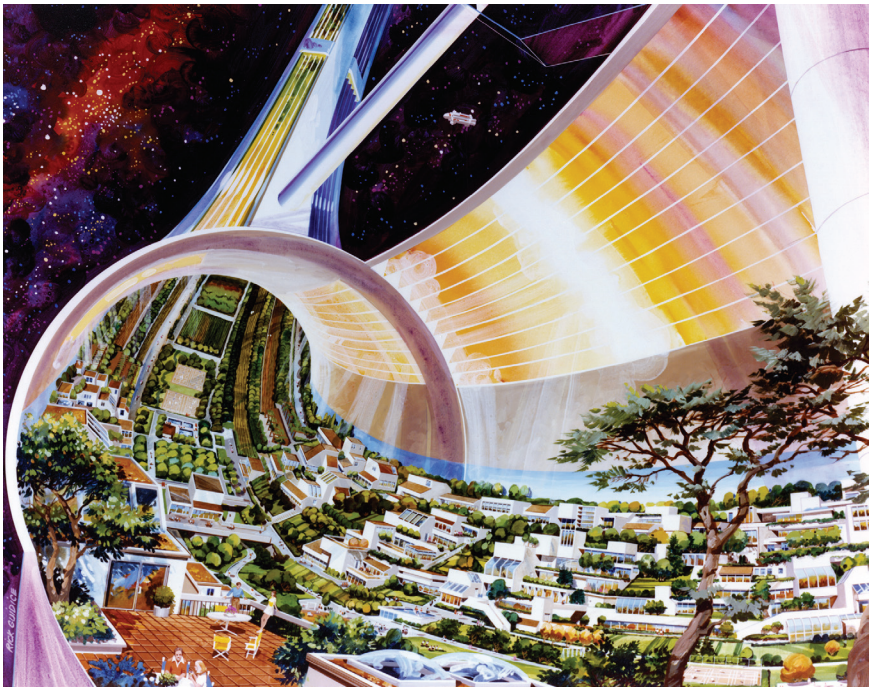


FIGURE 7.4 Cutaway view, exposing the interior (1977). Art work: Rick Guidice
CREDIT: NASA AMES RESEARCH CENTER

1976 book *The High Frontier: Human Colonies in Space*. In the film's reference to this canonic imagery, it produces a techno-utopian rural image that not only draws on the seductive qualities of Euro-American pastoral idylls but also on those of white and heteronormative suburban fantasies (see Siddiqi). Much like O'Neill's vision, *Interstellar*'s idyllic space cylinders make invisible the

structures of power and processes of labor and material extraction needed to facilitate such speculative realities. Bezos, too, has referenced the O'Neill cylinders as a direct influence on his visions of space colonization, in which the extractive logics, human costs, and structural exploitation needed to uphold such a project remain similarly invisible.

Significantly, Cooper's old farmstead also reappears on the space station when he is taken to a heritage site and museum that is a replica of his former property. As he approaches the farmstead, the audience sees the former property positioned in front of a curving wall of lush pasture. Compared to earlier images of the farmstead under siege by the climate, this replica looks clean and static, almost pristinely so, bathed in artificial sunlight. As Cooper approaches the farmstead, a museum display can be observed that is showing the testimonies by Murph and the Dust Bowl survivors that opened the film. This affirms the earlier intimation that the earthly threats of climate change and environmental degradation have been relegated to the past, together with the regressive socio-political order of the rural. The musealized reproduction of the farmstead reinforces the promise of triumphant settler-cum-capitalist progress and nostalgic heteronormative domesticity through an affective historicization of the rural US West as a foundational site of struggle between white settler subjects and Nature.

In this way, *Interstellar*'s speculative imagination of the future is exemplary of how genres of western US rurality perform powerful affective-historical labor in the contemporary assuaging of eco-anxiety. Nevertheless, while the musealized frontier farmstead affectively and spatiotemporally stratifies a rural-urban binary and teleology of progress – further obfuscating the structural violence at play in attempts to materialize such myths – something is still askew. For one, while Cooper might have ensured humanity's exodus from Earth onto the space cylinders, towards the end of the film (with his farmstead musealized) he is no longer a property-holding subject. Moreover, from the outset of the film, Cooper is a widower and his children are motherless. The figure of the dead mother in *Interstellar* can also be read as mirroring nature's inability to reproduce. Nature and land are thus gendered as female and, according to a colonial and heteropatriarchal logic, given up on or in need of replacement when they are no longer able to fulfill the reproductive – i.e. extractive – demands of capitalism (Jenner). While Cooper's elderly but dying daughter Murph ends up providing multiple generations of children and grandchildren, thus signifying (to a certain extent) the continuation of a heteronormative social order on the space cylinder, Cooper himself remains a single and soon-to-be childless father. Lastly, the space cylinder which has provided humanity refuge from a dying Earth is a landless, transient, and thus,

by settler logic, failing entity unable to sustain the promise of progress through the possession of land as (private) property and its extraction as resource commodity.[7] In this way, the narrative and affective resolution *Interstellar* works towards in its closing scenes needs to be read as fueled by the anxious desire to restore the reproductive capacities of capitalism, settler colonialism, *and* heteropatriarchy.

In the film's final scene, Cooper, encouraged by the dying words of his daughter, prepares an expedition to leave the space station and find his love interest, Dr. Amelia Brand (Anne Hathaway). Dr. Brand, as part of Cooper's earlier mission, was forced to execute the alternative plan of making her way to the planet that seemed most attuned to the project of human colonization. Murph reveals to Cooper that Dr. Brand has in fact made it to this potentially habitable planet and is thus alive somewhere in the galaxy. The viewer is then presented with a scene that depicts Dr. Brand standing on an elevation overlooking a desert-like terrain with dramatic rock formations. This terrain is reminiscent of the landscapes mythologized by the cinematic genre of the Western, such as Monument Valley, as well as the rural geography Cooper and his family fled. Murph's voice-over and a melodramatic soundtrack accompany this imagery: "She's out there setting up camp. Alone in a strange galaxy. Maybe right now she's settling in for the long nap by the light of our new sun, in our new home." Dr. Brand overlooks this new frontier, her face dusty and her expression tired, and then walks off towards a small, ambiently lit encampment with a US flag wavering in the wind (Figure 7.5). The next shot captures Cooper as he straps himself into the pilot seat of a spaceship, his face hopeful and decided. Dr. Brand is portrayed as waiting ("settling in for the long nap"), while Cooper's determined look foreshadows his departure from the civilized (i.e. urbanized) space station and his arrival on this frontier to realize the romantic reunification of the (white) heterosexual couple and the fruitful settler colonization of a new planet.

This final frontier image promises the well-rehearsed colonial gendering of the extraplanetary hinterland as fertile and female through the literal placement of Dr. Brand in the soon-to-be settled landscape. Interestingly, woman is imagined here as imperial agent – after all, Dr. Brand has successfully set up a camp with multiple tents and the national flag standing tall – but not as possessing the virility to propel the extractive, reproductive, and proprietary

7 As Brenna Bhandar asserts, "the control and possession of land is central to colonial endeavors, primarily because of the main objective of colonial rule, which is resource extraction" (n. pag.).



FIGURE 7.5 Screenshot from *Interstellar*

relations to the land necessary to facilitate settler-capitalist continuity.[8] The film relies on the well-rehearsed tropes of the strenuous, mobile, and forward-oriented hero of the Western to narratively resolve the existential crisis of the settler collective, or, rather, to assuage social anxieties over the loss of generic good-life fantasies and normative subjectivity.

Moreover, when looking closer at the above still (Figure 7.5), it becomes clear that *Interstellar* returns to an imagination of a future landscape that brings together the aesthetic and affective archive of the US western rural and wilderness. In its situating of the lone, heroic, settler and the tenderly-lit camp – the spaceship figuring as the pioneers' caravan – amidst the arid and mountainous landscape, the image not only reiterates the cinematic Western but also the work of nineteenth-century romanticist painters of the US western sublime such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. Simultaneously, an earlier close-up of Brand's weary and dusty face together with the overall warm and desaturated color grading of the final scene, as well as the contrast between the epic environment and the small encampment, situates this closing image within the earlier-discussed social realist and anthropocentric aesthetic of the

8 Significantly, an earlier scene reveals that part of Dr. Brand's mission is to safeguard a repository of embryos that she will be responsible for nurturing once a habitable planet is found. While this intimates that, in some sense, she could defy the drive for heteronormative modes of reproduction and complicate this speculative imagination of settler colonization, the anticipated arrival of Cooper at Brand's camp underscores the heteromasculine drive that saturates settler colonial imaginaries.

FSA's photographic output of the 1930s. While some of its particularities might be reimagined, the reiteration of the general aesthetic and narrative grammars that structure the cultural imagination of the rural US West continue to play a significant role precisely because it offers a historically and affectively legible genre of spatialized subjectivity that creates "continuity with the precrisis world" (Berlant 2005: 60).

It is no surprise, then, that a film like *Interstellar*, popular exhibitions like Koolhaas's *Countryside, The Future*, and men like Bezos and Musk draw on these settler colonial genres of rurality and structures of feeling in times of crisis, as they provide an affective adjustment that seems to ensure comfortable and historical legibility for a collective settler future. While the rural frontier genre of US West thus manages a sense of continuity with the supposed "precrisis world" for some, it is also evident that this sense of settler historicity affectively occludes how the precrisis world of settlers is and was always already the ordinary crisis world of Indigenous subjects, more-than-human entities, and those others sooner or later made disposable through the insidious recursive power that defines the interweave of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism. There is thus an urgent need for critics, researchers, audiences, producers, creatives, and institutions alike to not merely interrupt or shift the particularities of treacherous good-life genres, such as those pertaining to the rural US West, but to more actively, critically, and creatively contribute to the affective obliteration of generic settler constellations of worldmaking.

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CHAPTER 8

From Golden Age to Neoliberal Wilderness: Representing the Gaucho in Borges's "The South" and Bolaño's "The Insufferable Gaucho"

Josh Weeks

Abstract

This chapter offers a comparative analysis of Jorge Luis Borges's "The South" and Roberto Bolaño's "The Insufferable Gaucho" to explore how literary imaginations of the gaucho have been (re)shaped by two pivotal moments in Argentine history: the rise of Peronism in the 1940s and the financial crisis of 2001. "The South," the chapter argues, exhibits an idealized vision of the gaucho that serves to reinforce a white, Eurocentric cosmopolitanism that was supposedly under threat from Perón and his supporters. "The Insufferable Gaucho," by contrast, parodies Borges's story – specifically by juxtaposing the romanticism of gaucho mythology with the realities of neoliberalism.

1 Civilization and Barbarism

The dichotomy between the rural and the urban has long been a source of cultural and political factionalism in Latin America. At the heart of this debate is Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, an Argentine writer and journalist who, prior to a political career that saw him named the seventh president of Argentina, wrote the hugely influential *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845). Drawing on the racist and unilinear logic of colonialism, *Facundo* proposes an antagonism between the "indigenous barbarism" of the Argentine interior and the "European civilization" of cities such as Buenos Aires (Sarmiento 33). A typical passage reads:

> The man of the city wears European dress, lives a civilized life as we know it everywhere: in the city there are laws, ideas of progress, means of instruction, some municipal organization, a regular government, etc. Leaving the city district, everything changes … All that is civilized in the

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> city is blockaded, banished outside of it, and anyone who would dare show up in a frock coat, for example, and mounted on an English saddle, would draw upon himself the peasants' jeers and their brutal aggression. (Sarmiento 53)

The ultimate triumph of civilization over barbarism, Sarmiento insists, can only be achieved by opening Argentina's doors to "those in Europe who study the needs of humanity" (35). The underlying assumption is that, with the influx of European peoples and ideas, the Argentine nation will become more modern, more progressive, and, indeed, more urban.

Facundo's influence on the Latin American imagination cannot be overstated. As Roberto González Echevarría notes, "[i]n proposing the dialectic between civilization and barbarism as the central conflict in Latin American culture it gave shape to a polemic that began in the colonial period and continues to the present day" (2). In Sarmiento's case, this polemic was directed against the figure of the gaucho: a horseman, normally of *mestizo* ancestry, who drifted between provinces raising cattle and living off the land. Comparable to the figure of the North American cowboy, the gaucho was renowned for his bravery, independence, and legendary knife-wielding skills. Suffice to say that this rustic way of life – though "not without its attractions" (Sarmiento 58) – was at odds with Sarmiento's Eurocentric vision of progress, which coalesced around the image of the lettered cosmopolis. On the one hand, this Eurocentric vision proved achievable, with immigration skyrocketing both during and after Sarmiento's presidency (1868–1874). As Eleni Kefala has noted, "[b]y the end of the 1910s Buenos Aires was the biggest and most cosmopolitan city of Latin America as a result of the massive influx of immigrants arriving from Europe" (35). Equally significant for my purposes, however, is the colonial conception of Argentine "tradition" with which the gaucho went on to be associated. "In trying to eradicate the gaucho," writes González Echevarría, "Sarmiento turned him into a national symbol … a lost origin around which to build a national mythology" (15).

The aim of this chapter is to trace the shifting contours of this national mythology across periods of upheaval in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Argentina. As Dianna C. Niebylski has suggested, "each key revaluation of the figure of the gaucho … is and always has been tied to the great political-economic conflicts in the history of the country" (162, my translation). Via a comparative analysis of "The South" (1953) by Jorge Luis Borges and "The Insufferable Gaucho" (2003) by Roberto Bolaño, I analyze the changing face of the gaucho in relation to two such conflicts: the contentious rise to power

of Juan Perón – father of Peronism – who became president in 1946;[1] and the financial crisis of December 2001, when the build-up of more than a decade of neoliberal policy failures left millions of Argentines unemployed and out of pocket. My overriding claim is that the representations of the gaucho enacted within these texts cannot be separated from the broader processes of modernity shaping the nation's rural-urban dynamic, and that, by attending to this dialectic, we can begin to understand both the possibilities and limitations of the gaucho's popular appeal.

Borges's "The South" tells the tale of Juan Dahlmann, a librarian who returns to his family home in the Pampas following an accident in his Buenos Aires apartment building. This journey back to the countryside culminates in a standoff with a young thug at a rural bar-store, with the story ending just as Dahlmann is about to become embroiled in a knife fight. The protagonist's mythologization of the Argentine interior, I show, can be read as both a response to and a refraction of *criollismo* – the nationalist movement, centered around José Hernández's epic poem *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872), that dominated Argentine literature and culture in the first half of the twentieth century. As Edwin Williamson has suggested, for Borges, "the right-wing form of Argentine nationalism which emerged as a considerable force at the end of the 1920s" represented "a major ingredient in the ideology of Peronism" (278n10). It is against this backdrop, Williamson continues, that Borges sought to convert the gaucho from a repository of nationalist sentiment into "the unwitting champion of individual liberty against the State" (280). Borges's libertarian repackaging of the gaucho, I contend, is suspect on two accounts: firstly, it tells us very little about the material realities of *actual rural subjects*, either historical or contemporary; and, by extension, it obscures the extent to which a story like "The South" upholds the colonial insistence upon Argentina as a white, European nation.

In the second half of the chapter, I turn to Bolaño's "The Insufferable Gaucho," which not only reads like a pastiche of "The South," but directly references Borges's tale on a number of occasions. Mostly taking place in the aftermath of the December 2001 crisis, "The Insufferable Gaucho" revolves around a retired judge, Manuel Pereda, who – feeling angered and emasculated by the ravages of globalization – swaps his comfortable life in Buenos Aires for a dilapidated ranch in the Pampas. In contrast to Borges's Dahlmann, however, Pereda's clichéd expectations of the rural are challenged at every turn, destroying the

1 Peronism is a form of corporatism in which the state serves as intermediary between bosses and workers.

illusion of what Raymond Williams calls "the endless neo-pastoral" and confirming instead "the relentless intrusion of time" (32). In offering a worrying (and at times hilarious) reflection on the search for national direction in the aftermath of financial ruin, the story asks: what becomes of the gaucho myth when the city is in disarray, but the horizon of nationhood is delimited by what Fredric Jameson calls "the global space of the postmodernist or multinational moment" (1984: 91)? And, even more critically, how are we to negotiate such an impasse without resorting to rural nationalism?

2 Gilding the Golden Age

One of the difficulties in writing about the figure of the gaucho is that its cultural significance cuts across lines of class and political affiliation. This is especially evident in the first half of the twentieth century – the period when Borges came to prominence – during which various groups molded the archetype to fit their respective ideals. Given the debates surrounding Borges's position within this labyrinth of competing attitudes towards the gaucho, it is important to contextualize his intellectual journey in the years leading up to "The South," which was first published in *La Nación* in 1953. This intellectual journey began with a literal one: Borges's return to Buenos Aires from Europe in 1921.

"Borges's return to his native city after a prolonged absence … overwhelmed him," Eleni Kefala notes, "as he was now called to rediscover this rapidly expanding urban sprawl" (36). The writer's excitement at this urban expansion, one of the most significant effects of which was to produce a newfound hinterland between the city and the countryside (*las orillas*), stood in stark contrast to the prevailing literary mood of the period. In a series of lectures in 1913, the celebrated poet Leopoldo Lugones canonized Hernández's *Martín Fierro*, lauding the work as the archetypal epic of Argentina. The cultural renovation of the gaucho that resulted from these lectures betrayed an antagonism towards the changing socioeconomic situation in Argentina – particularly with regard to mass immigration:

> Lugones sustained that the poem celebrated the free-spirited criollo gaucho of the Pampa and offered a true image of Argentineness in an age when the Pampean rural life was being replaced by the spread of modernization … [H]e promoted the formerly "barbaric" gaucho to the status of national signifier and contrasted his "essence" with "la plebe ultramarina" [the overseas masses]. (Kefala 37–38)

As Borges's biographer Edwin Williamson has suggested, "Lugones's interpretation of *Martín Fierro* was to influence Argentine nationalism for many decades to come, giving it a distinctly right-wing bent" (227). Borges's response to this phenomenon was to propose an alternative myth of the nation – one that drew "not on a nostalgic view of the gauchos and the pampas but on Buenos Aires, and specifically on the city's peripheral barrios … where ordinary *criollos* lived cheek by jowl with poor immigrants" (Williamson 277).

One could be forgiven for feeling blindsided by Borges's hinterland leanings, given the avowedly rural trajectory of "The South." As we shall see in a moment, the story's protagonist, Dahlmann, is enchanted not by "the semi-rural/semi-urban liminal topography of the *orillas*" (Kefala 39), but, rather, by "the elemental earth … not disturbed by settlements or any other signs of humanity" (Borges 2000b: 150). It is important to remember, though, that "The South" was written more than three decades after Borges's return to Buenos Aires. Not only did the intervening years see the Argentine capital become even more industrialized, they were also marked by the rise to power of Juan Perón, who, after participating in the military coup of 1943, was elected president in 1946. Horrified by what he perceived as the manipulation of the masses by a fascist-adjacent regime, Borges decided to "re-interpret the emblematic significance of the gaucho in order to play the *nacionalistas* at their own game" (Williamson 280). What is so curious about "The South," however, is the way its anti-Peronist bravado indulges rather than contests a revisionist history of the Pampas that erases the centuries-long war against indigenous and *mestizo* subjects. As I argue below, whilst the nationalist overtones of the story might be dismissed as tongue-in-cheek, they also implicitly point to the corruption of an urban-*orillas* imaginary that – despite Borges's initial optimism – now housed the (racialized) base of the Peronist movement.

The opening of "The South" is at once typical and untypical of Borges. The reader is introduced to Juan Dahlmann, "secretary of a municipal library on Calle Córdoba," who considers himself "profoundly Argentine" (146). The classic Borgesian association between the library and the universal is undercut by an admission of national pride, suggesting a deviation from the cosmopolitanism for which Borges is renowned. Such pride, we are told, can be traced back to Dahlmann's maternal grandfather, Francisco Flores, who died whilst fighting against "the Indians under Catriel" on the outskirts of Buenos Aires province (146). Beguiled by his ancestor's "romantic death" (146), Dahlmann commits himself to saving the Flores family home in the Pampas, where he vows to settle one day.

Dahlmann's return to the South comes sooner than expected. Whilst rushing up the stairs of his apartment building – eager to begin reading *Arabian*

Nights, which he acquired earlier that day – he cuts his head on the edge of an open window. The accident leaves him bedbound and feverish for eight days, but after being admitted to a sanatorium (where his condition worsens), he eventually recovers, discovering upon waking that he almost died from septicemia. "The next day," the narrator informs us, "the surgeon told him he was coming right along … [H]e'd soon be able to go out to the country house to convalesce" (148).

Dahlmann's discharge establishes a motif of duality that structures the rest the story: "Reality is partial to symmetries … Dahlmann had come to the sanitorium in a cab, and it was a cab that took him to the station at Plaza Constitución" (148). Ostensibly, such duality signals the chasm between reality and dreams that creates a fault line within the narrative from the moment of Dahlmann's apparent recovery. It is strongly insinuated that Dahlmann's journey to the South is a deathbed hallucination – an unconscious attempt to grant himself a heroic end, like that of his grandfather. At the conclusion of the story, for instance, when Dahlmann is about to enter into a knife fight with a local hoodlum, the narrator states that "[a]s he crossed the threshold, he felt that on that first night in the sanitorium … this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen" (153). It is my sense, however, that this thematic of doubleness also points to the spatial, temporal, and affective rupture through which Dahlmann is able to imagine an uncontaminated split between the rural and the urban. As I argue below, not only does this imagined rupture obscure the capitalist conditions through which rurality is produced, it also seems to draw from the same reactionary playbook as Lugones and his contemporaries, for whom the gaucho represented a (symbolic) return to the heyday of Spanish colonialism.[2]

Dahlmann's perception of the rural – which he himself admits is the product of a "nostalgic, literary knowledge" (150) – hinges on the existence of a definitive, almost metaphysical frontier that promises an escape from the transience of modernity: "Everyone knows that the South begins on the other side of Avenida Rivadavia. Dahlmann had often said that was no mere saying, that by crossing Rivadavia one entered an older and more stable world" (148). The spirit of the rural idyll underlying such a belief is later emphasized by the protagonist's intuition that "he was traveling not only into the South but into the past" (150). In his famous examination of literary imaginations of rural and urban life, *The Country & the City* (1973), Raymond Williams outlines the "permanent and indeed timeless idea of the tranquillity of life in the country" (27).

2 Adamovsky notes: "if the criollo traditions embodied in the figure of the gaucho … were considered to be of pure Spanish heritage, then these expressions of cultural nationalism posed little threat to the idea that the true Argentine people were white and European" (160–161).

He also suggests that, in the context of global-historical developments such as the industrial revolution, "the pull of the idea of the country is towards old ways, human ways, natural ways" (Williams 426). "The South," I want to suggest, operates precisely within this tension between timelessness and anachronism, emplacing and freezing an idealized rural past within what the narrator calls "the eternity of the instant" (149).

Consider the moment when Dahlmann enters the rural bar-store. The old gaucho he sees "curled against the bar" (151) seems to be caught in a temporal no man's land where history and radical permanence exist side by side:

> The many years had worn him away and polished him, as a stone is worn smooth by running water or a saying polished by generations of humankind. He was small, dark, and dried up, and he seemed to be outside time, in a sort of eternity … [O]nly in the South did gauchos like that exist anymore. (151)

How are we to square this old man's vulnerability to time with the statement that "he seemed to be outside time, in a sort of eternity"? It as though Dahlmann wants to have his time and transcend it too; he emphasizes the gaucho's link to a fading golden age whilst simultaneously granting him immortality. Indeed, the narrator's switch to the present and future tenses in the story's final sentence places Dahlmann and his rural counterparts in suspension, as it were: "Dahlmann firmly grips the knife, which he may have no idea how to manage, and steps out into the plains" (153). As Mac J. Wilson has shown, "[s]hifting voice in the last instance leaves the story in a kind of eternal present … [A]s with Zeno's paradox, only a penultimate resolution exists" (54). As an imaginative rejoinder to Dahlmann's walk from the station to the bar-store earlier in the story, when the sun's "final splendour brought a glory to the living yet silent plains before they were blotted out by night" (150), this conclusion points to the *eternal splendor* of a past becoming present, teetering on the cusp between expectation and the everlasting. We cannot overlook, however, the anachronizing effect of Dahlmann's description of the old gaucho in the passage above ("He was small, dark, and dried up"), which reflects the colonial framing of indigeneity as a relic of history. "[C]onfining nonwhite presences to Argentina's colonial past," writes Ezequiel Adamovsky, "has been a common device for rendering them invisible in the present" (175). Borges seems more than happy to "preserve" the figure of the gaucho, provided that this is a purely mnemonic process that remains at the level of lip service.

Williams is unequivocal on the kind of "idealist retrospect" (50) deployed by Borges here. In his view, there is no ground zero of innocence at any point

within rural history "unless we ourselves choose to put it there" (70). In other words, instead of accepting the idea of a rural "golden age," we should ask: Who is doing the gilding? To what effect? For whose benefit? The generous response is that "The South" is a parody of *criollo* nationalism, combined with an attempt to give the gaucho an anti-Peronist makeover. As Williamson has suggested, Dahlmann's anticipated knife fight is vital to this reading, for it represents "an extreme affirmation of individual identity against a rival … the political stance in the defence of the freedom of the individual that Borges had adopted against Perón" (285). I would also draw attention, however, to the copy of *Arabian Nights* that puts the plot into motion (by causing Dahlmann to hit his head), which the protagonist takes with him to the countryside. The sporadic reappearance of this staple of world literature serves as a reminder that, for all of Dahlmann's national and rural attachments, he is ultimately – like his creator – a citizen of the universe.[3]

And yet, there is the lingering sense that such cosmopolitan brushstrokes are insufficient; that Borges's attempt to "liberate" the gaucho does little to challenge nationalist revisionism, replacing as it does the material history of the Pampas with what Beatriz Sarlo calls "the imaginary landscape of Argentine literature" (20). As pristine as this imaginary landscape may appear, it is in reality caked in epistemic violence. Contrary to what the story would have us believe, the gaucho did not emerge or exist in a rural vacuum; their *mestizo* ancestry can be directly linked to colonial expansion, and their reputation as a stoic wanderer is invariably bound up with capitalist developments both at home and abroad. As Silvio R. Duncan Baretta and John Markoff suggest, "[f]rontier populations came to be considered as 'barbarians' by the spokesmen of the same civilization that had created them out of its clash with Indian societies" (597). Following this initial genocide, the ever-dwindling land rights of "people of the frontiers" coincided with the "[r]azionalization of production resulting from the rising prices of hides in the international market and from the prominence of jerked beef as an export industry in the first years of the nineteenth century" (Baretta and Markoff 588). Such histories belie the "timelessness" of both the gaucho and the Argentine interior, revealing instead the racialized violence that this fiction erases. It is no coincidence that the framing device of "The South" – the story within a story that results from Dahlmann's hospitalization – points to the realm of dreams, and perhaps even the precipice of death. The protagonist's "bland romanticization of the criollo past"

3 In "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" (1951), Borges famously proclaims that "our patrimony is the universe" (219).

(Sarlo 48) has little basis in reality, emerging instead at the intersection of personal and national fantasy.

The racial implications of this fantasy cannot be overlooked. If the nationalist (re)vision of the gaucho provided Lugones and his contemporaries with "an alternative myth of white Argentina to compete with the 'cosmopolitan' white Argentina" (Chamosa 120), then certain strands of anti-Peronism represented a third iteration of this trend. As Eduardo Elena suggests, "anti-Peronist sectors mocked the popular base of the Peronist movement with racially charged slurs such as '*cabecitas negras*' [little blackheads] or simply '*negros*' … [I]n the eyes of many observers, to be a *negro* was almost by definition to be a Peronist" (189). Gáston Gordillo, meanwhile, clarifies this association by noting how the

> industrialization and urban expansion that Argentina experienced in the 1930s and 1940s … attracted to the city and suburbs of Buenos Aires working-class multitudes from rural areas that had not been Europeanized. These male and female migrants brought with them a nonwhiteness that had officially been declared extinct. (248–249)

Whilst Borges may not have used such language himself (at least not in the story), his growing trepidation towards the laboring masses – combined with his questionable deployment of the gaucho trope – speaks to a political and intellectual culture in which indigeneity was perceived as a threat, and in which this threat was transposed onto the working class. Considered in this context, "The South" begins to resemble a form of delayed onset elitism – a *conditional cosmopolitanism* that does not extend as far as the Peronist majority.[4]

3 "Cows … Where Are You?"

As a counterpoint to this idealized, anti-Peronist rendering of the gaucho, I now turn to Roberto Bolaño's "The Insufferable Gaucho": a story about a retired judge who returns to his family ranch in the Pampas following the December 2001 crisis in Argentina. The crisis in question resulted from the accelerated neoliberalization of the country in the wake of the 1976–1983 military dictatorship, which, instead of demonstrating the merits of the free market, produced widespread unemployment, crippling austerity, and ultimately, mass protest.

4 Swanson's analysis of "Conjectural Poem," written by Borges in 1943 (the same year as the military coup in which Perón participated), reaches a similar conclusion (86–87).

"The Insufferable Gaucho" offers a reflection on both the persistence and fragility of the gaucho myth at the turn of the millennium, when the dividing line between the urban and the rural was more porous than ever. Whilst the protagonist of the story mourns this predicament, however, the narrative itself provides glimpse into subaltern experiences of rurality that throw a sobering but vital shadow over the rural idyll. Shaped by poverty and precarity, but also consumerist enjoyment, these subaltern experiences of rurality point to a dialectical – rather than antagonistic – relationship between the countryside and the city under globalization.

Like Borges, Bolaño is not the first Latin American author to come to mind when thinking about the rural. The Chilean is primarily known for his depiction of urban spaces, most famously his representation of Mexico City in the 1998 novel *The Savage Detectives*. Bracketing the story's title for a moment, "The Insufferable Gaucho" shows no early signs of bucking this trend. The protagonist, Manuel Pereda, is a retired judge and avowed anti-Peronist who – in spite of the sudden death of his wife some years earlier – lives a contented life in Buenos Aires with his two children, Cuca and Bebe: "It's hard not to be happy, he used to say, in Buenos Aires, which is a perfect blend of Paris and Berlin" (11).[5] The European flourishes of the Argentine capital, which call to mind Sarmiento's prescription for civilization in *Facundo*, seem to pervade every aspect of Pereda's daily routine, from the "buttered French bread" that he eats for breakfast every morning to the "two teachers with Italian surnames" that come to the house to give English and French classes to Bebe (10, 11). In a clear nod to Borges, this cosmopolitan existence takes on a more literary form when Cuca and Bebe eventually grow up and move out (which happens a few pages into the story), leaving Pereda to dedicate his time to "organizing his huge, chaotic library" (12).

It is during this period of newfound solitude that the "civilized" (i.e. white, European) veneer of Buenos Aires begins to crack. Whenever Bebe comes home to visit, he drags his father along to a local literary gathering, but Pereda's experience of these meetings is markedly ambiguous. "When they talked about literature," the narrator informs us, "he was completely bored … But when they talked about national and international politics, the lawyer's body grew tense, as if under the effect of an electric current" (12). The suggestion that something ominous is in the air becomes even stronger when Pereda has lunch with a fellow judge and a retired journalist. He laughs throughout the

5 Gordillo notes: "there are few things that white Argentina finds more gratifying than hearing Europeans or North Americans refer to Buenos Aires as 'The Paris of South America'" (248).

entire meal, and when asked what is so funny, he simply replies that "Buenos Aires is sinking" (13). His intuition proves correct:

> A few days later … the Argentine economy collapsed. Accounts in American dollars were frozen, and those who hadn't moved their capital (or their savings) offshore suddenly discovered that they had nothing left … That was when Pereda decided to go back to the country. (13–14)

This allusion to the fall of the Fernando de la Rúa government in December 2001 points to a critical moment in the neoliberal experiment that had been forced upon Argentina during the military dictatorship. As Mario E. Carranza notes, "Fourteen million Argentines – over a third of the population – lived below the poverty line … The neoliberal model had reached a crisis stage" (70). Bolaño's portrayal of the eruption of this crisis stage also represents an early turning point in the narrative, with the rest of the story charting Pereda's relocation and adaptation to the Pampas.[6]

The similarities between "The Insufferable Gaucho" and "The South" are plain to see. At one point, Pereda even claims that "his destiny … would be to meet his death like Dahlman [sic]" (22). In this instance, however, the Argentine interior represents a safe haven not from the corrupting influence of mass immigration and/or Peronism, but from the humiliating and bankrupting effects of globalization – at least from the perspective a white, upper-middle-class citizen who sees financial crisis and the waning of masculinity as two sides of the same coin. "We have fallen," Pereda announces midway through the story, "but we can still pick ourselves up and go to our deaths like men" (28). The rural, in this configuration, becomes a gendered site of redemption where the "pride of the nation" – code for bourgeois comfort and status – can be symbolically restored. And yet, Pereda's arrival in the countryside produces a disjuncture between expectation and reality that he is unable to close, despite his continuous efforts. On the side of expectation lies anachronism and rusticity: a countryside that is "no place for a man like him, a cultivated family man" (14), but this is not what appears on the side of reality. Beginning with the "part Indian … reading a Batman comic" (15) that Pereda encounters on the train (who challenges the supposed antagonism between rurality/indigeneity and modernity), the Sarmiento-inspired split between civilization and barbarism is incessantly eroded.

6 Though Pereda's decision to leave Buenos Aires is driven by a general dissatisfaction with urban life following the crash, there is also a practical dimension to his departure – namely, that his money is "all frozen in the bank – in other words, as good as lost" (14).

When Pereda first enters the local bar-store, he is dismayed to find the customers enjoying games of cards, drafts, and Monopoly: "The habit of playing games … seemed ill bred and dishonourable to Pereda. A store is a place where people converse or listen in silence to the conversations of others, he thought" (27). The insinuation that these men have been somehow emasculated, which intensifies when the protagonist learns that "the gauchos had sold their horses to the slaughterhouse, and now got around on foot, or on bicycles, or hitched rides" (28), is later used to explain the strange absence of cows in the region: "Cows, [Pereda] shouted, where are you? … The shame of the nation or the continent had turned [the gauchos] into tame cats. That's why the cattle had been replaced by rabbits" (34–35). Bolaño alerts us here to a form of gaucho subjectivity that diverges from the colonial framing of the plainsman as either a violent savage or a hyper-masculine hero. Far from inhabiting an uncontaminated space beyond the city-limit (as in "The South"), this form of gaucho subjectivity clearly exists *within* modernity's material, cultural, and temporal sweep. As Brett Levison suggests, Pereda seeks to "reestablish the civilization/barbarism divide" in a context where the "differences between gaucho and city denizen … have vanished" (172).

The sticking point for Pereda is what Raymond Williams calls the "consciousness of real processes" (48). Bolaño is less interested in indulging his protagonist's preconceptions about the rural than in registering their susceptibility to capitalist transformation. It seems important, for instance, that the story brims with hired hands, housekeepers, local merchants, and even the landless: "they spotted the shell of a ranch house on the horizon … five or six malnourished children came out to greet them, and a woman wearing a very wide skirt" (33). The impoverishment of such subjects, which the woman attributes to the fact that "the owners of the ranch had gone off to the city a long time ago" (33–34), represents the flipside to the incursion of Batman, bicycles, and Monopoly. It registers the devastating effects of what Ericka Beckman calls "the dynamics of uneven rural modernization, caught between logics of dispossession and abandonment" (821).

On this point, we must attend to Pereda's anger and disgust at learning about the gauchos' political alignment – a reaction that signals an ignorance about the lived realities of subalternity. "[T]hey were nostalgic for General Perón," the narrators informs the reader. "This is where we part company, said Pereda, and pulled out his knife" (35). In addition to further highlighting the ludicrousness of the protagonist's macho pretentions ("the old guys recoiled in fear and asked what he was doing" [35]), Bolaño alludes here to the part played by Peronism in improving indigenous and *mestizo* lives. As Oscar Chamosa shows, the folklore policies introduced during the first Peronism (1943–1955) marked a "step

toward dignifying dark-skinned workers from the interior" because the policies in question "implied a challenge to the historical representation of Argentina as a white nation" (117, 114):

> The key difference between the Peronists and the Conservatives was that the celebration of criollo folklore under Perón accompanied sweeping reforms such as unionization of sugar and wine workers, as well as the regulation of rural day labor, that empowered the rural criollo … [T]he Peronist embrace of criollo folklore can be understood as a significant revision of the official discourse on Argentine ethnicity. (123)[7]

Pereda is unwilling to entertain this Peronist inflection of *criollismo*. It is as though the near eradication of gauchos over the course of the nineteenth century were not enough: now it is the mores, values, and even political desires of their ancestors that require taming.

Crucially, such is Pereda's desperation to maintain the illusion of what the narrator calls "places that remain steadfastly faithful" (34) that, instead of abandoning his revisionist fantasy, he projects it inwards, expressing it at the level of reconfigured subjectivity. For all of his disappointment with his rural surroundings, over the course of the story, Pereda undergoes a radical, almost cellular transformation from cosmopolitan city-dweller to gaucho stereotype. During his first encounter with a local after alighting from the train, he notices that "his voice … sounded off, as if the air of [the town] Capitán Jourdan had invigorated his vocal chords" (18). This personal metamorphosis is well under way by the time Bebe comes to visit, with the protagonist sporting "a beard, long tangled hair, and a bare chest tanned by the sun" (28–29). On the one hand, Pereda's obsession with rural cliché is as banal as it is insufferable. As Williams shows, the essentialization of country life has become a default position when it comes to capitalist critique. But Pereda's disregard for his *actual* rural surroundings suggests a version of this position that is specific to the neoliberal moment, in which the voiding of the gaucho's mythic content does not necessarily translate into reconsideration or disavowal.

There are resonances here with Fredric Jameson's claim that, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, "the producers of culture have nowhere to go but to the past" (1984: 65). In "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984), Jameson famously indicts the "depthlessness" and "weakening of historicity" that dominates cultural production under globalization (58).

7 Chamosa is careful to point out that the "Peronist discourse on criollo culture had its share of ambiguities, showing the lasting pull of Eurocentrism on Peronist policymakers" (125).

The "past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed," he writes, and so "we are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra" (Jameson 1984: 65, 71). In a way, Pereda embodies the "schizophrenic" subjecthood that characterizes postmodernity – he appears as a kind of pop-cultural bandit whose only means of expression is to steal from the (rural) past. But whilst this postmodern quandary is normally described in playful, even irreverent terms, Bolaño imbues it with a more sinister potential.

It is worth reiterating here the "virile image of the gaucho" that Pereda seeks to restore (Niebylski 173, my translation), which he proposes as an antidote to Argentina's reputational and financial ruin. Not only does this assumption highlight the gaucho's role in mediating masculine, upper-middle-class anxieties about the loss of capital and status, it also prepares the ground for the story's violent denouement, when the protagonist is accosted by a writer outside a Buenos Aires café after returning to the capital to sign some papers related to the sale of his house: "Before Pereda knew what was going on, the writer was upon him … [Pereda] took a step forward and, without anyone noticing that he was armed, planted the point of the blade, though not deeply, in his opponent's groin" (40). At the same moment that the civilization/barbarism binary proposed by Sarmiento is undercut (insofar as it is the writer rather than the gaucho who instigates the confrontation), Bolaño refrains from simply inverting the model, which would involve presenting Pereda as a rational, irreproachable victim. Rather, in keeping with the general cynicism of Bolaño's fiction, barbarism is reframed as a pervasive, perhaps inescapable condition that encompasses the city and the countryside alike, as well as the "emasculated" men who lay (phallic) claim to such spaces.

The dream that Pereda has leading up to this encounter, in which he imagines himself as a Christ-like figure riding a horse into Buenos Aires, is emblematic of this refusal to sanitize the rural:

> He imagined people thronging the sidewalks as he made his entry … All of us enter Jerusalem sooner or later, he thought as he tossed and turned. Every single one of us. And some never leave. But most do. And then we are seized and crucified. Especially the poor gauchos. (37–38)

The allusions to Christian sacrifice and cosmopolitan betrayal are reminiscent of the fascist weaponization of the countryside, or what Williams describes as "the offensive against democracy in the name of blood and soil" (51). In fact, one wonders whether, had "The Insufferable Gaucho" come to Bolaño earlier in his career, Pereda might have made it into his mock anthology of fascist writers, *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996). The point is that the ridiculousness

of Pereda's becoming-gaucho conceals a hidden, more disturbing truth: in a context where "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 2003: 76), the idealization of the rural as a safeguard against global(ized) violence can easily become a source of violence itself.

4 Conclusion: the Future of the Rural Past

In the late 1990s, a group known as *los piqueteros* ("the picketers") began protesting against the government of Carlos Menem (1989–1999). Comprised of disaffected youths who had had enough of the poverty and unemployment brought about by Menem's neoliberal reforms, *los piqueteros* set up road blockades in urban centers of Argentina, demanding reassurance and support in the face of their uncertain futures (Gordillo 254). The conservative newspaper *La Nación* would later denounce "The Savagery of the Piqueteros" (qtd. in Gordillo 255), positing them, in Gordillo's words, as "direct heirs to the indigenous savagery" denounced by Sarmiento in 1845 (255).

This rendering savage of deprived, subaltern populations echoes the material and epistemic violence against rural subjects that I have examined in this chapter. Much like the figure of the gaucho, which Sarmiento associated with the "devastations of barbarism" (35), *los piquetoros* are framed in terms of a non-white, non-urban encroachment that "threatens the spatial integrity of White Argentina" (Gordillo 256). And, like the gaucho, whose historical eradication paved the way for the figure's nationalist rebirth, the voices of *los piquetoros* have been drowned out by those of the (predominantly white) middle and upper classes.

As I have shown, Borges and Bolaño approach this nationalist (re)vision of the gaucho in radically different ways. Whilst "The South" revolves around a libertarian dreamscape that obscures the histories and legacies of settler-colonialism, "The Insufferable Gaucho" highlights the impossibility of maintaining such a façade in the context of globalization. And yet, both texts also point to a socio-political tendency that is difficult to reject wholesale: the idea that the future – in whatever progressive or perverted form one envisages it – might be located in the past. Williams describes this tendency as an "escalator" moving backwards through time, one which at first glance seems to be "a single escalator, a perpetual recession into history," but "turns out … to be a more complicated movement" (16–17). As we have seen, this movement gives rise to representations of the countryside that are as idyllic as they are dangerous. But it also creates the opportunity for excavating alternative, *anti-colonial*

genealogies of rural space that may be crucial in empowering non-white subjects, and may provide a ground from which to (re)imagine post-neoliberal futures. In a sense, both Dahlmann and Pereda are right; they are just right in the wrong way. Maybe we do need to look back to move forward, only remembering whilst we do so that the rural past – like the Argentine gaucho – is more than the figment of a white, urban imagination.

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CHAPTER 9

Four Cottage Scenes: Reading across Globalized Idylls

Ben Stringer

Abstract

This chapter examines how tensions between conceptions of the rural as local idyll on the one hand, and as a working production space on the other, play out in four fictional cottage scenes; two from the early nineteenth century and two from the twenty-first. The first, London's Regent's Park, exemplifies picturesque occlusions of the working reality of the countryside within an upscaling, globalizing and industrializing food system. Conversely, the other three – the novel *Frankenstein* and the movies *Blade Runner 2049* and *Bait* – draw critical attention to the idyll's enduring entanglement with global productivist farming in spite of the small farm imaginaries it espouses.

1 Introduction

In 2017, Minette Batters, then vice president of the UK's National Farmers' Union, asked: "Do we want the countryside just to be a national park and import our food from elsewhere or do we want it to be full of thriving communities that can be a productive part of the economy?" (Adams n. pag.). This was a question born out of frustration at the decline in rural infrastructure, the shortage of affordable rural housing, and the major economic challenges faced by UK farms, particularly small ones. Post Brexit, post-pandemic, and with the Ukraine war ongoing, it still resonates: the UK consumes less and less produce from its own farms and fisheries, while imports are rising. At the same time, leisure demands on the countryside are increasing, along with rural property prices.

Batters's question would also have been relevant two hundred years ago, when farming was intensifying and scaling up (especially on colonial plantations), and when, by means of enclosure, traditional common lands farmed by peasants were being turned into grand picturesque landscapes for the landed gentry. In what follows, I discuss how enduring tensions between idyllic conceptions of the rural and the rural as food production space plays out in four

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fictional rural cottage scenes, two from the early nineteenth century and two from the twenty-first.

The first cottage scene is Park Village, a mostly unbuilt proposal for a group of ornate faux rustic cottages designed in 1823 by architect John Nash. It was intended as an extension to his design for Regent's Park (begun in 1811 and, at the time, located in the countryside just beyond the northwest edge of London). This "village," seen by some as a prototype for modern suburbia, would have presented an entirely idyllic impression of the countryside to its intended patrons, and offered them respite from the city's congestion, filth, and disease (Fishman 70–71).

The second cottage scene, originating from a very different political perspective, is the De Lacey family's cottage in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, published in 1818. Shelley grew up close to the site of Regent's Park in the years just before its creation, when the area comprised fields, farms, woods, and market gardens. In her lifetime, Shelley, who said she "lived principally in the country as a girl," will have seen this working rural or peri-urban neighborhood consumed by the expanding city and by the park's picturesque landscapes and gardens (173). According to Stephen Asma, "monsters … disrupt neat categories of taxonomy" (125). Here, I suggest that Frankenstein's monster destabilizes the kind of urban-rural dichotomy that Regent's Park's aesthetic promoted. It has also been argued that Shelley's monster reflects contemporary anxieties about race and emancipated slaves (Malchow; Mulvey-Roberts). If the monster is indeed a product of the plantations in the Americas and West Indies as well as of Victor Frankenstein's laboratory in Ingolstadt, does he, in the scenes where he hides in (and subsequently destroys) the De Lacey's farm cottage, raise a specter of globalized industrial scale farming and its possible effects on local and traditional farming societies?

The third cottage scene, from the twenty-first century, is protein farmer Sapper Morton's gloomy and functional abode in Denis Villeneuve's big-budget dystopian sci-fi movie *Blade Runner 2049*, released in 2017. If Regent's Park imagined a countryside devoid of industry, *Blade Runner 2049* does the opposite by portraying Earth's future as a synthetic industrial plantation world inhabited by replicants in the years following an ecological catastrophe. The countryside here is an ultra-productive zone where hardly anything remains of natural flora or fauna. Because of this, when fragments of the previously existing rural ecology and society are shown, they seem intensely idyllic in comparison. With images of a real-life industrialized agricultural region of Spain being used to create some of *2049*'s dystopian rural panoramas, a glimpse, perhaps, is provided, of the kind of "elsewhere" that Batters's question refers to, supplying supermarkets with cheap fruit and vegetables while many local farms struggle to survive.

The fourth and final cottage scene I look at comes from *Bait*, a low-budget black-and-white film made in Cornwall with old 16mm film cameras by local filmmaker Mark Jenkin with local actors, released in 2019. *Bait*'s plot centers on a Cornish fishing village and the tensions that arise when a family of Londoners buy a fisherman's cottage for use as a holiday home. The film's plot is mainly conveyed through the eyes of a struggling fisherman who resents the village's transformation from a site of production to one of consumption. The idea of the rural idyll is manifest in some of the film's scenes, for example when the London holiday makers use old fishing nets to decorate their living room. Thus, unlike Regent's Park, which erased a patchwork of productive rural spaces to create picturesque views for Londoners, *Bait* critically juxtaposes tourists' idyllic imaginaries with the productive ones of local working people. The film raises questions about where food comes from, for example when shots of a fridge being filled with supermarket shopping are juxtaposed with footage of local fishermen struggling to land and sell their catches. While the obvious response to Batters' question would be that leisure, production, and environmental protection must support each other, this is easier said than done within current market conditions wherein, as *Bait* suggests, a quayside cottage has much more commercial allure as a second home than as a local worker's abode.

I am interested in teasing out the different critical relationships these four cottage scenes have with the rural idylls they portray and with working people's experience of globalization in the countrysides of their respective eras. By focusing on these scenes, I am also drawing parallels between our current heightened appreciation of the countryside and some early nineteenth-century urbanites' idealization of it. If, as Batters' question infers, the UK's "post-productive" rurality overlooks its dependencies on people and environments elsewhere to provide the nation's food, then, to my mind, this faintly and problematically echoes the era of the picturesque when tranquil impressions of a bountiful and tranquil English countryside were created which obscured its disturbing economic dependency on colonial plantations.

2 Regent's Park: An Idyllic Disassembly

Architect John Nash and landscape gardener Humphrey Repton began work on Regent's Park in 1811, but it did not open to the public until the 1830s. Initially it was supposed to be a grand gated housing project, but parliament insisted it should be made a public amenity.[1] The Park was the endpoint of a new north

1 See *Hansard* 20 April 1841 vol 57 cc958-62: Regent's Park, House of Commons Debate; and The Royal Parks, *The Regent's Park and Primrose Hill Conservation Management Plan* (2015: 32).

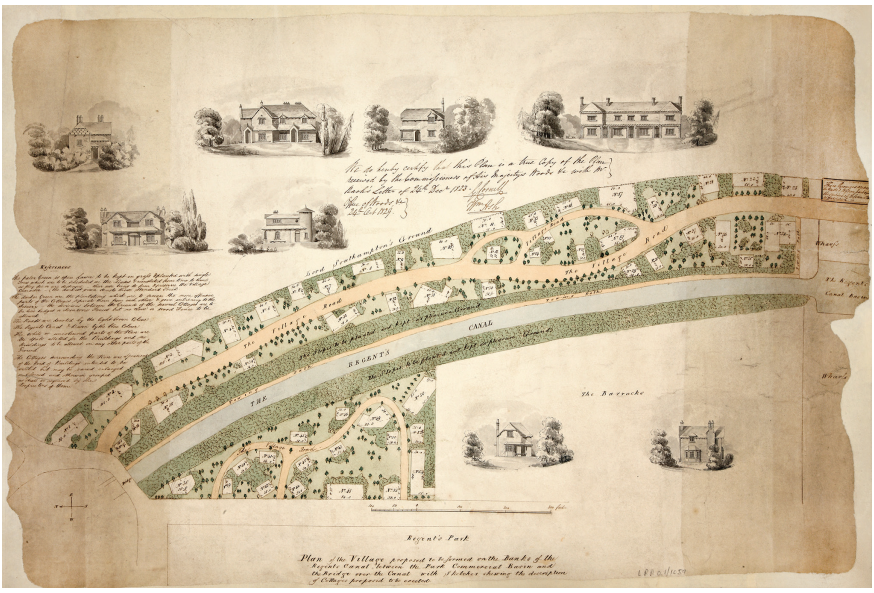


FIGURE 9.1 John Nash, Plan for Park Village, 1823. The National Archives ref: MPE 1/911
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

westerly route from London's crowded and dirty center to the space and fresh air of the countryside, allowing wealthy Londoners to flee the health risks of poor sanitation, a polluted river Thames, and shipborne diseases (Bewell 1999).

The park's plan is roughly circular. Along its southern edges are grand terraces of well-appointed town houses with creamy white painted façades facing into the park. Their whiteness is reminiscent of the limewash used in tropical colonial buildings to help combat disease.[2] It is, indeed, quite hard to distinguish the terraces built here from those built in places like Calcutta under the auspices of the East India Company. One of the terraces (at Sussex Place) even has "Hindoo" domes inspired by Indian temples, perched atop a classical façade. This grand architectural ensemble can thus be seen as celebrating London's place at the heart of a global empire. While these buildings' park-facing frontages are dressed in white, their rear elevations are mostly faced in plain London stock brick; thus, they seem to prioritize the view from the park and cocoon it from the city.

The architecture to the north-east of the park was meant to be very different. Nash's idea here was to develop a meandering ribbon of small detached rustic country cottage-style houses called Park Village (Figure 9.1). This design

2 For more on whiteness and sanitization, see Wigley.

has been described as a prototype for modern suburbia (Fishman 70–71). In the end, Nash replaced this design with one for two streets (Park Village East and Park Village West) of larger Italianate and gothic villas (Tyack 68–74). Apparently, "the humble yet the better sort of the class of people" whom he had envisaged living in his cottages were less attracted to them than he had hoped, so for commercial reasons he developed the area for a wealthier clientele requiring more space for their servants (Tyack 68). The villas that were actually constructed arguably diluted the urban to rural logic of the park's design because they were more easily interpreted as outposts of urban and cosmopolitan sensibilities within rural contexts than the originally planned faux-vernacular cottages.

The landscaping inside the park also makes a distinction between city and country. Through the park runs the main route from what was then the edge of London to the south to the countryside to the north. The southern part of this axis is called "the Avenue," and is flanked by formal, manicured parterres, flower beds, and fountains laid out in classical style and planted with fruit trees, shrubs, and flowers such as cherries and acers and tulips imported originally from an array of overseas territories. The northern part of this route is "the Broadwalk," which is more "rural" and planted in a more informal and naturalistic manner: the plants and trees here are mostly native woodland species such as oaks and limes. Thus, an urban-rural and global-local taxonomy is established both in the architecture and in the landscape design wherein the global is associated with the city and the local with the country. The Park's buildings fulfil the role of separating the working city from the gardens,[3] making the park an urban-scale scenographic bubble set up to frame an idealized and nostalgia-tinged view of the countryside.

Among the ironies of Regent's Park's design is that its idealized countryside necessitated the clearance of a working rural landscape of real farms, cottages, fields, and woods. Another irony is that many of those escaping to this invented countryside owed their wealth to the economics of the city they were escaping from, having, for example, invested in colonial plantation-owning companies.[4] In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the fashion for cottages and picturesque landscapes emerged in England at about the same time as new scales of industrialized monocrop cultivation and processing for international trade were being introduced in colonial plantations in the Americas and Caribbean (Shaw Taylor). At this time, a very large farm in England would have

3 Repton did the same in "The View from the Port near Bristol" (Hoare).

4 See Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, UCL: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/maps/britain/#zoom=11&lng=-0.203247&lat.

been around 120 hectares and might have had a workforce of about 10 people (Mingay), while the largest Jamaican plantation was the Good Hope Estate, which grew to over 3,600 hectares in size and had a workforce of around 500 slaves (Bassett). Good Hope's owner, John Tharp, who kept a total of 3,000 slaves, lived just a few blocks away from Regent's Park in a house on Portland Place and maps produced by UCL's Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery show that this part of London had the highest concentration of residents with interests in slave ownership in the UK.[5] It should be noted, however, that Regent's Park was mainly financed by developer James Burton, who made his money not through slave-owning companies, but through major construction projects in London.

About the picturesque landscaping style of which Repton was a later exponent, Macarthur says: "Arguably, our continued appreciation of the 'English' gardens of Kent and Brown relies on the heightened effect that neo-classical country mansions have in irregular and naturalistic settings. Which, among other things, served to '… play up the paired and parallel orders of nature and culture ….'" (6). In Regent's Park, nature is paired with the rural, and culture with the city, within an aesthetic schema that not only distinguishes the country from the city, but also from the international trade and colonialism fueling its growth. In reality, though, as London grew, the English countryside was undergoing significant changes as well, partly because of the rural-to-urban migration that came with new industries and partly through enclosures of common land (displacing peasant communities) and the creation of stately homes and estates. A significant amount of the money for these rural developments came from investments in plantations and slavery (Fowler). By conceptually segregating the countryside from its entanglements with global trade, colonialism, and slavery, the landscape and cottages in Regent's Park performed a kind of idyllic disassembly, when in reality "the city and the country were both part of the same overarching system," as Raymond Williams put it.[6]

3 Frankenstein as Anti-idyll

The urban-rural and man-nature dichotomies manifest in the picturesque style that Regent's Park exemplifies contrasted deeply with the worldviews of some notable writers of the time. According to Timothy Morton, "Romantic era authors such as Wordsworth and Shelley strove to confuse and undermine the

5 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/maps/britain/#zoom=11&lng=-0.203247&lat.

6 Williams quoted in Mike Dibb's *The Country and the City* (BBC Films, 1979).



FIGURE 9.2 Cottage scene in Universal Pictures' 1931 *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale. Screenshot

difference between Nature and the human, the object and the subject, history and natural history, not necessarily by blowing it up completely, but by exploring its ironies and paradoxes" (146). Monsters in gothic-era horror stories had similar taxonomy disrupting tendencies. According to Marie Mulvey-Roberts, "Monstrosity is invariably a perception relating to bodily confusion and the blurring of boundaries out of which liminality manifests as an object of fear. The monster refuses to be contained within the familiar taxonomies through which we organise the world" (3). She also argues that "Monsters are a rupture in the fabric of society, which can itself become *monstrous* …" (Mulvey-Roberts 233, emphasis in original). In conjunction with Morton's critique of the concept of nature, this leads one to ask whether the normalization of man-nature dichotomies is more monstrous than their disruption.

Until she was 10 years old, Mary Shelley (or Mary Godwin as she was then) lived with her father in an unusual circular modern group of houses called "the Polygon," about three hundred meters east of the site that was to become Regent's Park. The Polygon was a progressive, new development among open fields, woods, farms, and market gardens in an area popular with artists and refugees from the French Revolution.[7] While the view from her nursery win-

7 https://www.theundergroundmap.com/article.html?id=51223.

dow would have been an open vista stretching into the countryside and while she thought hers was a "country childhood" (Shelley 173), Shelley's home was actually at the vanguard of urbanization in her neighborhood, which would have had a liminal peri-urban character. As well as the rural spaces and activities in the vicinity of the Polygon, contemporary maps show that the workings of a city's edge were there too, including clay pits, brickworks, lumber yards, dung, dust and ash heaps.[8] This was a hybrid and productive environment that was feeding the city with food and materials, and recycling much of its waste. During her lifetime, however, the working spaces that surrounded Shelley's childhood home were erased. In their place, new city blocks and streets, as well as the park's idyllic landscapes and gardens, were constructed. Five years after Nash and Repton designed Regent's Park, Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*.

Contrary to the segregating aesthetics of Regent's Park, *Frankenstein* continually pulls different realms together. The monster is the most obvious example of this because he is created from an ambiguous array of pieces of humans and animals, seemingly from different parts of the world. Bewell argues that his hybrid composition echoes the ways that new breeds of farm animals were being designed and bred for efficient meat production. His focus on animal breeding in this context is given extra weight when he emphasizes Shelley's vegetarianism and her engagement with food politics. He also points out that the "physiological writers of Germany" mentioned by Shelley in the first sentence of the novel's preface, likely included those such as Blumenbach, who were interested in "race theory" and physiological differences between ethnicities (Bewell 2020: 717). Theirs was a branch of science that was served by an international trade in human remains for research purposes.

Mulvey-Roberts, following Malchow, identifies affinities between the monster and emancipated slaves in Shelley's descriptions of the monster's appearance and fugitive state. It is well known that Shelley abstained from sugar consumption because of her objections to the slave trade and that she was among those concerned about freed slaves' welfare. In this interpretation, *Frankenstein* plays out some of the scenarios being discussed at the time about what might happen if slaves were freed, whether they might run amok seeking revenge for the inhumane treatment they had suffered, for example, or whether it might not be possible to integrate them into society through education. When the monster says he would flee to Latin America with his bride (if created), he seems to be recalling the thousands of settlements, such as the quilombos or maroons built by escaped slaves in the remote jungles and

8 https://www.theundergroundmap.com/article.html?id=51223.

forests of Brazil, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. If the monster does represent disenfranchised former slaves, then it follows that the colonial plantation system, where most slaves were forced to work, is metaphorically embedded in his character too.

Shelley describes the monster in settings of various scales: oceans, mountains, woods, the city, a town, a village, a farm, and a cottage. The narrative frequently seems to intersect these scales, such as when one imagines Mrs Saville reading Walton's letters about chasing the monster across arctic wastelands from the comfort of a living room armchair. Stereotypical assumptions about places are liable to disruption; the scenes in the rustic hovel where the monster reads philosophy, for example, destabilize the notion of learning as a metropolitan preserve. If the monster is a signifier for emancipated slaves, industrial farming, colonialism, racial stereotyping, and more, then the rustic scenes in Frankenstein that involve the monster become complex assemblages.

When the monster is hiding in the De Lacey's shed, Shelley describes in some detail the farm's layout and the daily routines of a subsistence farming family whose "nourishment consisted entirely of the vegetables of their garden, and the milk of one cow, which gave very little during the winter, when it's [sic] masters could scarcely procure food to support it" (2018b: 79). The monster is completely charmed by the family he voyeuristically spies on, by their love for each other and their simple livelihoods, and yearns to be accepted by them. His yearning intensifies the idyllic overtones of these scenes, and because they are described by an outsider looking through a crack in a wall, they seem akin to a framed picturesque view of country life.

It is, however, soon revealed that the De Laceys are not an alpine family rooted in the locality with generations of farming experience, but instead are also outsiders, having fled from the revolution in Paris. When the monster introduces himself to the blind grandfather in their cottage, the latent specters of numerous global political and philosophical issues are present, many of which relate to farming and food. The creature not only evokes colonial plantations and artificial livestock breeding, but also practices a hand-to-mouth vegetarian diet of gleaned berries and acorns. Agriculture's science-driven and globalizing tendencies thus appear within the mixed-up DNA of a primal forager within a subsistence farm. For a short time, until the monster is chased away, the cottage thus contains a Russian doll like assemblage of food and farming types and histories.

In his essay about rural horror movies, David Bell argues that the rural idyll depends on othering undesirable forms of rural life and that anti-idylls emerge when those unwanted elements threaten or corrupt the preferred vision of country life. If we extend the rural to include plantations in colonized

territories, then the abjection of Frankenstein's monster within the pristine alpine countryside reveals anti-idyllic traits. But is it possible that the roots for these traits might also lie in Shelley's feelings about the erasure of the working spaces surrounding her childhood home to create an idyllic landscape of consumption for the well off?

4 Blade Runner 2049: Fugitive Rurality



FIGURE 9.3 K (Ryan Gosling) approaches Sapper Morton's protein farm and cabin in *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve). Alcon Entertainment. Screenshot

Blade Runner 2049 both echoes and inverts *Frankenstein* in the way it imagines the rural. In Shelley's novel, there is plenty of wilderness and traditional farming countryside for the monster to run amok and hide in, whereas in *Blade Runner 2049* Earth has become a plantation planet run by replicants supplying human populations on other planets ("off world"). Almost all life on Earth is artificially designed and programmed by the Wallace Corporation. If Frankenstein's monster carried within it a warning about the consequences of industrial farming as it was emerging at that time, then in 2049 it is too late to do anything about it.

While Ridley Scott's original *Blade Runner* movie began with spectacular aerial cityscape views, *Blade Runner 2049* begins with sweeping aerial views of a grey, polluted, and highly technologized rural landscape, which the subtitles say is California. The first shot is of an endless array of solar farms; the second of an infinite sea of greenhouses. These views look as though they might be CGI, but they are based on real footage filmed from an aircraft over the Gemasolar solar plant located near Seville and the expanse of plastic greenhouses

covering much of the Southern Spanish province of Almeria. Known locally as *El Mar del Plastico* (the plastic sea), the latter area produces huge quantities of fruit and vegetables for export to supermarkets around Europe.[9] At 31,000 hectares, it is one of the largest concentrations of plastic greenhouses on the planet. The workers in Almeria's greenhouses are mostly migrants from Africa, who typically live in makeshift shanty houses, often without sanitation, running water or electricity. Their pay is often much less than the legal minimum wage and proper contracts are scarce. One *Guardian* report quotes a worker saying: "Every worker here has a family, a wife and children, but the only thing that matters is that we work to get the vegetables to Germany or the UK. It's like they have forgotten we are also human beings" (De Pablo n. pag.). Another worker notes that "Consumers are not aware that we are slaves inside the greenhouse" (Rippingale n. pag.). Concern was also raised about the general lack of protection provided to workers in Almeria's greenhouses during a Covid outbreak (*Sustain*).

In *Blade Runner 2049*, the opening scene's aerial views are ascribed to a "spinner," a flying car-like vehicle, piloted by a replicant LAPD officer or "blade runner" called K (Ryan Gosling). His job is to track down and eliminate renegade replicants from a previous era. According to the plot, a near-total ecological collapse took place sometime around 2020 following the bankruptcy of the Tyrell Corporation. Subsequently, the industrialist Neander Wallace rose to power because his new synthetic farming technologies averted famine. When K's craft lands, it is among greenhouses where no natural life is evident except a dead tree. He has come to visit Sapper Morton, a fugitive replicant suspected of living beyond his allotted time of death. Morton cultivates grubs for protein in the greenhouses. His home is a plain grey box with a yellow pod attached. Inside, the rooms are sparse and gloomy. We know there is running water and electricity because we see Morton cooking on a stove in the kitchen. There are also windows, but they look frosted and frame no idyllic views.

Despite the bleak imagination of the rural here, however, there are a couple of scenes later in the film where something like a rural idyll is operative. The first takes place in the farmyard when, following his killing of Morton, K notices a pair of small yellow wildflowers that have been placed at the foot of the dead tree. K picks them up, studies them, and smells them. The suggestion is that this is a rare experience for him. Describing characteristics of the rural idyll in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Brian Short writes:

9 See https://www.movie-locations.com/movies/b/Blade-Runner-2049.php.

> A typical feature here was the prominence and close relationship of emotion, intuition, aesthetics and morality; another feature was the well-known aversion to modernity and industrialized society. In the representation of nature, these features are reflected in a strong emotional and moral sympathy towards 'natural' beauty, and in the admiration of real rural life and wilderness. (138)

All of these characteristics seem to be at play as K smells the flowers and contemplates their significance. Is this a hint that there may be some sentience somewhere within him?

The second idyllic scene comes when K starts to doubt his own provenance and seeks advice from a scientist about a "memory" of a toy horse that is troubling him. As a replicant with a limited lifespan, he knows his "memories" should have been artificially implanted, but he wonders if somehow this could be an actual memory. The scientist, a human called Dr Ana Stelline (Carla Juri), has a deficient immune system and spends her working life in a large white air-filtered dome. She is employed by the Wallace Corporation to create memories to implant into replicants' brains and projects moving images of things she is imagining onto the dome's surface by way of a device that reads her mind. The dome is introduced with a shot of a beautiful view looking up to a blue sky through a canopy of leaves gently moving in a breeze and bathed in dappled sunlight. This view contrasts starkly with the dead landscapes that have dominated the film so far, but the lush scene then abruptly pixelates and fizzles out as Dr Stelline is revealed, kneeling in the middle of the dome adjusting the controls of the device in her hands. Until the images disappear, her space cocoons a precious, idealized imagination of the countryside, in a way that echoes the picturesque imagination that was central to the design of Regent's Park and challenged by *Frankenstein*.

In different ways, the wildflower and dome scenes evoke memories of a more natural world that existed before globalization, industrialization, and corporatization took over. If Sapper Morton's cabin is a working farmhouse where utility and production take priority over aesthetics, then Dr Stelline's space is the opposite: an architecture subservient to projected dreams and memories, and a space in which illusory idylls continue to be manufactured. It could be said that K's role when he visits these settings is akin to that of Frankenstein's monster, in that it is his uncertainty about his own provenance that unsettles the taxonomic boundaries that *Blade Runner 2049* critically sets up between spaces of production and consumption, and functional reality and idyll.

5 *Bait*'s Polysemic Cottage

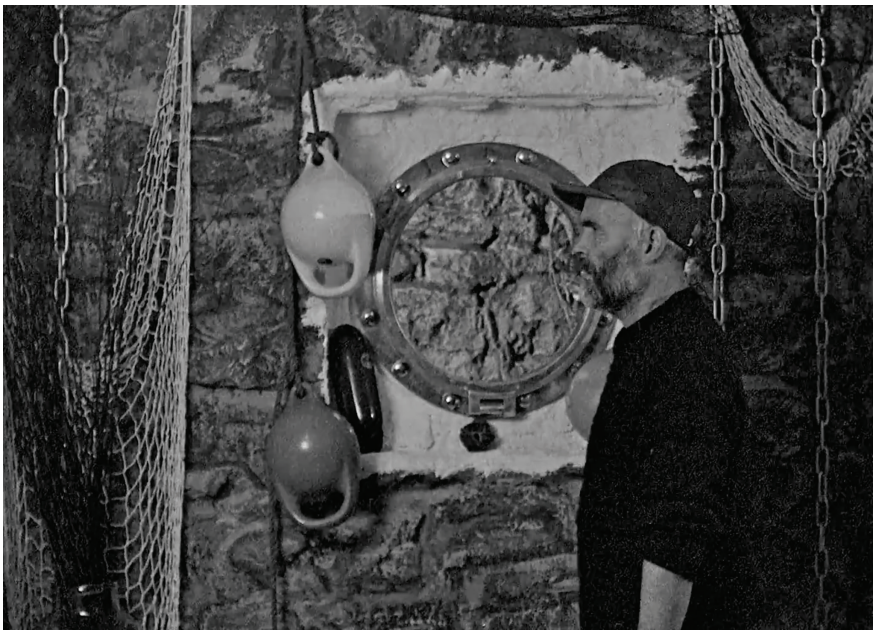


FIGURE 9.4 Stephen Ward (Giles King) in the cottage in *Bait* (2019). Early Day Films. Screenshot

Mark Jenkin's 2019 film *Bait* centers on a cottage in a Cornish fishing village. Tensions have arisen after the Leigh family from London bought it for use as a holiday home from two fishermen brothers (Martin and Steven Ward) who have to move to an inconvenient edge of town estate as a consequence. The plot reflects current realities in Cornwall where demand for holiday homes has driven up house prices and displaced local working people from their neighborhoods, particularly in coastal areas (Whitehouse; Weeks; Stevenson). *Bait*'s release coincided with the outbreak of Covid in the UK, which increased rural property sales and prices as lockdowns opened up homeworking possibilities for mostly white-collar workers (Inman). Loose parallels can be drawn here with early nineteenth-century urban to rural migration by wealthy urbanites, catalyzed in part by anxieties about the spread of disease.

The Wards have not only lost their family cottage, but have been split by tourism in other ways too: Stephen earns more by using the family fishing boat to take holidaymakers out on pleasure trips than Martin could by using it to fish. Without a boat of his own, Martin has to cast nets on the beach to catch

fish when the tides come in. When the Leighs ask him to stop parking his battered pickup in his old quayside space because they have reserved it for their Airbnb guests (who complain about the noise of fishing boats leaving early in the morning), Martin is incensed.

An early scene has Martin standing in the hallway of the Leighs' freshly decorated kitchen. Their new décor includes nets, chains, boat fenders, a porthole, and other fishing industry memorabilia. These items have conflicted meanings: for Martin it is odd to see things he uses for work aestheticized in this way, but for the Leighs these items, bought on eBay, signify the rural idyll they are creating for themselves. They do not seem to connect their fishing boat decor to the local industry that they are complicit in displacing. *Bait* juxtaposes the contrasting perspectives on the village and its function with great effect: in one sequence, the camera cuts between a shot of Martin setting up his nets on the beach and one showing the Leigh family's mother Sandra taking food items out of supermarket bags and placing them in the fridge. This not only raises the question of where our food should come from – from places like Almeria's greenhouses or from local farms – but also of where the plastic bags might end up end up when they have been discarded.

Early on in *Bait*, a sense of foreboding is created when a jump cut suddenly reveals Tim, the father of the Leigh family, lying dazed on the ground. A few shots before, Martin, who we later learn is angry about the parking and noise complaints, is shown striding down a street staring grim-faced toward the camera. Did his frustration boil over into violence? The cause of Tim's distress, which was not Martin, is revealed later in the film. Jenkin's style creates expectations of rural horror tropes in which outsiders meet grisly ends at the hands of unhinged locals (Bell). *Bait*'s dark soundtrack adds to the sense of foreboding; it comprises slow, deep rumbling sounds that make even ordinary scenes seem unsettling. When these sounds combine, for example, with a close-up of an old fisherman (the Wards' father?) closing his eyes, it feels like the film could take a supernatural turn. Although *Bait* plays with viewers' expectations of horror erupting until the end, it never actually happens. Moreover, while *Bait* resembles an anti-idyll in its mood, it does not abject Martin but leads the viewer to understand and sympathize with his position. The cottage scene described above, and the film as a whole, creates an ambiguity about who is being cast as an outsider and othered by whom.

In *Bait*, as with Nash's Regents Park, a productive rurality is supplanted by idyllic spaces of consumption for people seeking respite from the city. But is tourism actually responsible for the decline of fishing? Until 1983, Britain was a net exporter of fish, but it now imports around twice as much fish as it exports (Uberoi et al.), partly because British tastes are for fish that are in short

supply in UK waters (Greenwood). Furthermore, the UK fishing industry now employs around half the number of fishers it did in 1970 (Uberoi et al.). EU fishing policies have long been blamed for the decline of UK fishing, including by pro-Brexit politicians and fishers, but a recent Centre for Food Policy report suggests that "the real causes were changes in the international rules governing access to fisheries, overfishing which required drastic remedial measures and the UK's own policies" (Greenwood 6–10).

One review of *Bait* on a Cornish arts website says:

> In recent decades second home-owners have taken the heart from the traditional communities of St Ives and Padstow, and similar processes of change are undoubtedly affecting most of the other fishing villages in Cornwall. But perhaps, apart from its obvious artistic virtues, another reason why Bait is prompting such interest outside the Duchy is the fact that it also speaks to even bigger problems, particularly the fracture in British politics and society, and the fact that the liberal metropolitan elite don't seem able to understand the issues that exist in other hard-pressed communities outside the metropolis.[10]

Bait was released in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and one could argue that it inadvertently reinforces the stereotypes which plagued that divisive event. Brexit was seen by many as a vote against the "metropolitan elite" by marginalized communities. The film is definitely on the side of the marginalized and when Martin refers to Tim as a "prancing Lycra c***!" in one of their arguments, he will have echoed the frustrations of many local people. Having said that, the film also shows the Leigh and Ward families to be full of individuals with their own perspectives on the situation that they find themselves in, with some of these moving beyond traditional urban-rural and local-global dichotomies. This is particularly the case for Martin's nephew Neil and the Leighs' daughter Katie: Neil makes a point of working with Martin and learning the fishing trade rather than work with his father (Stephen) in the leisure industry for more money. And Katie likes Neil much more than some of the more arrogant "DFL's" ("down from Londoners") that she knows and starts a relationship with him. These younger characters offer a glimmer of hope for better interactions between metropolitan pleasure seekers and rural working communities. However, this hope is dashed when a fight between Neil and Katie's brother, who is appalled by their romance, results in Neil falling

10 http://www.artcornwall.org/index.htm.

from the quayside and ending up unconscious or possibly dead on a boat deck far below. The film's ending shows the brothers Stephen and Martin taking the boat out fishing together in solidarity.

6 Conclusion

The cottages in Nash's Park Village scheme were meant to be the centerpieces of an idyllic scene removed from the reality of rural peasant life and from the globalization, colonialism, and agricultural industrialization fueling London's growth then. In contrast, Shelley's *Frankenstein* critically exposed the cottage to global politics, colonialism, and slavery by inhabiting it with a Parisian refugee family and the monster with his inferred plantation provenance. In this context, the scene where the monster spies on the De Laceys through a crack in a wall suggests that, for those like him, the idyll can be viewed, imagined, and yearned for from afar, but not experienced. *Blade Runner 2049* also makes a point of separating experience and idyll: Morton's grey functional cottage appears to be in a completely different realm than the projections created by Dr Stelline in her bubble. But have the latter's seemingly innocent projected imaginaries and artificial memories emerged as a result of the material realities of the former? In *Bait*'s present-day setting, the Leighs' nautical kitchen décor and the supermarket shopping in their fridge also indicate a disconnect between idyll and the lived experience of rural workers who provide our food. However, unlike those whose homes and workplaces disappeared under Regent's Park, Martin's fishing livelihood is not quite erased, and his battered car still spoils the Leighs' view.

I began this chapter by quoting Minette Batters's question about where British food comes from and used it as a starting point for looking at tensions between idyllic representations of the countryside and the lives of rural workers within globalized agricultural economies. Batters's emphasis on "thriving communities" indicates that she is advocating for more productive rural futures that all kinds of human and non-human agents can contribute to and prosper in. Clearly, she is supporting neither the kind of super-productivism of early nineteenth-century colonial plantations or de facto plantations like El Mar del Plastico, nor a totally nature-conserved and leisure-dominated UK rurality. *Frankenstein*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Bait* draw critical attention, in their different ways, to the rural idyll's entanglement with intensive globalized food production systems and with the environmental damage and human hardship that they are too often associated with. Their criticality contrasts sharply with the kind of taxonomic, picturesque, and obscurantist sensibilities

that resonate not only in the Regent's Park of early nineteenth-century London, but in too many contemporary post-Brexit and Post-Covid imaginaries too.

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CHAPTER 10

Sponging and the Island of Kalymnos: Rural, Industrial, Global

Joyce Goggin

Abstract

This chapter discusses how sponge fishing became the basis of the economy on the Aegean island of Kalymnos after the scaphander diving suit was introduced in 1864, creating various gendered forms of indebted subjectivity. As sponging grew into a mono-industry from the 1860s to the 1990s, most of the rural population became involved in financing the industry or in fishing and processing sponges. The most severely impacted, the chapter shows, were the divers, many of whom lost their lives or returned from fishing expeditions paralyzed, and their wives, who bore the burden of care and maintained the domestic economy.

1 Kalymnos and the Aegean Sponge Fishing Industry

The history of sponge fishing in the Aegean includes the story of rural communities that were restructured by a single industry on which entire island populations came to depend, until the industry all but disappeared in the twentieth century. In what follows, I will focus on the island of Kalymnos and on the Kalymnians who once dove for sponges as an occasional supplement to their agricultural subsistence, but would find their economy, culture, and daily lives re-imagined in the period of technology-supported mass commercial sponge harvesting that began with the industrial revolution. The combined forces of industrialization, globalization, and financialization not only served to normalize indebted subjectivity as a way of life on the island; they also reshaped gender identities and relations. My goal here is to demonstrate how the imagination of the island of Kalymnos, as a rural space harboring rural people, changed under the influence of the sponge industry. While sponge fishing has sometimes been seen as a form of agriculture, it produces subjectivities that are specific to diving and processing sponges – from wealthy merchant and indebted, disabled "mechanical diver" subjectivities to hardened female subjectivities, resigned to the effects of the industry's capitalization.

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Although the entire eastern side of Kalymnos is barren rock, the island is blessed with a sheltered bay area, the Aegean climate, and what were once readily accessible sponge-bearing beds, all of which nurtured a long tradition of diving in the local population. Indeed, legend has it that Kalymnians are "natural divers," and this supposedly inborn ability has become a key feature of what Evdokia Olympitou called Kalymnians' "constant promotion of their singularity" (347). It is also an essential feature of the island's cultural imagination, and part of how Kalymnians are imagined from elsewhere. This singularity is reinforced by cultural practices such as mixing salt with the first bath water of newborn male infants in the hopes that they will take to the sea (Marinou 79).[1]

Originally undertaken by naked divers, sponging was first conducted using the apnea or breath-hold method, or by means of frames – *gagavas* – dragged along the seabed, which gathered sponges but caused damage to the seabed. Harpoons were also used to hook sponges, which risked tearing them; "hooked sponges," moreover, were less valuable than "virgin" sponges (Kalafatas 125). Even combined, these early methods for extracting sponges yielded small returns, so that sponge fishing remained only a part of a rural, agrarian subsistence economy that included raising goats and sheep, as well as limited agriculture for domestic consumption.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, two factors significantly grew the trade. The first was a major increase in the global demand for sponges used in industrial applications such as casings for machinery and working with toxic substances, as well as for cosmetic and domestic use. Kalymnians went from apnea diving for a very few sponges to mass sponging that supplied "the industrial needs of the West, while fine soft sponges were marketed in London, Paris, Vienna, Saint Petersburg, and New York" (Olympitou 88; Fourt et al. 2). Supporting this global trade, specialized sponge merchant houses which served as points of sale and logistics management were established in major centers such as Paris and London.[2]

The second factor was the invention and development of the diving suit with a water-tight scaphander [*σκάφανδρο*] helmet made of metal with a glass

1 Throughout this chapter, I refer to the divers as men because, with the exception of sponge merchant Fortis Mastoridis's pregnant wife Evgenia, who put on the suit for a crowd of "proud island men" apprehensive to do so, the divers in the scaphander suits were always men and it was considered bad luck for women to set foot on a sponging boat (Olympitou 87). The story of Mastoridis's wife is well-known and particularly interesting given the notion that "farming masculinities" involve the ability to "control the elements by means of big machines" (Warn 32; Olympitou 87; Kalafatas 167; Brandth and Haugen 13, 16).

2 Importantly, until the invention of various kinds of synthetic sponges – viscose, rubber, plastic – in the 1930s and 1940s, animal sponges were the only kind available.

window through which the diver looked. The first diving suits to arrive on Kalymnos in 1865 were those developed by mining engineer Benoît Rouquayrol and Navy officer Auguste Denayrouze, who equipped their suit or "mechanical diver" with a device to supply oxygen (Warn 32; Olympitou 155). Divers could now spend more time on the seabed, while the suit enabled them to reach the greater depths where the best sponges are found, thereby greatly increasing their productive capacity. The suit also extended the sponging season from four months for naked divers to seven months or longer, given that the suit insulated divers so that harvesting could continue in colder waters. In sum, the "mechanical diver" facilitated the extraction of enormous quantities of sponges from the seabed, generating tremendous wealth for some Kalymnians.

Importantly, the arrival of the diving suit in the Aegean transformed sponge diving from an occasional, supplemental activity undertaken by a rural community into the island's central activity, which was much more lucrative than subsistence agriculture. To be more precise, in records from the nineteenth century it is noted that the total area of Kalymnos is "forty-nine square miles of rock," of which "less than a fifth is arable land," yielding only small quantities of vegetables, figs, almonds citrus fruits, grain and olives (Sutton 1998: 417).[3] According to Kalafatas, Kalymnians call their island *agono nisi* – barren island – and "have a hardness of character that comes from 'living on a rock.'" Anthropologist David Sutton likewise writes that the residents of Kalymnos "refer to their home as 'the barren island" (Kalafatas 77; Sutton 2004: 417). Therefore, while rurality and the rural are often imagined as idyllic, close to nature, and romantically bucolic, this is hardly the case for Kalymnos. Indeed, the island's ruggedness and the difficulty of eking out an existence "on a rock" at least partially accounts for how rapidly sponging intensified.

Yet, while the scaphander suit brought industry to the island, providing wealth for some and a way to earn high occasional wages for others, the suit was also known as Satan's machine, and hated "as much as the head of Gorgon and Medusa" (Kalafatas 12). If the scaphander suit allowed the diver to remain under water for significantly longer periods of time, and to increase productivity by at least one hundred percent, pressure from investors and captains as well as international companies to increase the number of sponges harvested on each dive resulted in mounting casualties in the form of decompression sickness that caused paralysis or sudden death. Captains who forced divers to

3 Although agricultural production was limited, it does appear that some of the total yield was exported. Rough estimates based on census information gathered at various junctures in the nineteenth century suggest that there were approximately 50 farmers, 100 families raising livestock, and 8,000 sheep and goats on the island (Olympitou 13).

make as many as three dives every day at greater depths than recommended with the suit further increased the risk of decompression sickness in their divers.

Exacerbating the rate of disease and death among divers yet more was the occasional practice of recruiting sponge divers from "the dives of Piraeus, or life's castaways, suffering from various diseases," so that their health was often poor to begin with (Olympitou 35; Panagos 3). Given the high mortality rate and the high risk involved, and the fact that divers came from the ranks of the poor and "low-living," heavy drinkers, and smokers, the dangers of diving and the extreme conditions at sea took their toll (Kalafatas 75). Hence, rather strikingly, while rural living is generally associated with healthfulness and the image of the sober, down to earth farmer or the hardy fisherman, sponge divers were associated with hard living when on land, as well as with early death and paralysis.

The result of these technical and physical aspects of the early days and later the "Golden Age" of industrial sponge fishing was that an enormous swath of the island's male population returned from six-month sponging expeditions paralyzed in at least one part of their body, if they returned at all. According to figures published by the Greek government, in just twenty-four years between 1886 and 1910, there were 10,000 deaths and 20,000 cases of paralysis in the Aegean (Warn 37). Kalafatas estimates that between 1866 and 1896, on the island of Kalymnos alone, three hundred young men died of the bends and six hundred more were paralyzed (16).

2 Financing the Industry

Where the financing of the industry is concerned, the introduction of the diving suit, along with the increased industrial and domestic demand for sponges in the West, led to the organization of large-scale sponge-fishing expeditions, involving multi-member crews, a group of boats including a "deposito" for the crew's supplies, and on-board areas large enough to process sponges. This kind of modernization and expansion also necessitated a shift to modern banking, which supported a complex web of investors and specialized instruments of credit, while investors entered into agreements based on projections of future yields and speculation on the market value of their product once processed.

Captains were usually under contract, either with a merchant or money lender. After 1949, the money lender became Agricultural Bank of Greece, thus taking over a system of investment and lending that had previously been managed by families and extended families. And while some captains owned their

own boats, the expenses of sponge fishing expeditions were funded by loan(s), which placed captains under serious pressure to come back with sizable hauls, again resulting in added pressure on divers to take greater and greater risks. Captains' loans had to be repaid with interest, and there were also the crews' wages and the remainder of the divers' percentage to settle. If captains failed to harvest enough sponges to make all of these payments, they remained in debt until the following year, with interest accumulating (Olympitou 59–60). If sponges were left unsold; if captains had borrowed large amounts of money at high interest rates; if they offered their vessel or home as collateral, they found themselves in an accelerating cycle of debt.

Overall, the new conditions that came with the industrialization and modernization of the Kalymnian sponge fishery were: "more intense monetisation leading to bank loans, greater visibility and commercialisation of the product, (the introduction of seasonal workers from other islands into the island's sponge-fishing labour force), less-specialized workers, and reduced remuneration" (Panagiotopoulos 21). As Olympitou has explained, this cluster of events and agents formed a dense network that supported the person who recruited Kalymnians, as well as marginalized and unemployed young men from the port of Piraeus, and it paid their travel expenses to the island; the loan-shark grocer who rented squalid rooms to the recruits and charged exorbitant rates; and the rich merchant-investors in sponge-fishing groups. Hence, when the recruiting season began every year, divers found themselves "trapped in a collaborative network of exploitation," torn between their debts and readily available jobs on the sponging vessels (Olympitou 343).

Concerning the divers, who were required to expose themselves to the dangers enumerated above and to endure incredible hardships for six months of the year while at sea, one might ask what kind of financial arrangement would entice them to do so. Quite obviously, poverty and the opportunity to quit subsistence farming to become a wage earner was one reason men became sponge divers. Likewise, occasional laborers who were recruited in ports like Pireaus and who were living a down-and-out urban existence seized any opportunity to improve their lot. Perhaps rather remarkably, those who signed on as divers were generally both aware and accepting of the dangers involved in sponging. Hence, in a 2005 interview, former diver Michalis Lampos explained that "[i]f you go into this kind of garden, this is the cabbage you get" (Olympitou 264).

The monetary enticement to enter this undersea garden was known as the *platika* and was probably the greatest motivation to go sponging at the risk of paralysis and death. The platika was a large up-front payment made to divers at the height of the "Golden Age" of the sponge fishery and there were various kinds of platikas, which often included a percentage of the diver's projected

catch and salary for a six-month period. This system of payment offered big rewards for big risks, and attracted poor men living, for the most part, with few or no sources of income, on a barren island or in a port dive (Olympitou, 248). According to P. Zotos's December 1903 report on the fishery and the platika system, "the advance payment renders captains petty tyrants, and divers rapacious" (9). The platika, in fact, profoundly impacted people's daily lives and reshaped how their rural community was and is imagined.

3 Sponging and Gender: Rural Masculinities

Sponge divers were famous for their unwholesome, reckless lifestyle, typified by what Michael Herzfeld has called the "poetics of manhood" and the notion of "performative excellence" – the ability "to foreground manhood by means of deeds that strikingly speak for themselves" (Kalafatas 87). A description provided by one diver in an interview is illustrative of Campbell and Bell's discussion of how rurality helps to "constitute notions of masculinity" in context-specific ways (540):

> After the diver was dressed in the 172-pound diving suit, he crossed himself and jumped overboard, sometimes with the embellishment of a one-and-a-half twist. No other diving group in the world … jumped from a diving vessel into the water in deep-sea gear, and for good reason: it risks fouling lines, breaking hoses, or suffering concussion with the 35-pound brass helmet. (Kalafatas 71)

The divers' bravado and the "poetics of manhood" that went with taking on enormous risk for a large platika, in combination with the seasonality and undependability of sponge fishing, particularly in the twentieth century, made for a culture in which divers went on rampages, bought expensive clothing, drank, and gambled away their platika. This became a significant aspect of how the island was imagined by Kalymnians as well as travel writers. Sponge divers are reported to have worn "tight black trousers and peaked black caps, with bright cummerbunds wound around the waist and a coloured scarf twisted about the shoulders of their clean white shirts" (Clift 157), and the most fortunate divers were known for showing off the temporary wealth the platika brought them in the form of "gold watches with glinting fobs that dangled from velvet vests" (Kalafatas 23). Divers' culture thus manifested a new form of rural masculinity on the island, with inner contradictions such as weakness and strength, wealth and poverty, as well as fearlessness and early death. If,

thanks to the platika system, "divers were treated like heroes and acted the part" (Kalafatas 75), the image of the "diver-hero, which also shaped the collective identity of sponge-fishing lands, has two faces. Boldness led, with almost mathematical precision, to death or – the ultimate humiliation – to paralysis" (Olympitou 332).

4 Sponging, Debt, and Class

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sponging on a massive scale prompted the transformation of a rural community into a monoindustry to supply the needs of a global market and a globalizing world. The sponge fishery's rapid growth was underwritten by instruments and networks of credit, including the platika, which lured divers in particular into what more often than not turned out to be a life of pain and permanent indebtedness. In *The Making of Indebted Man*, Maurizio Lazzarato asks, "[w]ith what kind of machinery does debt produce the subject?" (39). In the present case, the answer is relatively straightforward. The scaphander diving suit turned human subjects into "mechanical men," while the value of the platika had to be returned in sponges and interest paid by the end of the season, keeping the diver-subject limping along from one debt to the next. As Lazzarato writes, moreover,

> [t]he debt economy combines [subject formation] and labour, in its classical sense, such that ethics and economics function conjointly. The modern notion of "economy" covers both economic production and the production of subjectivity. Traditional categories rooted in 19th and 20th-century revolutions – labour, society, and politics – are now informed and in large measure have been redefined by debt. (11)

So, the kind of laboring subject that came with the modernization of the sponge fishery and the shift to a debt-intensive economy as described by Lazzarato – the loans, speculation, the platika – formed the indebted sponge-fishing subject.

The centrality of the fishery after its expansion, along with the economic structure that underpinned it, also created a new financial class, and a social schism that expressed itself in town planning and geography. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, the town of Pothia began to take shape on a level plain, along the coast, and on the two facing steep slopes. The neighborhoods established on these slopes – with small properties laid out in amphitheatrical

form – were populated by workers in the sponge fishery to whom the area was known as "*σφουγγαρομαχαλάδες*" [sphoungaromakhaládes] or "sponge workers' neighborhood." In 1862, Kalymnian lawyer Hippocrates Tavlarios wrote that there were almost 2,500 houses in the *sphoungaromakhaládes*, "which is shabby and squalid, with narrow streets, like all Turkish towns, and there are hardly any buildings worth mentioning" (qtd. in Olympitou 28; see Tavlarios). Furthermore, as one informant explained in an interview with Olympitou, "[t]here were both poor and rich people on the island. … Captains were the rich ones. They had big houses, they ate wheat bread, and instead of sending their children to work with sponges, they sent them to Athens to study."[4]

Half a century later, in her travel narrative of living on the island in 1954, Charmain Clift offers a clear picture of how the industry restructured Kalymnian society and family, in her account of sixty-six-year-old diver Emmanuele Manglis and his investor cousin Anthony from the wealthy side of the Manglis family:

> [Emmanuele] was a diver for twenty-five years and was brutally crippled. … His cousin Anthony Manglis represents, in a sense, the other side of the Kalymnian coin. … He stands for the mercantile, the prosperous, the respectable …. He is a man of considerable wealth and commercial talent, handling the very considerable Vouvalis estates …, merchandising sponges in the markets of the world …. One finds oneself inevitably lingering on the absolute separateness of the lives of these two branches of the family. It is, in a way, a perfect example of the great schism which ruthlessly divides all the life of Kalymnos. (93)[5]

Not only did the sponge fishery, as the mono-industrial base of modern Kalymnos, restructure economic and family relationships and inject money into the social structure of the island that caused it to harden along class lines, it also became part of Kalymnians' "cultural singularity," and of how this rural community was imagined. This reimagining is exemplified by "The Dance of the Mechanical Diver," an apocryphally "traditional" sponge diver's dance invented by Theofilos Klonaris, a Kalymnian graduate of Sports and Physical Education, who first presented the dance with the culturally significant Dora Stratou ensemble in 1952 (Olympitou 333–334). The dance mimics a semi-paralyzed "mechanical diver" who has been slightly "hit" by the machine, and who leads

4 Manuscript 2729/1976, Angeliki Georgiadou, p. 121, CFS (Olympitou 353).

5 For an interesting and well-justified critique of Clift's colonializing, romanticizing, and mildly denigrating gaze, see Previti et al.

the dance, dragging his legs along the floor. For most of the dance, he falls and pulls himself up again with his cane only to collapse again, but at the end he is miraculously cured, throws away his cane, and joins the other dancers.

Perhaps more interesting than the fact that this purportedly "traditional dance" was invented in the 1950s is the fact that it was incorporated into local tradition – into how Kalymnos is imagined. As such, "The Dance of the Mechanical Diver" demonstrates how various social, political, economic, and cultural imaginations shape contemporary notions of rural life, and how those imaginations affect the way people, inside and outside the rural, make sense of it, while shaping the rural and mobilizing it politically and economically as a means of dealing with the island's difficult past. And while new victims continued to be made by the fishery when the dance was being performed, it requires flexibility, skill, and strength on the part of the lead dancer who pretends to be paralyzed. Given that the "stricken" or paralyzed diver is the star of the show, one might see "The Dance of the Mechanical Diver" as destigmatizing disability caused by decompression disease.

At the same time, however, the centrality of the paralyzed dancer normalizes criminal industrial negligence as an acceptable and regular occurrence – part of the island's cultural heritage, richly imagined for tourists and Kalymnians alike. The dance seems to suggest that semi-paralysis, in the context of sponge diving, comes with the territory – with "the poetics of manhood." Hence, as Zotos wrote in his report on the island in 1903, the mildly paralyzed "were so numerous that dragging one's leg was considered a sign of bravery or knowledge of the profession" (19). Similarly, Sofia Giannatou claimed that it is only in the tradition of Kalymnos and the sponge fishery that men may cry without being considered weak (258).

5 Debt and Gender: (In)visible Women

As Campbell and Bell have noted, various forms of rural masculinity "promote the invisibility of women," and the (in)visibility of Kalymnian women is yet another aspect of the island's rural cultural singularity. Part of the island women's invisibility is accounted for by divers' frequent habit of extravagantly spending their platika before the sponging expedition, leaving behind wives and children in extreme poverty. The negative impact of the industry and the platika on households was then worsened by the loss of the men who never returned, or returned paralyzed and constituted a further economic burden and added strain on what was already an exceedingly difficult life on Kalymnos. It was not until 1960 – when the sponge diving industry was only about twenty years away

from being virtually defunct – that a system was put in place whereby half of divers' advance payments were deposited at the bank to be used by their families, in response to pressure exerted by the women of Kalymnos (Russell 309).[6]

At the same time, however, during the six months the men were absent, women were, to a great extent, responsible for affairs both domestic and public. In the face of these challenges, the women of Kalymnos famously became "tough like men" (Olympitou 462). Indeed, a character in Ion Dragoumis's novel *The Sponge Fishermen* (1898/1899) contemplates the endless hardships of the diver's wife – the majority of which are attributable to the industry – as she decides never to marry a diver:

> She would never marry a diver. Never. To stay three or six months completely alone, not knowing if her husband is coming back? And then, what if he does come back and he gets drunk? To have him come home late at night and beat her? And what if he dies at sea and never comes back? Then she will wear black just like Kyra Georgaina, the neighbourhood laundress. (qtd. in Olympitou 325)

Clift claimed that "the primary function of a Kalymnian woman is reproduction, at which, heaven knows, she acquits herself honourably. She will have a baby a year for as long as she is capable" (52; see also Sutton 2004: 417). This was written in the 1950s, when, as the author claims, even little girls know "by imagination or experience, the weight of the responsibilities ahead of them," over and above child-rearing and domestic tasks (Clift 52). These would be agricultural activities – viticulture, arboriculture, harvesting, threshing, and beekeeping, as well as the gathering of tree branches from the surrounding mountains for kitchens, bread making, and washing (Flegel 38) – and these were constant duties (Olympitou 308). Tasks outside the home – such as gathering branches – often forced women to make their way into secluded areas of the island, and nineteenth-century archival documents record various kinds of

6 Testimony of Giannis Koutouzis to Evdokia Olympitou, 25/8/2003 (59). This practice makes its appearance in individual recruitment documents starting from the years of Italian occupation. See, for instance, doc. 44, 21/9/1919, MC Minutes 1919–1922, MAK. On the same topic, see also Warn 68. After World War II, captains deposited the advance payments with the Port Authority and, during the divers' absence, these payments were paid in monthly installments to the divers' families.

violent attacks against women, including rape, when fathers, husbands, and sons were away at sea (Olympitou 309).[7]

In periods of intensified sponge-fishing or manufacturing activity, moreover, the shortfall in the male labor force was bridged by female labor, for which women were paid considerably less than their male counterparts. The types of paid employment open to women were few, employment was occasional, and women were paid day wages for jobs such as sorting and trimming sponges. Women also worked in the tobacco processing warehouses that were built at the end of the Ottoman administration, while the class divide to which the industry gave rise meant that many women whose husbands worked as divers and crew hands on sponging expeditions served as maids in the houses of wealthy Kalymnians and sponge merchants on Kalymnos, in Asia Minor, and abroad, exposing them to further risk of being attacked and raped. In addition, the wives and children of sponge fishermen were compelled to serve at the residences of the few wealthy captains throughout the winter, either to work off their husband's debt or to ensure that their men would be hired again the following year. It is important to keep in mind, finally, that when husbands came back paralyzed, Kalymnian women became primary caregivers to full-grown men and their children, while also filling the role of sole family provider, along with the hardships just enumerated.

In the discussion of divers and indebtedness above, I referred to Lazzarato's work on the "making of the indebted *man*" as a means of understanding how and why the modern sponge fishery created subjectivities permanently indebted to the industry from what were formerly rural subjectivities. In the case of divers, the platika insured that they often returned with more debt, trapping them in a Sisyphean cycle from which it was difficult to escape. When divers died, their debts were born by wives who passed the remainder on to their children at death, so that debt was carried forward for generations.

Lucí Cavallero and Verónica Gago's critique of Lazzarato's account of the "making of the indebted man" as grounded in the assumption of a "universal subjectivity of the debtor-creditor relation" is highly pertinent to the Kalymnos sponge diving industry. As a corrective to the concept of the "indebted *man*"

7 The figure of the *klaofora* [woman carrying branches] – and, more specifically, the sponge fisherman's widow – present throughout written and oral accounts is a deep memory of what ultimately amounted to the enslavement of the women of Kalymnos. Katerina Giannatou argues that a statue of the klaofora should be erected on Kalymnos, in honor of the mothers whose willpower and sacrifices made it possible for their sons to study so that they would not be forced to turn to the sponge fishery for their livelihood.

(emphasis added), they put forward a feminist reading of debt and gender differences, arguing that "gender difference operates differently in regards to debt" for the following reasons:

> (1) a particular form of moralization directed toward women and feminized bodies; (2) a differential of exploitation due to the corresponding relations of subordination; (3) a specific relation between debt and reproductive tasks; (4) the concrete impact of sexist violence, to which debt is connected; and (5) fundamental variations in possibilities "for the future" involving financial obligation in the case of feminized bodies. (Cavallero and Gago 4)

One could hardly find a better example than Kalymnian women to illustrate Cavallero and Gago's elaboration of the specificity of woman and indebtedness, over and above Lazzarato's universal subject. Kalymnian women struggled to fulfil their husbands' various shortfalls and manage their debt obligations; hence, their "possibilities for the future" were determined for them. Besides being responsible for reproduction and caregiving, they were also vulnerable to sexual violence as a direct consequence of their indebtedness. And while working as domestics in the homes of wealthy investors as well as sole caregivers in their own households, Kalymnian women were certainly subject to a "differential of exploitation" attributable to the degree of their subordination, which included being paid less for processing sponges on an occasional basis. As far as a particular form of moralization directed toward women is concerned, one need only think of the tradition of keeping "daughters locked up in their houses" in order to keep them from bringing shame on the family through even the hint of premarital sexual behavior, which would also diminish their marriageability (Sutton 2004: 422). In addition to highlighting this gender dimension of indebtedness, the case of Kalymnos makes clear that the shift from rurality to mono-industry inflects the figure of the indebted man and the indebted woman in ways specific to each, including through the extended absences of the men, and the victims made by the scaphander suit.

6 Into the Present

Following the development of the synthetic sponge beginning in the 1930s, the demand for natural sponges rapidly decreased, as did work for divers. By the 1970s, the divers' flamboyant, reckless behavior became defunct and with it a once celebrated part of their masculinity, of the local culture, and of how

Kalymnians and the rest of the world imagined this rural community. When the industry declined dramatically, however, the divers' lifestyle was no longer acceptable, "at least outside of the island's working classes" (Olympitou 339). That what had once been understood as the justifiable panache of machismo associated with sponging came to be seen as uncouth and antisocial when the industry went into decline exemplifies how "transformations in rural areas may have gendered consequences" for men such as Kalymnian sponge divers (Brandth and Haugen 13).

In 1986, Mediterranean sponge beds were severely diminished by a disease that caused the sponges to crumble, rendering them worthless and resulting in a reduction from 30,000 tons harvested in 1986 to 3,000 tons in 1992 (Sutton 1998: 24). In 1999, the disease returned, destroying most of the remaining sponge-bearing beds in the Mediterranean. Intensive overfishing over the course of roughly two centuries, as well as climate change and sea pollution have also contributed to dramatically decreased sponge reserves. The story of Kalymnian sponging, then, is yet another example of how the capitalization of rural spaces and practices can be socially and environmentally damaging. Here, heteropatriarchal and capitalist epistemes of extraction, domination, mastery, and progress have led to the demise of the very industry that spongers sought to develop. Unsurprisingly, by the early 2000s, only about 10 sponge-fishing caiques were left in Kalymnos, with crews of 25–30. As of 2010, based on data provided by the Union of Kalymnos' Sponge Fishermen, there were 15–17 vessels with 100–120 people, and an annual production of about 4 tons.[8]

The arrival of the synthetic sponge and the large-scale depletion of Mediterranean sponge beds caused a second momentous shift in virtually every aspect of life on the island, and Kalymnians were forced to migrate or diversify. Already in the 1980s, the local, once entirely rural community began to promote diving for tourists and, more recently, rock climbing. The island's population has "turned to tourism as an alternative development strategy to meet these changes just like farmers in many other peripheral parts of Europe" (Brandth and Haugen 14). The island is now dependent on a different kind of economy defined by a new model of indebtedness, based on the constant consumption and waste production that comes with tourism, and the degradation of a landscape dotted with resorts. This has also affected the imagination of Kalymnos. With the promotion of tourism, the island is re-imagined as a post-production, service-based experience economy, which is destined

8 More recent estimates suggest that the annual haul is around 2 tons, but the precise number is difficult to ascertain. Most "Greek" sponges are now imported from the Caribbean or Tarpon Springs, Florida.

to be depleting in both the short and long term. At the same time, constant extraction from the sea has created an enormous environmental debt that can never be repaid.

As Vassilis Panagiotopoulos imagines it, "the island of Kalymnos, [is] a land of extreme and eternal poverty" (Olympitou XI). Kalymnos was a rural Aegean Island, restructured by the sponge fishing industry, with its "man-eating machines," which created new wealth and new historical conditions that became "part of a cycle of rebirth, evolution, and decay" (Olympitou XIII). The economics and politics of indebtedness entailed in the evolution of this cycle created or hardened class and gender divides, and introduced modern banking and specialized instruments of credit. The financialization of the industry resulted in various forms of indebtedness and indebted subjectivities: deceased divers' families indebted to captains; captains indebted to investors, and so on, as well as a macro debt owed to the Mediterranean, which is now almost depleted of sponges.

The technological advancement of the diving suit produced a specialized diving subject – a "mechanical man" adhering to a specific "poetics of manhood" – who helped usher in a new kind of modern, indebted rural masculinity on the island, accompanied by a modern, indebted rural femininity. Ultimately, on the island, it was the notion of rural subjectivity as agricultural subjectivity that was replaced by an imagination of the divers as still rural subjects (certainly from the perspective of Greece's urban centers), but *modernized* rural subjects, who were also globalized. Thus, the history of the sponge fishing industry on Kalymnos illustrates how rural subjectivities cannot be thought narrowly as only agricultural or only non-modern/non-globalized. Not in the present, and also not necessarily in the past.

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CHAPTER 11

Scales of Sustainability: the Ethical Positioning of Productivist Farmers in Debates about the Environment

Peter van Dam and Esther Peeren

Abstract

Recent tensions between governments seeking to set sustainability goals and farmers arguing that such goals endanger their businesses have resulted, among others in the Netherlands, in a seemingly deadlocked debate about the future of agriculture. Our discursive analysis of a study of productivist farmers in the municipality of Hollands Kroon suggests that a more constructive debate might be enabled by taking seriously the ethics of globalist ruralism espoused by these farmers, which includes a sense of social and environmental responsibility, and the agency they perceive themselves to have or lack across different scales (local, national, European, global).

1 In Search of a Sustainable Future for Agriculture

Is there a place for large-scale, high-yield farming in a sustainable future? At a historical juncture where the need for environmental sustainability has become virtually unanimously accepted, views on what this would entail and how it should be achieved vary widely. Particularly strong tensions have arisen between governing institutions seeking to set environmental sustainability goals and push for a transformation of agricultural practices, and productivist farmers arguing that such goals endanger their livelihoods. In the Netherlands, among other places, this has resulted in a series of farmers' protests and a seemingly deadlocked debate about the future of agriculture.

The notion of sustainability interrelates economic, environmental, and social considerations. Sustainability extended discussions about the viability of economic growth that became prevalent in the 1960s (Seefried 381–385; Caradonna 2017; Van Dam). The impetus to question the viability of economic growth and the ethical ambition to realize "the best quality of life possible …, which can be maintained indefinitely … and should be extended to the whole of humanity" (Steurer 537) has remained at the core of sustainability discourse.

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At the same time, the consequences of reconciling economic interests and the preservation of natural resources and ecosystems are contested (Adloff and Neckel). Some suggest establishing a balance between environment, social equity, and economy, whilst others grant priority to environmental and social considerations. Moreover, there is no consensus about the limits the environment and society impose on economic growth (Caradonna 2014: 8–9).

Attempts to achieve more sustainable agricultural production have historically occurred on a small scale. However, as local initiatives have proven difficult to scale up (Van Dam and Striekwold), it has become clear that a transformation in the practices of large-scale agricultural production is key to achieving a more sustainable way of living. This has led to productivist farmers facing criticism. In the Netherlands, the social and cultural status of such farmers was especially high in the period of rebuilding after the Second World War, when agricultural policy was characterized by a drive for efficiency and upscaling. Farmland was consolidated into larger plots, whilst farmers were encouraged to apply new technologies and scientific insights to increase production (Bieleman). Large-scale, efficient farming was seen as having gotten the nation back on its feet and remained unquestioned for many decades. Globally, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the Green Revolution – founded on the introduction of high-yielding grain varieties, irrigation systems, synthetic fertilizers, and pesticides to the developing world – was widely heralded as an ingenious, ethically sound solution to world hunger before coming under scrutiny in the 1990s (Westerman; Shiva).

Today, criticism of agricultural productivism is an important component of attempts to introduce social and environmental considerations into thinking about a sustainable future. Productivist farmers face strong, ethically grounded condemnation for, among others, their treatment of animals, their creation of "green deserts" through an increasing reliance on monoculture, and their contribution to global warming. Restrictions have been put on certain practices and outputs (of, for example, nitrogen and methane) by local, national, and transnational authorities. Such restrictions are not always consistent and have been subject to frequent changes, leading farmers to complain about being unable to plan for the longer term. Many productivist farmers also feel unfairly scapegoated in relation to other heavily polluting sectors.

Among farmers practicing large-scale conventional (non-organic) agriculture, a prevalent reaction to the perceived delegitimization of their former status as an intrinsically valued, essential sector has been to reaffirm their deep ties to local communities, as well as their role as stewards of the land (and, by implication, the nation), while rejecting transnational governance. This has aligned them, in various countries, with populist-nationalist movements

prone to dismissing climate change and renewable energy efforts (Bosma and Peeren; Mamonova and Franquesa; Berlet and Sunshine). In this chapter, we analyze survey and interview data from a study conducted in 2020 among Dutch farmers in the Hollands Kroon municipality. Hollands Kroon is situated in the North-West of the Netherlands and has almost 50,000 inhabitants. Large parts of the area were reclaimed from the sea in the 1930s and specifically designed for more efficient agriculture (Van de Grift). Today, around 3,500 people are employed in agriculture, forestry, or fishery – more than in any other sector; this is why Hollands Kroon is known as the agrarian capital of the Netherlands.[1] The interviews and survey were conducted by Amsterdam Green Campus at the request of the municipality of Hollands Kroon in 2020 against a background of contentious discussions between the municipality and farmers about land scarcity and sustainable energy initiatives such as wind turbines and solar fields.[2] The study comprised in-depth interviews with 13 farmers and stakeholders; data research on the size and composition (organic/non-organic) of the agricultural sector; and a survey sent to all 578 agrarian business holders in Hollands Kroon in May 2020, eliciting 204 responses (response rate: 35,3%) (Persoon and van Maanen 2020a: 18).[3]

We re-analyzed the data using discourse analysis (Gill), looking for ways to reorient the stalled debate with productivist farmers about how they can (and need to) contribute to ensuring a sustainable future. The fact that this is a re-analysis necessitates some caveats. Because the survey was primarily designed to achieve a better understanding of the business practices and outlook of the farmers, the responses privilege economic perspectives over ecological and sociopolitical ones. The survey's focus on the farmers' ties to the local community and municipality, moreover, results in an emphasis on the immediate context. Finally, the agricultural sector in the region is highly diverse, ranging from relatively small tulip bulb and livestock producers to

1 See https://hollandskroon.incijfers.nl/dashboard/banen-en-vestigingen.

2 Amsterdam Green Campus (https://amsterdamgreencampus.nl/) is a non-profit foundation that brings government, business, and higher education together to promote knowledge sharing, the growth of the green sector in the North-West of the Netherlands, and continuing education.

3 Persoon and van Maanen 2020a is the report about the study, completed 29 June 2020 and published on the website of the municipality of Hollands Kroon on 10 July 2020. Persoon and van Maanen 2020b contains the transcripts of the 13 in-depth interviews with stakeholders and was made available to us by the authors. We were also given access to the anonymized dataset containing the respondents' answers to the survey (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c). Specific answers are listed by question and respondent, with Q1_1 referring to Question 1, Respondent 1, etc.

large-scale potato farmers and horticulture (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q1). Organic farming, however, is practiced on less than 10% of agricultural land in Hollands Kroon and 63% of the respondents' businesses cover more than 51 hectares (2020a: 13, 19), indicating that most are involved in large-scale, non-organic agriculture.

That a productivist mindset prevails in Hollands Kroon is clear from 57% agreeing "very much" and another 31% agreeing "somewhat" that they are "efficient growers" (2020a: 32). Whereas much research on sustainable agriculture focuses on farmers moving away from productivism, it is important to recognize that the shift "from productivism to post-productivism to multi-functionality" has not stopped many farmers from continuing to adopt "productivist farmer identity roles … stressing increasing reliance on, and intensification of, agriculture, and a degree of faith in technocentric approaches to land management" (Burton and Wilson 101; Evans et al.). Given the scale at which productivist farmers like those of Hollands Kroon operate, looking for ways to secure their participation in the effort to make agriculture more sustainable is vital.

In the sections that follow, we first establish the vantage point from which farmers in Hollands Kroon are entering the agricultural sustainability debate: what kind of farmers do they believe they are and what ethical position(s) do they espouse? Second, we take up the prevalent distinction between the economic, social, and ecological dimensions of sustainability to establish how the respondents view these dimensions and their ethical implications, and how they link them to the local, national, European, and global scales. We also explore at which of these scales and with regard to which activities the farmers see themselves as having agency. Our analysis shows that the farmers espouse a particular "farmers' ethics" (Drenthen 70) that we characterize as one of *globalist ruralism*. It combines an insistence on the importance of large-scale, high-yield production for the farmers' immediate economic interests with a future-oriented sense of primarily local and global economic, social, and environmental responsibility. Recognizing this ethics as part of these farmers' self-image and self-presentation makes it possible to appeal to them to act in accordance with it, especially on the scales where they see themselves as influential actors. Such an appeal, we suggest, might be more effective in getting them to adopt more sustainable farming practices than one based in an environmentalist ethics they perceive as being imposed upon them. In arguing for serious engagement with how productivist farmers imagine their role in securing a more sustainable future, even if this imagination does not (yet) match their actual contribution, we take up this volume's argument that it is not just material and economic relations to the rural but also imagined ones that matter when striving for rural transformation, especially at a global scale that is itself difficult to grasp.

2 Productivist Farmers as Globalist Ruralists

> The agrarian business has changed, 30 years ago you needed to work hard and now you need to be a good entrepreneur. (Theo Meskers, city councilor Hollands Kroon, Persoon and van Maanen 2020b: 6)

The image of what a 'good farmer' is has significant influence on how farmers determine what agricultural practices they should adopt, what their role in wider society should be, and what ethical responsibility they bear for environmental issues (Morton et al.; Silvasti). Farmers in Sweden have been observed to become less likely to adopt environmentally friendly farming practices if media construct an opposition between large-scale farmers as "villains" in opposition to biological famers as "conservation heroes" (Hallgren et al.). This caused large-scale farmers to think of themselves as a besieged minority "better equipped to make environmental judgements than the dominating urban majority culture" (Hallgren et al.: n. pag.).

The surveyed Hollands Kroon farmers repeatedly evoke the negative public image of productivist agriculture as harming the environment, not just in terms of this image being unfair, but also as a problem for the farmers. Thus, 28 respondents mention their desire to cultivate better relations with people outside the agricultural sector as a reason to sell more products locally (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q20). More understanding among the general public is mentioned 8 times as a precondition for being successful in the future (2020c: Q34).

On the basis of the in-depth interviews, the study concludes that, in order to be sustainable, the agrarian sector needs to participate in environmental initiatives in a way that is visible to the public (2020a:11). Refusing to engage with the issues of environmental sustainability that are at the forefront of public and political debate would damage the public image of the Hollands Kroon farmers by placing them on the side of the unethical. This, in turn, could endanger what Te Velde et al., in a study of farmers' and consumers' perceptions of animal welfare in Dutch livestock breeding, call their "license to produce" (208). It is therefore perhaps to be expected that, although the Hollands Kroon farmers express some hostility towards "green" movements and politics, 21 percent is "very willing" and another 55 percent "quite willing" to "experiment for a sustainable future" (Persoon and van Maanen 2020a: 32). Many of them also indicate that they are already involved in water management (46 percent), using less fertilizer and pesticides (48 percent), promoting soil health (56 percent), and circular agriculture (38 percent) (Persoon and van Maanen

2020a: 29). Overall, the study suggests considerable willingness to adopt more environmentally friendly practices, as long as this does not compromise the farmers' economic position.

In response to increasing criticism of productivist farming in mainstream media, Dutch farmers exhibited similar forms of defensiveness as the Swedish livestock farmers discussed by Hallgren et al. Already in 1999, due to an increase in social and political pressure, Dutch "farmers fe[lt] that they do not get what they deserve, that society does not appreciate their contribution, and that the future of their profession is at risk" (De Weerd and Klandermans 1078). These feelings are reiterated by several of the surveyed and interviewed farmers of Hollands Kroon (Persoon and van Maanen, 2020c: Q30_75-164, Q32_165, Q34_28-106, Q46_66–107). According to Te Velde et al., the "coping strategies" resorted to by farmers whose "license to produce" is under threat range from trivializing animal suffering, misrepresentation, and concealment to shifting responsibility onto consumers or government. The latter strategy is found among the Hollands Kroon farmers, some of whom reproach consumers for not wanting to pay more for quality products (Persoon and van Maanen, 2020c: Q20_59, Q32_127-167, Q34_106, Q43_197) or accuse local, national, and European governments of thwarting farmers' attempts to produce sustainably (2020c: Q32_12-133–194). Instead of dismissing such shifting of responsibility as purely self-serving, it can also be regarded as an ethical move – of farmers holding consumers to the same ethics they feel they are being held to.

At the same time, the public image of farmers in the Netherlands may not be as negative as many of the surveyed farmers assume. This is suggested by the initially positive public response to a series of highly visible farmers' protests in late 2019 and early 2020, following the announcement of a government plan to cut livestock in order to reduce nitrogen emissions (Bosma and Peeren). Significantly, the protesters' appealed for public support by invoking the traditional image of farming as not just a job but a vocation undertaken out of passion and a desire to feed the nation. As such, they aligned themselves with what Woods calls "reactive ruralism," where "a self-defined 'traditional' rural population" rises up in defense of a purportedly historic, natural, and agrarian-centered "rural way of life" aimed at sustaining the nation (218). Reactive ruralism builds on the "agrarian vision," which holds that agriculture bears a special responsibility for feeding societies. However, by separating this vision from the ecological ethics centered on "the maintenance of a metabolic unison of humanity and nature" with which it has been associated (Jauernig et al. 392), reactive ruralism activates a notion of stewardship that gives farmers the right to use the land as they see fit.

While the Hollands Kroon farmers follow reactive ruralists in designating bureaucrats from the municipality, the national government, and the EU as "a distanced and detached elite" (Woods 322), they do not position themselves against this elite as embodying a more authentic "rural way of life." Rather, in line with the "industrial vision" of farming that sees "farmers make economic decisions guided by the goals of efficiency and competitive survival" (Jauernig et al. 392), they present themselves as belonging to a different elite: that of global entrepreneurs who deserve credit for their business acumen and the money they generate for the (inter)national economy (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q48_66). This embrace of entrepreneurialism is surprising given Burton and Wilson's finding that the entrepreneur was the farmer type with which even productivist farmers were least likely to identify because of its "strong (negative) urban connotations that conflicted with farmers' sense of rurality and stability" (101). It also sets the Hollands Kroon farmers apart from the Illinois productivist farmers discussed by Wilson et al., who, despite using plow tillage and chemicals, adopt a reactive ruralist ethics in which their common sense is linked to their "love for the soil," farming is presented as a vocation, and the farmer "transcends societal preoccupations with wealth, commercialism, and obsessive consumption as the reserved but knowing 'grass-roots guy'" (26–29). The Hollands Kroon farmers emphasize their ownership of the land (Persoon and van Maanen 2020b: 16) and articulate a libertarian notion of "free enterprise" as their ideal (2020c: Q33_188, Q41_23-180, Q42_200, Q46_96-194, Q48_188). One of the interviewed farmers even rejects the notion of farming as a vocation outright by insisting that "it is not a good idea if you farm to farm" (2020b: 11).

In the end, the ethical positioning of the majority of the surveyed farmers of Hollands Kroon does not fully accord with any of the three forms of ruralism distinguished by Woods. Its entrepreneurial bent distinguishes it from reactive ruralism, and it is neither the progressive ruralism of environmentalists and anti-globalization activists nor the aspirational ruralism of counter-urbanites seeking to preserve the countryside as idyllic (Woods 318). What the Hollands Kroon farmers appeal to is still a form of ruralism, in that it remains strongly counterposed to the urban (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q18TEXT_110, Q20_59-110, Q21_144, Q41_162), but a *globalist* one. The farmers endorse globalization, especially in its economic sense, but also in the ethical sense of considering export of their produce vital for feeding the world.

In this respect, it is telling that most of the Hollands Kroon farmers consider sustainability perfectly compatible with continued upscaling, mechanization, and digitization (2020c: Q33_102). In the words of Peter Graven of the Provincial Authority of North Holland:

> Really, what we are talking about is the Netherlands, Ltd. Upscaling is often also a form of becoming more sustainable. We are the country with the most sustainable production in the world and still we need to do better! Can we translate the principles of the biological sector to the regular sector? Society is demanding change. That transition is happening in fits and starts. That always requires a balance of the 3 P's, where businesses often operate in an international market with parties in the horizontal and vertical chains. (2020b: 17)

Here, the scale at which agricultural sustainability is being thought is emphatically global. In the next section, we follow Mohan and Stokke in insisting that, when thinking sustainability, "it is crucial to pay attention to issues of scale, ie to transgress analytically the boundaries between 'local', 'national' and 'global scales'" (249–250). Parsing the scales at which the Hollands Kroon farmers think issues of sustainability, we contend, can push the discussion about sustainable agriculture past the veneration of the local that characterizes not only "'new' Right and 'new' Left conceptualisations of development" (Mohan and Stokke 249), but all three forms of ruralism distinguished by Woods.

3 Scales of Sustainability

> There is nothing wrong with export. Our climate is exceptionally suited for some products, which we should by all means export. This allows us to import products we cannot grow here. (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q21_44)

The tensions between the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability are well-documented (Dryzek) and can be observed in the responses of the Hollands Kroon farmers. These responses, however, do prompt a reconsideration of the homogeneity of economic, social, and environmental concerns across different spatial and temporal scales – local, regional, national, global; short-term and long-term. This is true first and foremost of the economic dimension of sustainability, which has been particularly contentious. Proponents of a radical version of sustainability relate it to zero-growth or degrowth strategies, whilst moderate and conservative interpretations present selective growth or growth aided by new technologies as sustainable ways forward (Steurer 538–540). The Hollands Kroon farmers, on their part, overwhelmingly relate sustainability to expanding their businesses. This is understandable in light of the post-1945 history of Dutch agriculture, in

which upscaling was presented as the only economically viable way to thrive as an agricultural business. It also makes sense in the context of the farmers' desire to pass on their businesses to future generations. 79% of the respondents agree that sustainability entails the intergenerational continuation of their businesses (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q39_6). This long-term perspective is markedly different from the neoliberal emphasis on immediate economic impact, which, in relation to sustainability, has fostered short-termism (Seefried 396).

For a majority of the respondents, there is no opposition between maintaining or increasing production and operating sustainably. Stressing the importance of scale, these farmers relate their local focus on expanding production to a global sustainability and food security perspective: 66% agree with the statement that "large-scale agriculture is sustainable agriculture" (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q39_2) and multiple respondents see themselves as helping to feed the world (Q21_21, Q32_27-133, Q33_103-133-184-196, Q36TEXT_189, Q48_106). While critics of current agricultural practices propose producing on a smaller scale and predominantly consuming regionally grown foodstuffs (Fresco 229–246), the vast majority of the surveyed farmers have little interest in selling locally. The statement "My business is more future-proof if I can sell 20% locally" was only supported to some extent by 33% of the farmers, while 79% agreed that short chain-marketing would never be more than an additional market to large-scale export (Persoon and van Maanen 2020a: 22). As a vegetable producer with a substantial business put it:

> [P]eople do not want to pay twice as much for a product which originates from [North Holland, the province Hollands Kroon is part of]. Europe is local. In winter, the product comes from the south and in summer, it comes from the north. It's about [local] climate, not about distance. (2020c: Q21_90)

Many respondents echoed this notion of production being geared towards the global market: "We actually have the opportunity to function as a regional product of the world" (2020c: Q21_165). The intention to produce (more) sustainably, moreover, is firmly tied to the continued need for large-scale production as environment-friendly agriculture demands more land (2020c: Q34).

Significantly, this economic perspective is connected to social and environmental considerations. Some respondents regard producing less for a regional market as wasteful in light of the climate crisis. "Growing premium seed potatoes is important to the entire global population now and even more

in the future because of extensive climate change," an arable farmer noted (2020c: Q48_107). Arguing for the priority of agriculture in Hollands Kroon, a colleague remarked that "globally, the amount of fertile soil is decreasing. Make the choice to build where it takes up the least productive soil" (2020c: Q46_80). These answers suggest that, rather than looking at sustainability from an exclusively economic perspective, they embed their imagination of themselves as working towards an economically sustainable future in an ethics that also seeks to address ecological and social sustainability.

With regard to how the Hollands Kroon farmers reconcile the local, regional, national, European, and global scales, their answers firstly indicate a commitment to the environment that emphasizes their local situation and exceeds economic concerns. In particular, they acknowledge the importance of soil quality, producing as environment-friendly as possible, water management, and the conservation of the rural landscape (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q35). In addition, many indicate a willingness to invest in improving soil quality (56 percent), decreasing the use of fertilizer and pesticides (39 percent), and enhancing water management (38 percent) (2020c: Q38). Asked to compare their way of working to that of their predecessors, needing to think about ecological sustainability comes up as an important difference (2020c: Q30_127).

At the regional scale, secondly, some respondents express an appreciation of and pride in the landscape. Asked about the unique properties of the region of Hollands Kroon, the vastness of the landscape is highlighted by several farmers. 81% of all respondents strongly agree that the agricultural sector is of great scenic value (Q44), not only because it passively anchors the vastness of the landscape, but also because farmers actively care for the land and ensure scenic diversity and biodiversity through the variety of their agricultural activities (Q48). The farmers thus go beyond a discourse of sustainability that respects nature only as a useful resource to humans (Dryzek 159).

Thirdly, the respondents perceive an alliance between their local agricultural practices and the global threat of climate change. Whereas they do not acknowledge contributing to climate change through their modes of production and consumption, they do envision playing a role in counteracting climate change's consequences. By farming responsibly and on an efficiently large scale, they claim to provide food for people who cannot grow it themselves and to do so with a small carbon footprint, all the while maintaining biodiversity (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q33_25). Putting aside the question of whether these claims can be verified or must be seen as strategic imaginations, the farmers' commitment to presenting themselves as part of the effort to achieve global food security and ecological sustainability is evident. Drenthen

views such commitment as part of a "farmers' ethics" that should be taken into account in discussions about the environment and seen as supplementing the contrasting nature ethics of conservationists and rewilders (71).

Significantly, the farmers' ethics voiced in the survey is grounded in the respondents' belief that they know what is best in terms of environmental sustainability. Political interventions tend to be viewed as unwanted and counterproductive interference. Local politicians are said to act inconsistently and to be failing to protect the agricultural sector from environmental groups and other industries, including global technology companies like Google and Microsoft seeking to build datacenters in Hollands Kroon. The respondents use the survey as an opportunity to express their opinions to the municipality and to ask for specific measures to be taken, such as more frequent cutting of roadside vegetation or better road maintenance. Above all, however, they request room to operate autonomously. Political institutions should, in their view, limit themselves to providing a stable framework for conducting business (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q46). While the respondents have some faith that they will be listened to by local authorities (as evidenced by their participation in the survey), national and European politics are imagined as beyond their scope of influence. Asked about the biggest threat to their business, an arable farmer replies: "Policy The Hague/Brussels. They don't notice that we are producing safe and healthy food for the Netherlands, Europe, and the whole world in an efficient and environment-friendly way" (Persoon and van Maanen 2020c: Q32_133). National and European regulations concerning conservation, pesticides, and other environmental issues are mentioned by 39 percent of the respondents as measures they want lifted (2020c: Q42). The unwillingness to see national and European political interventions as anything other than a threat is one of the main factors hampering policy discussions at these levels.

With regard to the social dimension of sustainability, the Hollands Kroon research raises the question of what exactly agrarians understand as their ethical responsibility and on what scale(s) they conceive of this. The ambivalent stance of the farmers towards social relations is striking. On the one hand, the added value of cooperation is widely acknowledged: 71% of the respondents agree that co-operatives are good for the region and 74% are themselves part of a co-operative (2020a: 24). On the other hand, the respondents regard other agricultural businesses as competing with them for land and additional income, as is illustrated by the frustrations over the distribution of wind turbines. The commitment to the well-being of humanity at large is similarly ambiguous. The threat of a global food shortage is recognized and the farmers assign themselves a role in preventing it from becoming a reality, but it remains unclear whether this is more than lip-service.

4 Reconsidering Farmers' Agency

The number of scales and dimensions of sustainability an individual farmer needs to address results in a confusing and unpredictable outlook. Against this background, the desire for political consistency and social stability is understandable. In the below table, we indicate at which scales and with respect to which activities the surveyed farmers experience a sense of agency or a lack of agency in relation to economical, ecological, and societal sustainability, and where they leave their agency unacknowledged.

TABLE 11.1 Farmers' experienced agency in relation to the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability on different spatial scales

	Economy	**Environment**	**Society**
Local	*Agency* Producing, competing, cooperating with other farmers, transferring business to next generation	*Agency* Adopting more responsible farming practices (improving soil quality, reducing use of fertilizer and pesticides) water management, conservation and preservation	*Agency* Contesting regulation, negotiating with municipality, organizing through co-operatives
	Lack of agency Buying land	*Lack of agency* –	*Lack of agency* Refuting environmentalists, obtaining wind turbines
	Unacknowledged agency Consuming, selling	*Unacknowledged agency* Contributing to climate change	*Unacknowledged agency* Participating in local government
National	*Agency* Selling, competing	*Agency* –	*Agency* –
	Lack of agency –	*Lack of agency* –	*Lack of agency* Contesting regulation, refuting environmentalists, influencing public image of (productivist) farmers

TABLE 11.1 Farmers' experienced agency in relation to the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability on different spatial scales (*Cont.*)

	Economy	**Environment**	**Society**
National	*Unacknowledged agency* Consuming	*Unacknowledged agency* Contributing to climate change	*Unacknowledged agency* Participating in national politics, lobbying efforts by political parties and farmers' organizations
European	*Agency* Selling, competing	*Agency* –	*Agency* –
	Lack of agency –	*Lack of agency* –	*Lack of agency* Contesting regulation, refuting environmentalists, influencing public image of (productivist) farmers
	Unacknowledged agency Consuming, employment of migrant laborers	*Unacknowledged agency* Contributing to climate change	*Unacknowledged agency* Participating in European politics, lobbying efforts by political parties and farmers' organizations
Global	*Agency* Selling, competing	*Agency* Removing need for harmful farming in other parts of the world	*Agency* Providing food security
	Lack of agency –	*Lack of agency* –	*Lack of agency* Refuting environmentalists, influencing public image of (productivist) farmers
	Unacknowledged agency Consuming	*Unacknowledged agency* Contributing to climate change	*Unacknowledged agency* –

What is noticeable is that most agency is experienced at the local and global scale. Given the municipal scope of the survey, an emphasis on local agency was to be expected. But the extension to the global scale is surprising, especially in a context where farmers often align with nationalist politics. Experienced agency with respect to economic sustainability is particularly strong locally, where the farmers feel they can control who they collaborate with and how and what to grow. Experienced agency with respect to environmental and social sustainability is particularly strong on the global scale, but primarily regarded in terms of economic productivity. It derives from the farmers' conviction that they produce more sustainably than farmers in other parts of the world and can make a substantial contribution to global food security because of the scale of their production. At the national and European scales, much less agency is experienced in relation to all three forms of sustainability; here, the primary feeling is that of unfair regulations being imposed in an erratic way that cannot effectively be contested by the Hollands Kroon farmers, something that they feel is possible to some extent at the local level.

Where the farmers do not acknowledge their own agency – and thus reject any ethical responsibility – is also revealing. At all scales, the farmers' role as not just producers but also consumers, as well as their considerable contribution to climate change through production and distribution, is mostly left unarticulated. The strong farmers' lobbies that exist at local, national, and European levels are not acknowledged either, while the negative public image of farmers is presented as wholly unwarranted and beyond their sphere of influence (except at the local level, where the farmers believe it could be ameliorated through more direct sales). This poses a problem. If sustainability is to be upscaled, political interventions on a national, European, and eventually global level are essential (Dryzek 181).

Research has shown, and the Hollands Kroon study confirms, that productivist farmers in particular are liable "to underestimate or deny negative impacts of their farming practices" (Silvasti 143) and that "beliefs about climate change causality are not explanatory factors" for the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices (Morton et al. 29). Consequently, asking farmers like those in Hollands Kroon to take responsibility for environmental sustainability on the basis of their role in causing climate change or their espousal of an environmentalist ethics will likely have little effect and may incite even stronger claims of being unfairly beleaguered. A more effective approach could be to focus on the scales of sustainability at which the farmers consider themselves powerful agents, namely the local and global ones, and to articulate their ethical responsibility in the terms of the economic register they foreground in their self-presentation as globalist ruralists. This would mean holding the farmers to

account as entrepreneurs for whom productive land is a necessary asset and who need to pivot towards more sustainable agricultural practices in a global economy increasingly geared towards becoming greener.

5 Conclusion: Moving Forward

We have suggested that stalled policy debates about sustainable agriculture might be advanced by moving away from trying to convince productivist farmers to act sustainably on the basis of a nature ethics they do not subscribe to, and instead appealing to them on the basis of the globalist ruralist ethics they espouse. As we have shown, the Hollands Kroon farmers conceive of their position in relation to the different temporal and spatial scales of sustainability in ways that partially align with the direction policy debates about sustainable agriculture are moving into. First, they combine a determination to ensure profitability on the short term with an intergenerational perspective. Second, they tie their concern about the availability of land for efficient production to improving the quality of the soil and water management. Here, local and global perspectives on economic and environmental issues come together in the aim of combating the effects (drought, food shortages) of global climate change. Third, the conviction that the agricultural environment in Hollands Kroon is unique nationally and even globally, and should therefore be protected from competing sectors, unites local, national, and transnational scales to produce a possible convergence with new conservationist policies that are no longer exclusively oriented towards preserving uncultivated areas (Büscher and Fletcher).

On the basis of their professed globalist ruralist ethics, productivist farmers like those in Hollands Kroon might not only be enlisted to improve the local soil and water quality, but also expected, like other globally operating businesses, to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes. This would offer them a way to align their stated ethics with their business practice or at least improve their public image and thus become habituated to financially investing in sustainability.[4]

4 On CSR in the agricultural sector, see Luhmann and Thuevsen 2016; 2017. In proposing CSR as one possible direction for the debate about sustainability with productivist farmers, we are not claiming it as a panacea. We acknowledge that climate change cannot be solely addressed within the framework of market logic (Chakrabarty 21) and that CSR often amounts to greenwashing (Laufer).

At the local level, the Hollands Kroon farmers regard the economic flourishing of their business into the future as a dimension of sustainability that trumps the environmental one. Globally, however, they emphasize the importance of producing efficiently on a large scale, so the production surplus can be exported across the world. They relate this intent to concerns over the decrease of farmable land as a result of global warming, as well as to the expansion of the global population. Here, the farmers' globalist ruralist ethics challenges environmentalists to consider the potential merits of maintaining large-scale production in parts of the world with particularly fertile soil. It is of course possible – even likely – that the professed desire to combat world hunger is more a strategic way to legitimate productivism than a true commitment. However, appeals to change productivist farming practices based on purely environmentalist considerations have had little success. Asking farmers to live up to the ethics they themselves claim to espouse, especially at the scales at which they locate their responsibility and agency with regard to sustainability, might open up the deadlocked debate about agriculture's role in ensuring a more sustainable future.

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CHAPTER 12

The Rurality of Region: Narrative and Counter-Narrative in Indian Literary History and Politics

Sumati Dwivedi

Abstract

This chapter examines a seminal history of Indian literature, and the rhetorics and iconography of Indian movements for regional autonomy, to uncover an underlying contention over the meaning of rurality. Both region and nation compete to claim the village as the site of "authentic" identity-formation, disregarding the problems in attributing indigeneity to the agrarian rural. Indian rurality appears through this comparative analysis as a valued source of legitimacy, a repository of powerful images and tropes. At the same time, in politics and historiography, the coveted village becomes a paradox: frozen in past time and severed from global possibilities.

1 "India Is to Be Found Not in Its Few Cities but in Its … Villages": the Problem of Placing the Nation

This chapter examines the complicated history and present of the "regional" in Indian culture being imagined as primarily "rural." I begin with a close reading of a seminal history of Indian literature(s) and then chart the way the tensions and questions that arise from this reading also manifest in the realm of contemporary political culture. *A History of Indian Literature* by Sisir Kumar Das, published as three volumes from 1991 to 2005 and produced under state auspices, is focused on establishing a national literature, but it also celebrates "regional literature" and contends with the problem of how to subordinate it to the national category. Das gives regional literature a genre-claim that reaches across linguistic boundaries and is based on themes and affects that add up to a picture of, often idyllic, village life. This raises an interesting implication: that the regions thus shaped and voiced are bound to a sort of compulsory rurality. Such an equation of "regional" to "rural" can be traced also in Indian movements for regional autonomy, which have mobilized popular tropes of pre-modern rurality – including harvest goddesses and peasant revolutionary

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leaders – to imagine communities older and more "authentic" than the nation-state, which is implicated in modernity. Movements for provincial autonomy often appeal to such rural communities to legitimate their demands, yet rurality's implicit claim to indigeneity is challenged and problematized by the presence of marginalized tribal communities.

As the quotation from Gandhi (1962: 38) in the title of this section demonstrates, these regional-identitarian movements are creatively subverting a nationalist rhetorical tradition of glorifying the village as the only "real" place for founding an identity. This raises a conundrum: if the village is "occupied" by assertive regional identity, what is the space of the nation? It would be absurd to conclude that the nation lives only in the cities. But the rhetorics operating in literary history on the one hand, and politics on the other, do play with this absurdity when they represent the regional through certain tropes and affects of rurality. Furthermore, as they construct the village as the only or most "real" place of origin, they paradoxically also freeze it in (past) time and fix it in the local within the national, un-tethering it from the present and its globalizing potential.

2 The Nation, the Region, and the Sub-national in Das's National Literary History

> Indian literature … is not a theoretically coherent category … though in some sense every book written by an Indian, inside the country or abroad, is part of a thing called Indian Literature. (Ahmad 244)

The author, translator, and comparatist Sisir Kumar Das began publishing his monumental history of Indian literature[1] in the 1990s, through Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. So far, only three of his planned ten volumes have appeared, but these are considered authoritative. One of Das's prefatory statements lays out the scope of his work: it "does not claim to be a complete account of the literary activities of *the whole people*" (1991: XIII, emphasis added). Das's scaffolding for his history of modern India – told on the basis of print, which, though created and consumed by a smaller "more articulated group," is what he must rely on for clues to the larger collectivity – is "a continuous struggle between the native and the foreign models … in a colonial situation" (1991: XIII). Out of this struggle came "[t]he genres that gave the

1 Das's wavering between the singular "Indian literature" and the plural "Indian literatures" is significant for my argument; here I cite the title, which uses the singular.

new Indian literature its distinct character, [which] became slowly naturalized and … became the powerful medium of new thoughts and sensibilities" (XIV). The "distinct character" and "new thoughts and sensibilities" are what is taken to constitute the national consciousness.

At first glance, these ideas seem best understood through Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined community. Postcolonial critics, notably Partha Chatterjee, have argued that Anderson's conception of the nation relies on the "homogeneous empty time" of capital, which classifies any heterogeneities it encounters as "pre-modern" (925–926). In the time-space of modernity defined by capital, it becomes possible for the individual to "transcend by an act of political imagination" such "constricting … perhaps inherently conflictual" older serialities as "ethnic politics" (Chatterjee 926). This maps onto Das's vision of native-foreign struggle leading to the modern age of print, the medium in which the Indian nation can be imagined. But when it addresses regional literatures, Das's history diverges from Anderson and seems to grow closer to Chatterjee's proposal of the "heterogeneous time" of modernity. This complexity begins with Das's answer to the question of when and where the nation exists.

Das emphasizes that his India is *chinmay* rather than *mrinmay* – Sanskrit/Hindi terms translatable respectively as "accessible through the consciousness" and "earthy, of the soil."[2] Untethered from material criteria of nationhood such as Anderson's "finite … boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (224), this India can subsume territories and identities from different periods that bore different names in their own time.

Das's first volume, *A History of Indian Literature: 500–1399*, constructs India from the units of pre-modern kingdoms, regions, and ethnicities, and justifies this construction by casting these units as precursors to the nation, as sub-national entities awaiting subsumption once the nation appears. Das does not locate "region" and "regional literature" in ancient or medieval India, but entirely within modernity, first discussing these terms in some detail in the volume titled *1800–1910: Western Impact, Indian Response*.[3] The subsequent volume, focused on the early to mid-twentieth century, dedicates a section to the regional novel as a form existing across various languages. Here, Das argues that regional literature's defining quality is an affective one: quoting the critic Rama Darasa Misra, he contends it is "the love story of the region" (1995: 296). However, this section is productively complicated by reading it in the context

2 Author's translation.

3 In the first volume, "region" and "regional literature" are not defined or illustrated, making only stray appearances in references to local themes and emerging vernacular languages.

of larger structures and unresolved questions that can begin to be traced in the *1800–1910* volume.

At the start of the *1800–1910* volume, Das outlines his project using the term "unified national literature" (1991: 2). He distinguishes his methods from those of earlier, Western literary historians like Maurice Winternitz, who produced an impression of unity by elevating literature in one language alone (typically, the classical language of Sanskrit). Instead of aiming for "political or linguistic unity," Das aims for a unity defined by "communality … that goes beyond the exigencies of politics," in which exigencies he includes "nationality as a political concept" (1991: 2). As Das explains it, this unity

> is not constructed merely in response to a colonial rule, nor is it a mere by-product of the national movement. It is not a part of the pernicious political ideology that identifies one of the Indian traditions as national and everything else as "regional". It is as old as the Indian civilization. (1991: 4)

Das makes an extensive argument against histories based on a binary between "Pan-Indian" literature and the residual and implicitly inferior category of "regional literatures," the first defined by the use of a single (typically classical) language and the second as comprising all other languages and dialects. The core of his project is "the shifting of the literary historians' focus from language to people" (Das 1991: 4). From Das's argument it follows that he will not define regions simply by linguistic boundaries, or require them to be internally monolingual; he also does not believe in subordinating them to a linguistically defined national literature. So what new way of defining regions and regional literature does he propose?

The foundations of Das's understanding of the region/al are indicated in the subtitle of his second volume, *Western Impact, Indian Response*. The dialectic of impact and response established here structures the entire literary history. Though regional literatures are ultimately quite a small part of this enormous work, their location is nested within this dialectic; furthermore, much of the structure that clarifies how Das places these literatures is not explicated in one place in the text but must be assembled from various sections. Only then does Das's central definition of regional literatures by way of an imagination of "rurality" become both more legible and more complex.

First, Das distinguishes regions based on whether they encountered Western impact (political, cultural, educational) and on whether their literature changed in response. Das groups together un-impacted regional literatures as demonstrating a continuity with "tradition [rather] than with the experiments

that started in the regions exposed to Western influence" (1991: 148). Chief among the "experiments" that developed in the latter regions was the emergence of the novel. The second manifestation of the dialectic is that the novel as a form is discussed largely in terms of being a "response to Western influence" – for instance, one of the earliest and most influential novelists discussed, Bankim Chandra, is said to have been "indebted to Walter Scott" while "not entirely reject[ing] the tradition of Sanskrit narrative" (Das 1991: 199). In terms of their response to Western influence, Indian novelists are contrasted with Indian playwrights, whose "reaction to Western drama was hesitant" (Das 1991: 118). Thus, it is the dynamic of influence and impact that distinguishes different regions on the map of India and literary forms across regions, in preference to linguistic boundaries, which Das criticizes throughout. Third, as Das dives into the content and themes of regional works, the impact/response structure manifests in his description of the emergence of "regionalism." The British, Das explains, "found the multilingualism of India a great impediment towards … efficiency, and … tried to restructure the existing linguistic hierarchy" (1991: 139). The colonial policy of recognizing only a few languages generated, as a backlash, "the growth of 'regionalism' which manifested in linguistic exclusiveness" (Das 1991: 139). In other words, regional communities marginalized by the colonial administration responded by hardening their identity around the "de-recognized" language and turning from multi- to monolinguality. Fourth, the emerging novels in various regional languages evinced a common theme of "regional patriotism" and an interest in "reconstructing the history of the region with a definite purpose to vindicate the glory of the people of that area" (Das 1991: 201). Popular forms and genres also integrated Western influences and reactions against colonial impact into expressions of national patriotism, which "maintained its identity separate from the regional patriotism also emerging around this time" (Das 1991: 201).

To sum up, for Das, regional literatures were not just continuations of tradition developed in regions impacted by the West (whether experienced as the influence of European forms and genres, as colonial oppression, or as both). Rather, these literatures primarily employed emerging forms that were also responses to Western impact, such as through the novel. In contrast to Das's aim of freeing regions from being defined linguistically, however, emerging regional literatures often expressed a monolingual regional identity formed in response to the colonial imposition of national language/s. In addition, regional literatures were vehicles for regional patriotism, which existed parallel to national patriotism. On this last point, interestingly, Das does not engage with the question of whether regional novels that express national patriotism should be distinguished from those expressing regional patriotism instead.

Would the first fall out of the "regional" category and into one like "nationalist novels in a regional language"?

This question refocuses my reading of the history on the way in which Das negotiates the issue of organizing non-national identities, collectivities, or solidarities within a history defined by the nation. In other words, how he relates plural linguistic or regional literatures (his chief concern) to the singular, national Indian literature. He sets aside, for one, nationalist unity, which acknowledges but also subsumes the regional and local, converting them into sub-units of the national (exemplified in the Sahitya Akademi credo "India has one literature though written in many languages"). He also rejects the model of heterogeneity, which he refers to as one "subordinating the commonalities in cultures and the relationship between the self and the other" (Das 1991: XIV). Instead, Das falls back on "unity in diversity": "Indian literature is a complex of *literatures*, related to one another, at times by geographical proximity, at times by a *shared history*" (Das 1991: XV, emphasis added). This seems tautological – if Das is setting up the criteria identifying discrete literatures as a preliminary to writing their history, it would be a second-stage history which tracks shared histories between several literatures and thus "constructs" a national literature, not an Indian literature which already existed, long before the nation giving it a name.

Das is laudably sensitive to the distinct identity of non-national literatures, asserting that he "strongly defends the *uniqueness* of each literature in the country, and looks at each one of them as *distinct* expressions of the experience of each *community*" (1991: XV, emphases added). It is not easy, however, to reconcile this uniqueness, distinctiveness, and identification of a (presumably unique and distinct) community with any regional literature's inclusion in a national literature – which must also be unique and distinct, while expressing the nation. Despite rejecting the nationalist idea of literary history, Das's language and narrative structure do seem to take on its color. For instance, in giving an account of the history of Indian languages leading up to the linguistic reorganization of the States, he writes: "since the mid-nineteenth century the *regional aspirations* or the *sub-nationalisms* found language (and consequently, literature to some extent) a powerfully binding force among an otherwise *heterogeneous* people" (Das 1995: XV, emphases added). It is not entirely clear how Das's method of tracing commonalities through all of the subcontinent's time and space deals with such a strong heterogeneity, which must be acknowledged even at the sub-national level. If the peoples of India can be observed to crystallize their identities around smaller linguistic identities at a certain point in time, this decreases the persuasiveness of the literary historian's assertion that commonalities at the much larger national level exist

through time and demonstrate sufficient homogeneity to claim a continuous "India" from ancient to contemporary times. At the very least, this nation cannot have been the felt and imagined community the modern nation-state is. The impression thus remains that the purported centuries-old literary "India" constitutes an entirely different kind of historical subject than modern "India." The chronological problem of how modernity as a boundary cuts across the national and regional is only partially illuminated by Das's location of regional literatures in modernity, and within the dialectic of Western impact and Indian response.

3 Rural-Urban Tension: Defining the Region, Defining the Nation

The structure extracted from Das's *Western Impact, Indian Response* volume in the preceding section helps to understand and analyze his explicit engagement with the regional novel in the next volume of his history, titled *1911–1956: Struggle for Freedom, Triumph and Tragedy.* Here, though writing in English, Das makes the significant choice to exclusively use the Hindi word *aañchal* for region, and to form around it his category of *aañchalik* (regional) literature. In an interesting parallel to the wide scope he gives national literature, he makes aañchalik writing a major if not a meta-genre that crosses other boundary-lines like language and comprises composite sub-categories. Thus, he categorizes *Parti Parikatha* (roughly translated, *Fairytale of the Fallow Soil*), a 1957 novel by the author P. Renu from Bihar, as an "*aañchalik* novel *in Hindi*" (Das 1995: 296, emphasis added), praises it as the paradigmatic articulation of regional consciousness, and goes on to discuss aañchalik novels in other vernacular languages. The implication is clear: a genre-claim of a "regional" quality that transcends the specificities of any one region or regional language is being made. What, then, is this quality? Das's work suggests that it consists of rurality, as standing in tension with the urban.

Das agrees with Western historians that the novel as a form is modern. Further, in both his *1800–1910* and *1911–1956* volumes, the frame-narrative of his history is the *agon* between the "native" tradition and the invading one. As the overarching story, this struggle subsumes other ways of organizing his literary history, such as genre. Though both volumes are organized around genre, the Preface to the *1800–1910* volume describes the "growth of new literary genres, most of them being innovations in literary history" as "emerg[ing] out of the tensions between the indigenous traditions and alien models" (Das 1991: IX).

Similarly, the Preface to the *1911–1956* volume states that "[t]he history of that period was characterised mainly, if not entirely, by a continuous struggle between the native and the foreign models" (Das 1995: XIII). This foundational binary of native-foreign cannot help but insinuate itself into Das's account of regional literature(s).

In making the case for the aañchalik being a distinctive genre and relating it to other categories by way of influence, similarity or overlap, Das demonstrates what he considers authoritative evidence for a genre-claim. First, he privileges the statements of P. Renu. He cites the novelist on the subject of his own novels, to the point of titling Renu the originator of the genre as well as of the term aañchalik. This offers an approach to regional literature which may well be unique. Thomas Hardy in the English tradition is credited with constructing the region of "Wessex" through novels like *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Return of the Native*, and in American literature William Faulkner's postbellum South is celebrated, but it is difficult to call up an instance of one author being credited, by a leading literary historian, as the originator of regional writing as such.

It is clear that Das accords considerable value to Renu's statements of intent and claims of "newness," as he extensively quotes him:

> [the aañchalik novel] is a narrative of the Purnea region, which is a district in Bihar … I have chosen one *village* of this district, *a representative of the less developed rural India*, as the locale of my narrative. (1995: 296, emphases added)

Das also cites literary criticism on the term "regional novel," used by various Indian critics in the 1950s to identify "a special group of writings related to definite geographical areas" (1995: 296). Rama Darasa Misra, a contemporary critic, is quoted as arguing that the aañchalik "describes the total life of the region … it is not related to region, it is the love story of the region" (Das 1995: 296). Misra develops his evocative phrase by focusing on the idea of "total life" – to him, it is crucial that the aañchalik novel cannot be identified by any other theme, such as "marriage and domesticity" or "economic hardship." Implicitly, a novel about economic hardship only incidentally set in a rural setting would not be a representative aañchalik novel. The text must bring the total life of the region vividly before the reader and immerse them in the experience of belonging to it.

Notably, both Renu and Misra strongly suggest that a regional novel can only be located in rurality, with its agricultural seasons, folk dances and songs,

distinctive regional foods (eaten by the poorer classes), vegetation and wilderness, and so on. Das expands on Misra to state:

> these writings are representations of physical and cultural details of a particular geographical territory and the inhabitants there. They also attempt to represent the people in relation to history as well as to the history of the region involving their response to forces of social change and instincts to survive. (1995: 296)

What emerges from the authorial and critical statements Das cites is that, in his view, the aañchalik novel manifests a certain representative relationship to a very specific reality, by recognizably depicting a (rural) "region" and its people. It has a location which can be pointed out on a map and it also has a "tone," an affective relationship with this location and its people, which Misra tries to capture as "the love story of the region" (qtd. in Das 1995: 296).

Regional literatures are a small part of Das's mammoth work, and the theoretical foundations of his definition of the category remain implicit. Yet, under close study, his handling of this category becomes a fascinating illustration of the historian struggling with homogeneous and heterogeneous time. How is Das to arrange "region" and "nation" in a chronology without allowing region, as the older geographical and social entity, to displace nation as the space that needs to be maintained as the origin-point of the very history that produces it? One solution he attempts is to characterize regionality itself as a tension, specifically one between urban and rural.

After citing literary critics on the subject of the Hindi novel and establishing Renu as having coined the term aañchalik, Das argues, using their content-based descriptions but extending their application, that an earlier "origin" for the aañchalik can be discovered in the 1930s "*in those literatures where the urban-rural tension was quite strong*," whether in Marathi, Gujarati or Oriya-language novels (1995: 296, emphasis added). He then proceeds to analyze these novels, which Renu and the Hindi critics had not conceived of as aañchalik, under the same rubric of the "Regional Novel." Das thus expands the scope of the "type" aañchalik far beyond Renu's novels or their like, across decades and linguistic boundaries, illustrating that the category is not tethered to its "inventors" or first users, but rather to its thematic of rural-urban tension, viewed from the perspective of the rural. Das's approach of defining the regional novel is bolstered by later literary historians. Vasudha Dalmia's 2008 history of the Indian novel uses the same method (43–60). Both these histories, and others such as Gillian Wright's, illustrate the difficulty of locating the genre's "essence" or the tradition it draws on.

What all these scholarly discussions of the aañchalik or regional novel in India agree on is that it concerns itself with rural life. The content, themes, tone, and politics associated with the aañchalik novel converge in a mass of tropes that demand to be identified, explicitly, as pertaining to rurality: village life; agriculture; cattle-herding; the painful journey of a protagonist to the city and the alienation from the home village they confront; the cycle of the seasons; the beauty and lyricism of nature as seen by farming communities; traditional practices of land-use, construction, and water management; the precarity of agricultural livelihoods at the mercy of climate and economic pressures; the shrinking of villages; the return of educated and/or demoralized protagonists from the city; regional-rural dialects and the specific objects and modes of life they describe; the different experience of time in village life. This list, compiled from descriptions of about a dozen of the novels identified as "regional" in influential literary histories, cannot be comprehensive but is very strongly indicative that rurality is what holds the genre of the aañchalik novel together. In the next section, I will explicate how rurality fulfils the similar function of holding the region together in contemporary Indian politics. This political discourse continues and also subverts a pattern in Indian nationalist thought, of idealizing the village as the "true" or "real" India.

4 Regional Imagery and Tropes from the State to the Subversive

> We will eat cow-grass and finger-millet, and build our State of Uttarakhand! (Slogan of the Uttarakhand Statehood movement, The Indian Express)

Since its Independence in 1947, India has seen many reorganizations of its internal provincial boundaries. The Union is divided into States[4] and Union Territories, and over the last two decades, several popular movements of regional identity and autonomy have successfully demanded the carving-out of new States. The icon of one such movement, which was later adopted by Telangana, the new State it carved out, is a representative example: a mother-goddess and agricultural deity specific to the region, in traditional dress, who holds up in one hand a harvested ear of corn and in the other a flower arrangement that is important in a traditional festival celebrating the goddess's "return to life." The

4 For clarification, "State" capitalized refers to the official administrative units making up the Indian territory, while "state" carries the usual meaning of the national body politic or, more specifically, its governmental organization.

symbolism of this goddess image ties the regional identity to old customs, to the rhythms and festal intervals of the agricultural (solar) year, and to farming and harvesting as the quintessential human activities which are themselves symbolic of individual and universal time and rebirth (Reddy). The evocative power of the image, in sum, is built out of tropes of rurality.

The Telangana Thalli, as this goddess is called, is far from alone in her allusions to the farmer and the village. Another example is the slogan quoted at the beginning of this section, which was popular in the Statehood movement for Uttarakhand, which in 2000 succeeded in separating off the Northern, mountainous, and forest-rich region of an older State (Uttar Pradesh). This slogan uses local, non-commercial grains and the unique rural food of the region to ally sentiment, especially nostalgia, with political consciousness.

Jharkhand, another State born out of a regional movement in 2000, has a strong identification with a pre-Independence freedom fighter from a tribe of indigenous people known as the Munda.[5] Birsa Munda, the freedom fighter in question, died in a British colonial prison in 1900, and his agitation for the agrarian and forest rights of the Munda either faded or in some interpretations was subsumed by the national independence struggle.

In postcolonial memory and official history, from textbooks to stamps, one can trace a complex and often covert contest over what and who Birsa Munda "stands for." His image is popular enough to have developed the representational conventions of a somewhat divine figure: he carries a traditional Munda bow and a quiver of arrows, and is sparsely clad, thin, wiry, and dark. In his own time, he demanded not merely concessions but full statehood for his indigenous community: a Munda Raj to replace the British Raj. Surviving accounts do not show that he imagined the Munda nation-state subordinated to a larger Indian one. Birsa Munda fought (among other rights) for land for the poorest class of peasantry (Ranjan). However, his dedication to the Munda cause ensures that he cannot without controversy be bundled with other peasant and rural leaders, since the claims and traditions of indigenous communities like the Munda also conflicted with those of non-tribal peasants and farmers. This is not a problem for historians alone; the conflict between increasingly marginalized indigenous populations and (predominantly caste-Hindu) rural and agricultural settlements is alive and urgent today.

In a figure like Birsa Munda, then, the independent Indian nation confronts its difficult relationship with indigeneity as holding a "deeper," older, and even

5 The official and politically accepted term in India is "Scheduled Tribes," where "scheduled" refers to their listing in the Constitution. It is somewhat comparable to saying "First Nations" in Canada.

more powerful claim to affections and therefore autonomy than agricultural rurality does. In the repository of the popular imagination, indigeneity underlies and underpins rurality, and is the source of a great deal of its power; indigenous (or tribal) identity consciousness can also be mobilized to undercut the power of undifferentiated rurality by identifying the latter with mainstream caste-Hindu society. In its own language of iconography, indigeneity can raise a prior – indeed a primordial – claim to the land and as a corollary shift the idealized farmer figure to the category of occupier, displacer, colonizer.

The post-Independence and postmortem "career" of Birsa Munda can serve as an invaluable illustration of the difficulty of placing, or perhaps appropriating, him into some canon of heroes of the freedom struggle. He was adopted into the national and nationalist pantheon as a kind of precursor to Gandhi and Nehru, but has also been categorized as a "regional," "tribal," and/or "religious" leader, as well as a "folk hero." Within this national narrative, or arguably in tension with it, Birsa Munda was elevated into an icon for the State of Bihar, where his birthplace was located. In stamps and monumental statuary, in the war-cry of the Bihar regiment, and in the date of its Day of Indigenous Peoples' Glory, a version of Birsa Munda was memorialized that implicitly purported to reconcile the national, the regional – that is, Bihari – and the indigenous, chiefly Munda community. However, this seeming reconciliation could only pass unchallenged until the rise of a movement, in 2000, demanding that a new State of Jharkhand be carved out of Bihar, because those who now identified with the region of Jharkhand claimed "true" ownership of, or at least closer ties to, Birsa Munda and the authority of indigeneity that his name can carry.

Today, the State of Jharkhand celebrates its founding on Birsa Munda's birth anniversary. Jharkhand is also among the States with the largest tribal population by percentage, which can be seen as authorizing a second resolution to the contest over authenticity/indigeneity – the region identified with and by the rural is closer to authentic than the modern nation-state, but the indigenous people are closest of all, and a provincial reorganization and autonomy that addresses their marginalization and displacement in nationalist history and policy would allow for a more equitable reconciliation. In other words, as the icon of Jharkhand's regional pride, Birsa Munda seems to finally have been placed "correctly": his indigenous homeland translates into the present-day territorial boundaries of the State; the historical movement for autonomy from the British becomes legible as the predecessor of the present, sub-national one for autonomy from Bihar; and the existence of Jharkhand becomes the apotheosis of this regional history. Yet, even in this enormously simplified tale of Birsa Munda being politically mobilized to support increasingly smaller and more specific territorialized identities, the fissures are evident. For one thing, as a

provincial unit, Jharkhand's close association with Munda cannot abstract him from his complex relationship with the Indian nation, nor can it resolve this complexity into an unproblematic system of concentric layers, from regional to State to nation.

5 Conclusion

Though he explicitly refused the nationalist construction of a literary unity, Sisir Das's history acknowledges the complex and often "consanguineous" relationship between the rise of regional consciousness and its literary expression, and nationalism (1995: 62). The rise of nationalism led novelists and poets to study and revive "pre-colonial traditions … rural themes, folk metres and vocabulary" (Das 1995: 23). Nationalism also rejuvenated vernacular languages as "mother-tongues" and sustained movements for the linguistic reorganization of colonial provinces (Das 1995: 34). Vernacular languages, oral traditions, and rural themes were important both in regional and national literature. Nationalist political rhetoric similarly privileged the qualities Das identifies with aañchalik literature: a love for the village as a total form of life. Jawaharlal Nehru, for instance, writes in *The Discovery of India* of "the self-sufficient village communities" that colonial capital destroyed. He cites Metcalfe in praise of the lost "village republics" that "seem to last where nothing else lasts" (Nehru 303). The most influential advocate of what might be called a rural nationalism, however, was Gandhi. Gandhi's construction of the village was a privileged space that preserved a pre-modern ideal, and simultaneously birthed and sustained the nation. In a 1946 letter to Nehru he expressed this dogmatically: "For me, India begins and ends in the villages" (Gandhi 1979: 45). In opposition to Nehru, who envisioned the village and city "approaching each other," so that rural areas had better amenities and a "higher cultural level" (556), Gandhi held that "our cities are not India" and characterized the urban as parasitic, foreign, and essentially violent (1966: 288–89). The differences between Gandhian and other strains of Indian nationalism are beyond the present scope; what is noteworthy is the emphatic nationalist embrace of rural India, especially as represented by agrarian economy, traditional ways of life, folk traditions, and an idealized pre-colonial self-sufficiency. When post-Independence regional identity movements marshal their rhetorical and iconographical tools, they have the advantage of drawing on this nationalist tradition as well as subverting it.

The tropes of rurality, like the corn-bearing goddess and the forest archer, are sites of symbolic power that seethe with potential, and neither the modern

nation-state nor any regional or indigenous identity has succeeded in concluding the story of their serial occupation. One of the arenas that self-consciously demonstrates this persistent "un-settled-ness" is the writing of national literary history. Das's negotiations of the national/regional problem illuminate the accompanying problem of the time-space of rurality, which each identity can claim for political benefit. This power struggle, which remains implicit in the scholarly work, is more explicit in regional identity movements. Though regions like Uttarakhand and Telangana demanded provincial autonomy, not nationhood, such claims legitimate themselves by the same appeals as the emergent nation once did: that the region has priority over the existing political organization by virtue of an older 'love story' with a distinct and disenfranchised cultural and geographical space. Seen in this light, representations of Indian rurality from the nineteenth-century aañchalik novel to slogans and banners today appear frozen in the binary of the urban-rural tension that Das resorts to for his "regional" genre-claim. Furthermore, this tension continues to manifest in temporal displacements, whereby the city is implicitly unmoored in history, while the village is frozen in pre-modernity.

In the canon of regional literature as Das fashions it, there are suggestions of potentialities beyond this static, nostalgic ideal. As he constructs it, regionality (because it is rural) is a local and richly material condition (*mrinmay* or earthy). But it can also be seen as an unbound seriality (in Chatterjee's and Anderson's terms), which gathers together works (and readers) from across linguistic and geographic boundaries. "The village" as theme and affect thus manifests a capacity for extending beyond the national into the global, as its discourse develops beyond the contention with "nation" and into larger considerations of indigeneity, authenticity, belonging, and constructedness.

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CHAPTER 13

Reflections on *A Woman's Culm, Keeping the Home Fires Burning*

Gender and Rurality in the Commemoration of Ireland's Struggle for Independence

Pauline O'Connell

Abstract

This chapter reflects on *A Woman's Culm*, a commissioned art film that aligns with Ireland's Decade of Centenaries Programme (2012–2023). The film explores the often overlooked and underacknowledged roles women played in Ireland's fight for independence. Specifically, it highlights the struggles of rural women, whose contributions were rendered invisible due to their domestic nature during this period of national upheaval. By foregrounding the female voice and employing experience-oriented storytelling, the film challenges traditional power dynamics inherent in institutional archival practices and the production of historical knowledge (Stone-Mediatore). This approach not only revises male-dominated narratives; it also introduces new perspectives that underscore the significance of recontextualizing historical narratives to include diverse and multifaceted experiences.

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> "Culm" is a mix of inferior coal dust, yellow clay, and water. In a ratio of 1:3, the dry ingredients were shoveled together, and water was added to create a sticky substance. It was trod on by foot in a cultural practice called the "Culm Dance," then scooped up and formed into balls by hand. This was predominantly women's and sometimes children's work. The "culm" was then dried and used in the fire – a type of home economics – to extend the ration of coal and provide heat for the house, hot water for washing, and a cooking source. As a cultural practice, culm-making is unique to coal-mining areas.

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1 The Instability of Historical Memory

History offers us the necessary tools to analyze and explain issues that arose in the past. It provides us with the ability to see patterns that might otherwise be invisible in the present. Thus, it gives us a crucial perspective for understanding and potentially finding solutions to problems regarding the uneven geographies and power relations between the rural and urban. In 2012, the Decade of Centenaries Programme[1] (2012–2023) was initiated in Ireland to complement the ongoing program of annual State Commemorations. It set out to commemorate Ireland's Struggle for Independence, the Civil War, and the Foundation of the State and Partition with the aim of ensuring that this complex period in Ireland's history was "remembered appropriately, proportionately, respectfully and with sensitivity." Taking the form of a commissioned and open-submission competition, "the initiative provided opportunities to focus on the everyday experience of ordinary people living in extraordinary times. It also aim[ed] to offer fresh insights and constructive dialogue, and to foster deeper mutual understanding among people from the different traditions."[2]

My video work, *A Woman's Culm, Keeping the Home Fires Burning* (2021, single-channel HDV, 17:30 mins., sound), won an award for its response to the brief's sub-section about "women's roles." The artwork focuses on rural women's personal struggles for survival at a time of broader national struggle, and their less visible role – in the home – and underacknowledged contribution to Ireland's War of Independence. It does so by closely engaging the cultural practice of "culm" making, a practice in which women's hands became the fighting tools and the raw materials that made up "buns," "bungs," "bums," or "culm bombs" – coal dust, yellow clay, and water – became the measure of that labor (Figure 13.4). A material object, similar in shape and size to a "Mills Bomb,"[3] the "culm" embeds resilience, self-sustainability, and commemoration alike.

Until the early 1900s in rural Ireland, married women's roles included looking after their families, farms, and livestock. However, as part of Ireland's War of Independence (1919–1921) and subsequent Civil War (1922–1923), if called upon, they cooked food for soldiers; provided shelter for those on the run or injured; made first aid dressings and tended to the wounded; stored arms and

1 For further information about the Decade of Centenaries Programme, see: https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com.

2 https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com.

3 "Mills Bomb" is the popular name for a series of British hand grenades designed by William Mills. They were the first modern fragmentation grenades used by the British Army and saw widespread use in the First and Second World Wars.



FIGURE 13.1 Culm fire with three culm Lee Enfield Rifles. Film still

ammunition; and transported armaments under their long skirts.[4] More covert roles included collecting funds, carrying dispatches, gathering intelligence, and acting as lookouts while maintaining secrecy and equilibrium throughout. Altogether, these tasks did not necessarily fit the gendered imagination of domesticity, which conceived of housewives and mothers as nonworkers and therefore unproductive, dependent beings. Many rural women stepped outside of these dominant and domineering categorizations by undertaking these everyday, yet often risky tasks. By doing so, they played a pivotal role in the struggle for survival and independence, and thus for national and self-sovereignty.

However, not all women were recognized equally for their contributions. Those who were official members of Ireland's Women's League, Cumann na mBan, are widely acknowledged and remembered for their military support in "teach[ing] its members first aid, drill, signaling and rifle practice to aid the men of Ireland" and "advance[ing] the cause of Irish liberty."[5] Its membership comprised relatively independent women not bound by the responsibilities of looking after the family or farm, whose "privileged" circumstances afforded them proximity to towns and larger cities, and a means of transport, allowing

4 Such transportation of arms and munition was facilitated by the fact that women were not searched.

5 Cumann na mBan was officially founded on 5 April 1914. Its constitution contained explicit references to the use of armed force against crown forces in Ireland. Under its constitution, the primary aim of the organization was to "advance the cause of Irish liberty" and "teach its members first aid, drill, signalling and rifle practice in order to aid the men of Ireland." See: https://www.theirishwar.com/organizations/cumann-na-mban/.

them to move more freely and to mobilize at short notice. Everyday (rural) women's supporting role, by comparison, was less visible. They were bound by their duties at home, which meant their individual contributions were determined by these domestic factors. These women wore no uniforms, did not follow the rank-and-file system, and were not visibly combative on the streets. Their placement within the rural home meant that their contribution was, on the one hand, invaluable in advancing the war efforts, as *ordinary* rural women were not considered a threat by the crown forces and could carry out their orders without suspicion. On the other hand, their contributions were neither visible nor weighted equally to those in the official women's army as their legacy was downgraded by the domestic nature of the tasks carried out, which already fell under the rubric of women's work and were thus not considered extraordinary. This became clear when their post-war attempts to seek recognition for the part they played, and request recompense in the form of a state pension, were, for the most part, met with suspicion by the state institutions in charge, resulting in many applications being dismissed.[6] As the gatekeepers of what is remembered and what remains forgotten, the military has played a dominant role in the collating and curation of historical information included in state archives. These historical narratives uphold a male-dominated and military perspective, as acknowledged in the opportunity for redress offered by the Decade of Centenaries Programme of state commissions.

The invisibility of rural women's lay contribution to the war efforts has at its roots not only a gender but also a rural bias. The intersection of these biases for me raised the question of what it means for a female, rural-based artist/researcher to operate within and cooperate with institutional efforts to address gender oppression. How do I navigate the risks and pitfalls of this commemorative commission as it sought to rectify the historical invisibilization and silencing of women in archives? In this regard, it is important to note that it quickly became clear that the impetus for redress did not require looking to the distant past for oppressions, oversights, invisibilizations, and erasures of certain narratives in historical knowledge production. Instead, the Decade of Centenaries Programme revealed a continued gender bias that came into sharp focus through the Abbey Theatre's "Waking the Nation, 2016" commemorative

6 For more information, see: https://militarypensions.wordpress.com/2022/12/02/release-13-the-contentious-case-of-mary-anne-murphy/. Legislation was passed by the Oireachtas of Saorstát Éireann from June 1923 onwards to recognize and compensate wounded veterans, and the widows, children, and other dependents of deceased veterans, as well as those proven to have had active service during the week commencing 23 April 1916, in the War of Independence, and in the Civil War, through the payment of service pensions.

program.[7] It set out to creatively commemorate Ireland's revolutionary period (1916–1923) starting 100 years after the Easter Rising in 1916, a time when the Abbey Theatre (productions) – a place synonymous with Ireland's literary revival – contributed to building a sense of national identity and reassessing Ireland's status within the British Empire. Acting like a mirror to society, the theater's productions played a central role in contributing to and understanding the events of that period.

When the ten commissioned plays as part of the "Waking the Nation, 2016" program were announced in 2015, it held a mirror up once again. This time, however, it reflected the systemic gender biases within Ireland's theater sector. In this program, only one out of the ten commissioned plays was written by a woman, sparking a cultural sector coup that gave birth to the #WakingTheFeminists movement, which in turn led to a nationwide cultural audit titled *Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre* (Donoghue et al.), published in 2017.[8] With regard to political memory, Andreas Huyssen contends that "erasure becomes a metaphor for the instability of historical memory" and that such erasure is a form of violence (89). The gender imbalance of the Decade of Centenaries Programme made visible the tenuous strings that bind past forms of historical knowledge production to the present, revealing the many blind spots, still, remaining within contemporary (institutional) practices of memorialization and archive-making.

In this chapter, I ponder the dynamics of archive-making and historical knowledge production by reflecting on *A Woman's Culm: Keeping the Home Fires Burning*. Focusing on its creative mode of alternative (hi)story-telling – from a personal, female perspective – I draw attention to *A Woman's Culm*'s redistribution of what, in a particular community, can be said and seen, heard and comprehended, done and remembered, and what cannot (Rancière 89). My understanding of women's roles in both Ireland's War of Independence and the coal-mining industry is guided by the conviction that, in a patriarchal society, the reigning politics of narrative systematically affords the authority to tell stories and make history primarily to men. Jacques Rancière's "aesthetic theory" helps to explain how a politics of difference distributes what is sayable and unsayable, doable and undoable, audible and inaudible, which, in turn, determines what will be remembered or forgotten (86, 89).

The power dynamics and gender biases contained within state archives can no longer be maintained, or go unquestioned, in the wake of, among others,

7 The Abbey Theatre was founded as a national theater for Ireland in 1904 by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory.

8 www.wakingthefeminists.org.

the #MeToo, #WakingTheFeminists, and #TimesUp feminist movements calling for urgent critical readjustments of the status quo. In this text-as-reflection, I explain how *A Woman's Culm* – and its exhibition in the rural context that inspired it – acts as a vehicle to dispel the illusion that the archive is representative of historic events by giving voice to events and people excluded from the hierarchies of historical knowledge production.

The privileged position of the state-sanctioned Programme – which included the assumption that it could speak "for" or "on behalf" of suppressed, muted subjects of the past and present, raised the omnipresent dilemma that speaking for others provokes (Alcoff), also for me as someone submitting an artwork to the Programme. My position as an artist/researcher on the one hand separated me from my informants and collaborators, but, on the other hand, the fact that I am a "local" (living in the upland rural area where my research is conducted) meant I was also an insider already socially integrated into the rural community. As a result, I could be "placed" and therefore trusted. The tightrope to be walked was strung between the risk of being used by the Programme to perform an empty feminist gesture and being put under pressure to "get it right" by my rural neighbors and collaborators. I tried to navigate this positional tightrope by shifting from speaking "for" or "on behalf of" to "speaking nearby," a concept put forward by filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-Ha which "does not point to the object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place" (Chen 82). To speak nearby, then, does not claim representation as delegation and/or description. Rather, it is a speaking that comes close to the subject without seizing or appropriating it.

The two female narrators in *A Woman's Culm* recount their (hi)stories using their own unscripted words. Their inclusion addresses and seeks to redress a past when rural women's lay narratives were disregarded and met with suspicion. The aim of *A Woman's Culm* and my revisiting of the work in this chapter is not to replicate former hierarchies or to rewrite history so that it again belongs to a certain few. Rather, the aim is to ask what it means to navigate the power dynamics of archive-making and memorialization – within and in between visual art and the academy, art and research, art and autoethnography – with a critical solicitude.

2 A Woman's Culm

A Woman's Culm features unscripted (hi)stories told by two elderly women. Each woman recounts her childhood memories of how her mother and grandmother(s) taught her to make "culm," detailing the processes of gathering the

raw ingredients and making the "bombs" by hand (Figures 13.2a–e), as well as how their daily household chores were vital to the survival of their family yet remained invisible as labor. The film uses the metaphor of the culm "bomb" to highlight the hard labor performed by rural women in and around the home, and to translate the resilience and self-sufficiency this implies across the coal mining and War of Independence narratives. Interwoven with the women's stories is a counter-narrative that interrupts their voice-overs and that is accompanied by images of myself wearing overalls and making a sculptural object (Figures 13.3a–b). I wrap a (Lee Enfield) rifle in cling film, embed it in a flat layer of red clay, take a plaster mold of it, and cast it using the culm mix.

As the narration ends and night falls, we see three sculptural rifles being placed, standing upright, on a flaming pyramidal outdoor fire (Figure 13.1). As the screen fades to black, the fire is raging to one side of the picture frame while, on the other side, a time-sensitive text appears dedicated to the ordinary women of Ireland whose contribution to the war efforts is acknowledged



FIGURES 13.2A-E One woman makes culm by hand. Film stills




FIGURES 13.3A AND B Pauline O'Connell prepares the rifle mold for casting. Film stills

and officially logged (through this Programme and consequently in military and state archives) by military historian Commandant Larry Scallan, James Stephens Barracks, Kilkenny, who writes:

> … it was the ordinary women who were the homemakers, who significantly supported the active service members by providing rations, accommodation and safe places for rest and recuperation for men in active service or on the run …. The image of the piece of culm is evocative of the period, roughly the same shape and size as the Mills Bomb, it had a strategic effect in a real sense. The purpose of the culm and the bomb might be very different, however both in their own way significantly assisted the fights for freedom.

The (unscripted) spoken monologues, by narrators Anna-Mae Treacy and Nancy Geoghegan, at the film's core constitute experience-oriented storytelling that inserts the female subjective voice – formerly disregarded – into state archives. This redresses a past in which "official" contributions were male- (and military-) dominated and women's contributions were met with suspicion. As the voice-overs end, the text emailed to me in October 2021 by Commandant Scallan adds a long overdue institutional acknowledgment of the systemic gender and rural biases that have marked official practices of memorialization and archive-making.

In this regard, it is important to note that already in the 1920s hundreds of women attempted to obtain a Military Service Pension in recognition of the part they played in the struggle for independence. Their claims were scrutinized before the Pensions Board, whose Assessors were mainly men. About the process, it has been said that "the challenge of verifying these claims came down to interpreting [the subjectivities of women's] recollections and attempting to distinguish truth from exaggeration, embellishment and downright fabrication."[9] Each claim entangled the claimant in a complex bureaucratic

9 https://militarypensions.wordpress.com/2022/12/02/release-13-the-contentious-case-of-mary-anne-murphy/. This comment is taken from the MSPC blog discussed below.

system that met their accounts of their supporting roles, for the most part, with suspicion and disbelief. To validate their claims, the women were asked to provide information about military operations they had not been privy to, showing how the process privileged (mostly) male/military knowledge over the knowledge of ordinary women. The result was a sizable number of rejected claims.

The validation of lay (rural) women's contributions to the war efforts only occurred when their personal testimonies were inscribed into the Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC) blog, started in 2014.[10] The blog includes "unheard voices and brings the historical narrative down to the personal, the rank-and-file Volunteer as well as the leadership figures. It illuminates the organisations, events, and individuals in their particular context."[11] While the blog came too late for many of the women concerned, the cataloguing and archiving of their post-Independence applications, original handwritten letters and recorded oral testimonies acknowledges and validates their contributions by entering them into the public record. This creates a legacy for all those women whose stories were disregarded; for their families, it validates their ancestor's involvement in Ireland's struggle for freedom, turning into history what up till then had been considered mere hearsay.

A Woman's Culm, which continues the blog's feminist work through a practice of artistic research, premiered at Coan Hall, a rural (parish) community hall in the upland of North Kilkenny, a coal-mining area along the Castlecomer Plateaux, in Autumn 2021.[12] It was projected onto a large wooden screen positioned high up on a stage more commonly used for amateur dramatics and music performances. The premiere was officially launched by the Green Party Minister of Heritage and attended by those directly involved in its making – an invited group of 30 people came with their extended families, joined by two local government representatives and three Members of the Irish Parliament

10 https://militarypensions.wordpress.com/about/.

11 https://militarypensions.wordpress.com/the-collection-2/.

12 Since then, *A Woman's Culm* has been recontextualized at the WRPN Women's International Film Festival (2022) and WorldFest Houston International Film Festival (2022) in the US, where it won Awards; at the Mannheim Arts and Film Festival (2022) in Germany, where it received an Honorable Mention, and at the Best Short Fest (2022) in Ontario, Canada, where it was a Semi-Finalist. It was also officially selected for the Amsterdam Lift-Off Festival (2022) in the Netherlands, and I presented it as part of the Rural Imaginations conference in Amsterdam in August 2022. In Ireland, it has been exhibited alongside sculptural elements made from the culm at the Limerick Museum and as part of Culture Night at Moneenroe Hall, Co. Kilkenny.

(T. D.'s).[13] The work was open to the public for the following two days, playing on a continuous loop from noon to 6 pm.

In what follows, I highlight two aesthetic aspects of *A Woman's Culm* that demonstrate the way it facilitates a different mode of (hi)story-telling connecting women's vital roles in national coal mining and war narratives. Firstly, I explore how the production limitations (*A Woman's Culm* was filmed during the Covid-19 pandemic) led to my aesthetic decision to visually reframe the subjects. Secondly, I examine how the exhibiting of the film in the rural context that inspired it created a space where new subjectivities could emerge. Overall, I suggest that *A Woman's Culm* contributes to making (hi)story-telling more inclusive by focusing on lay narratives (history with a small "h") and using creative modes of retelling that speak back to the dominant ways in which national histories have been narrated.

3 The Aesthetics of (Hi)story-Telling

During the making of *A Woman's Culm*, I placed a culm "bomb" in Anna-Mae's hands which acted as a prompt for my semi-structured questions and enabled the conversation to flow (Figure 13.4). As she sat, still, in her chair,



FIGURE 13.4 Anna-Mae Treacy holding a "culm bomb." Production still

13 A T. D. or Teachta Dála is a member of Daíl Éireann, the lower house of the Oireachtas (the Irish Parliament).

recounting her (hi)story, what she was saying was being translated through her hand gestures. Passing the culm from hand to hand, she pointed into the distance to where they "dug up the yellow clay in the field along" and paused as if holding on to certain words and memories. The material object provided an extra sensory element that enabled her to channel her memories by touch. The engagement with the culm "bomb" prompted a self-reflection, featured in the opening line of the film: "I was the only one to make culm in the house as me mother was terribly sick." Anna-Mae added to this an anecdote about the time "a piece of coal that was in it, damaged me finger" so that the "bone went dead …" while showing the camera her mutilated fingertip. As a result of the injury, she stopped making culm aged twelve.

The act of remembering evoked a sadness within her, she told me afterwards. She felt guilty for no longer being able to make culm, as this had been one of her household duties, whilst also feeling a sense of relief that she no longer had to endure the hardships associated with it. The material object touched the wounds of personal hardship and suffering, scratching the emotional surface to reveal the scars that remained. While this could be viewed as a cathartic experience, Anna-Mae's recounting also seemed to confirm that, in Nietzsche's words, "only that which never stops hurting stays in memory" (66). The repressed wound was as much about her physically damaged finger as about shame linked to class, gender, and rural biases. Shame was attached to being a member of the laboring class, with the men working deep below the ground in the coal-mining industry, in hazardous and unsanitary conditions, having limited education, suffering poor health, and being stigmatized by society – and the women experiencing similar conditions in and around the home.

Anna-Mae's and Nancy's agreement to be filmed – at 100 and 80 years of age respectively during the Covid-19 pandemic – meant that they were both willing to risk their health and well-being to destigmatize coal mining as a solely male/inferior labor identity by telling their (hi)stories from an "inside" empirical perspective. While they do not explicitly talk about shame, it is evoked through their descriptions as they seize the opportunity to talk about the day-to-day hardships involved in the coal-mining industry to demystify the work involved, and seek a better understanding and (perhaps) appreciation.

With no union representation or insurance backup, men were the sole wage earners; their economic value was measured by the ton. They were rewarded not by the number of hours or hard labor it took to "work-out" the coal but by the amount of coal they yielded. The pressures imposed on rural women in their supporting roles was as ongoing as for the men: women and girls were expected to maintain a clean and sanitary house, keep the family healthy and provide clean clothes. This required collecting water from the well, having a

fire to heat it, washing the dirty clothes by hand, and drying them by the fire – tasks that were valued by the social and moral standards of having a "good" home, being a "good" wife, a "good" woman/sister/mother and daughter. When Nancy says: "I would bring in a half a bucket, 'cause I wasn't able to bring a full bucket," she implies she was too young and not strong enough to carry a full load. She recounts: "that was our chore, to 'work' the culm, and sometimes we didn't want to do it either," adding after a pause, "as children we just wanted to play." Her words and tone evoke sadness and embarrassment regarding a loss of childhood freedom and innocence at a time when being a "good" child meant she too had to work hard in the home.

The shame imposed on coal-mining peoples and places came from an "outside" perspective that implied a geographical, class, and gender hierarchy. A valuated distinction was created between those who worked above ground – who had sanitation, indoor running water and electricity (more associated with urban than rural areas) – and those who worked or supported work below ground, who did not have such infrastructures. This distinction downplayed the vital contribution made by these rural men, women, and children to the modernizing and globalizing project – which was dependent on coal and coke to smelt steel. Moreover, while miners were acknowledged (albeit through a stereotypical visual representation of dirty black faces, hands, and clothes) in the public sphere, in national archives and narratives, the supporting work done by rural women and children to maintain the home went wholly unacknowledged.

In *A Woman's Culm*, the sensory affordances mediated through the material object of the culm "bomb" give voice to muted events from the past in the present. The culm – an exact fit for the hands of its maker – embeds a memory trace regarding who made it and the circumstances under which it was made (Figure 13.4). As a mnemonic device, it prompted the elderly women to tell their own (hi)stories, which added a spectral trace that also honored their mothers and grandmothers. Anna-Mae, followed by Nancy, recounted stories about her mother and grandmother teaching her to make culm. Through the holding of the culm and the perspectival memories this evoked, in the manner of an alternative archive, they reached into the past to make visible the women whose labor has been forgotten, disregarded, and erased by the urban-centric patriarchal logics governing the epistemological practices of Ireland's national archives.

Instead of presenting Anna-Mae's story using the conventions of the face-to-camera documentary style (initially decided upon due to the restrictions of filming during Covid–19), I chose to refocus my gaze from her face onto her hands. Along with the material prompt of the culm "bomb" and its ability to

evoke memories, emotions, and spectral traces from the past, the unscripted (hi)stories provided by the interviewees became the "material" that guided the aesthetic choices made in the editing process. The reframing, away from the individual face to the hands, subverts a more normative documentary style and enables the story to become pluralized. While retaining a recognizable link to a specific rural context through the culm, this at the same time broadens Anna-Mae's and Nancy's stories into stories about women's labor and its underrepresentation in or exclusion from dominant histories across the world.

Secondly, *A Woman's Culm* was filmed in the rural upland coal-mining area of The Castlecomer Plateaux. Its production sites spanned Co. Kilkenny, Co. Carlow, and Co. Laois: we filmed in the two women's homes; at the side of a road where there was a working "culm crusher"[14] (Figure 13.5); in a pre-famine house where the culm was mixed ("danced" on) an original flagstone floor (Figure 13.6) and molded by hand to create "culm bombs" (Figures 13.2a–e); in my studio where I sculpted the culm rifles (Figures 13.3a–b); and on my land where the culm fire was lit (Figure 13.1). The collaborative processes and socially engaged relations necessary to produce the film were established remotely through telephone conversations and outdoor socially distanced meetings in line with Covid-19 regulations. This created new rural connections and collaborations amongst participants and allowed the local historical narrative to be seen



FIGURE 13.5 "Culm crusher" with horse. Film still

14 "Culm crushers" are large grinding stones hewn by limestone or granite, they were drawn in a circular orbit by a horse, pony or donkey. As remnants of the nineteenth-century coal mining industry these were communally erected on the roadside near a stream or river and regularly used by men (and horses or donkeys) to crush large quantities of culm.



FIGURE 13.6 Three women "dancing the culm." Film still

through a new lens. The production of a 30-second clip, for example, required the participation of ten (male) farmers, who came from three nearby counties. At the side of a road, a dray horse was yoked to a "culm-crusher" (Figure 13.5), with the horse led by one man by the halter, while another man was behind her holding long training reins and a third man shoveled the dry culm ingredients under the grinding stone for crushing. As Nancy recalled, with a laugh: "The men used to get the horses to do it, but the horses couldn't make the culm." By this, she indicates that the women were the real workhorses.

Showing the film, including this scene, in the local rural context created a meeting ground where gender disparities could be acknowledged and new rural subjectivities could emerge. The atmosphere in the large hall became emotionally charged during the premiere and over the two following days, as the two women's personal (hi)stories evoked sorrowful emotions. Even some of the men had tears welling in their eyes as they explained to me how their mother's hard labor had gone unacknowledged. These emotions revealed what could be described as a repressed grief, provoked in part by the fragility of the women's voices and the beauty found (by the camera) in the women's aged hard-worked hands – writ large across the twenty-foot-wide screen. The line between absence and presence, invisibility and visibility, silence and audibility was blurred as the women reinserted themselves into their own, the region's, and the nation's (hi)story. Waves of pride became evident, too, as the rural audience, mostly though not exclusively connected to the coal-mining industry or Ireland's War of Independence, reclaimed this history as theirs. In this way, the film's accumulation of experiences offered a recuperation of overlooked (hi) stories that went beyond the individual, singular voice.

Expanding the conversation beyond those directly involved in its production was part of the project's aim, necessary for it to act as a springboard to

(re)conceptualizing the future. During the exhibition, conversations unfolded, many of which I was part of, that centered around female intergenerational knowledge and its legacy: about women's and children's labor; gender roles; feminism; resilience; coal-mining practices; the climate crisis; fuel poverty; environmental policy; post-industrial identity; green transitioning; and more, with all these issues placed in the rural context. However, this was not an exercise in nostalgia. In fact, there was a unanimous call not to return to the making of culm – to a time when it was the only (labor-intensive) means to heat the house, boil water, wash, dry clothes, and cook. These conversations also wove themselves into discussions about the global need to transition away from fossil fuel extraction and move towards greener forms of energy – discussions complicated by the region's continuing involvement in farming practices relying on petrochemicals. Even though no clear-cut, short-term answers emerged, raising questions with implications beyond the past or the local enabled the audiences to participate and articulate the ambiguities of rural living openly.

The last (spoken) word in *A Woman's Culm* is given to Nancy, who says: "That's the end of it now." As she repositions a metal bucket between her feet and, having scraped out the remaining culm mix, proceeds to clean her hands by rubbing them across each other, we hear the "clinks" of debris hitting the hollow bottom as the bucket becomes like an echo chamber of the past in the present (Figure 13.7). The uncomfortable "silences" that follow each "clink" allow the audience to reflect on, for instance, the devastating (rural) extractive processes that have contributed to the global climate crisis, the end of the (local) coal-mining industry that afforded a labor identity to those involved



FIGURE 13.7 Nancy cleans her hands after demonstrating her two-hand method of making culm. Film still

and the socio-economic crisis that emerged in its wake; and the geopolitical/geo-capitalist wars that continue to rage around the world. As sparks fly across the picture frame, we see the three culm rifles slowly burn (Figure 13.1) and disintegrate, creating a symbolic "feeding back" to the land, a land once colonized and fought for. This scene reminds us of the burial rite "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dirt to dirt," offering hope of, if not resurrection, then at least a chance of redemption – a chance not to make the same mistakes again and rewrite (for) the future.

In *A Woman's Culm*, then, the two elderly women practice experience-oriented storytelling that allows them to speak back to the mechanisms of oppression that have silenced rural women (and children) and erased their labor from both military and coal-mining narratives. By metaphorically relating the culm (ball) to the Mills Bomb and women's hands to the Lee Enfield rifle, the measure of their contribution is manifested as embedding resilience, self-sustainability, and commemoration alike. This artwork – or, rather, the work it does – actively redistributes the regime of the sensible, the order of what is seen/not seen, heard/not heard, remembered/not remembered, in its attempt to redress past wrongs and reveal persistent blind spots. In *A Woman's Culm*, the female voices and the female-forged culm assert themselves as alternative archives, displacing the dominant ways in which Irish national history has been narrated. Returning the artwork to the sites and contexts from which it emerged, moreover, creates a public space in which an affective politics of memory can be practiced by subjects usually excluded from such politics.

This chapter has highlighted the importance of creating new narratives, oral, written, and visual, that open out the archive to include new voices and new modes of re-telling history; new narratives that rectify the historical invisibility and silencing of women and of the rural in ways that can be translated across contexts. In its attempt to reimagine the rural, *A Woman's Culm* speaks back to what Rancière calls "mute surfaces" (11). Doing so opens up a context in which the cultural politics of identity, place, gender, and community, of connection and disconnection, can be situated. The mute surface is transformed into a "place" where individuals can, not only redistribute and revaluate everyday rural histories and knowledge from a bottom-up, inside-out, embodied perspective but to make these histories and knowledge resound in and beyond the local or national context. It imbricates the historical, social, the political, and the economic and provides a new rural feminist imaginary for the past, present, and future.

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PART 3

(*De*)*Romanticized Rurals*

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CHAPTER 14

#COTTAGECORE: Online Rural and Climate Imaginaries

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Abstract

This chapter explores Cottagecore as an online aesthetic and cultural phenomenon romanticizing rural life. By analyzing its representation of rurality, sustainability, and nostalgia, the chapter investigates how Cottagecore both reflects and reshapes contemporary desires for simplicity in the face of urban and environmental anxieties, and, from 2019 to 2022, the Covid-19 pandemic. Through critically examining Cottagecore's representations and speculative reinterpretations of life in the countryside, this study contributes to broader discussions on rural imaginaries, offering insights into how digital platforms mediate visions of rural futures.

1 Exploring Cottagecore

Cottagecore is an online romanticization of Western countryside living. The interior design blog The Spruce describes it as "an idealized back-to-nature concept of simpler times, its romanticized aesthetics center on natural materials, wholesome pastimes, handmade crafts, homemade baked goods, gardening, and other hallmarks of bucolic domesticity" (Hohenadel). This contemporary vision of rurality draws from the Eurocentric genre of the rural idyll, in which the countryside "sustains a longstanding promise of a return to a stable, conservative normativity in the face of the supposedly unstable conditions of globalized urban life and subjectivity" (Valdés-Olmos 6). Rurality becomes synonymous with "the good old days" of close-knit communities and taking refuge in nature (Williams).

Cottagecore content on social media includes montages featuring countryside dwellings and activities like gardening and cooking, performed to the sound of soft classical music to convey a sense of slowness. Some people curate images from advertisements and films that capture the aesthetic and share them online (Giolo and Berghman). Such images may also be staged, for example by taking selfies in urban parks framed to look like open fields

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or by sharing photos of an apartment decorated like a countryside dwelling. Blogs teach their readers how to adopt a Cottagecore style, as illustrated by articles like "29 Cottagecore Fashion Brands to Get in on Those Pastoral Vibes" (Adhav). Popular artists like Taylor Swift, specifically her 2020 album *Folklore*, have catapulted the aesthetic into the mainstream (Valdés-Olmos 5).

Cottagecore is not about documenting life in the countryside, as most of those engaging with the aesthetic "have never lived in a countryside cottage, milked a cow, raised herbs or subsisted off the land without electricity and running water" (Ryan and Tileva 166). In this sense, Cottagecore differs from the content created by "off the grid" and rural social media influencers who showcase their lives in the countryside (Larsson and Ingridsdotter; Hollowood; Li). Although such influencers do not offer an unmediated window onto rurality and may engage in rural romanticization and the perpetuation of a cult of domesticity for rural women (Shao, in this volume), they aim to familiarize their audiences with rural realities.

Cottagecore's popularity peaked in 2020, when, during the Covid-19 pandemic, it became a sought-after form of "armchair countryside" (Bunce). This term captures how many urbanites experience the countryside at a distance, through advertisements, television, tourism brochures, rustic decorative styles, and now social media. During lockdowns, Cottagecore offered escapism for people living in cities and dealing with the effects of "neoliberalism, homogenization, austerity, and the anxiety brought on by climate change" (McGrath 70). In "the wake of such gloomy prospects," Cooksey also explains, "many young people have replaced fantasies of flashy, consumptive lifestyles with a romanticized vision of agrarian life known as 'Cottagecore,' dreaming of finding a stable microclimate in which they can own a house, grow their own food, and live a happy life" (n. pag.). In addition to being a rural imaginary, then, Cottagecore is also a climate and "sustainable lifestyle imaginary," compatible with approaches "found in the growing popularity of movements for sustainable consumption, localism and more recently 'slowness'" (Levy and Spicer 665). The aesthetic comprises "an acknowledgement that we could live in a better world" (Medhurst n. pag.).

In this chapter, we explore Cottagecore as speculative play in times of the generalized climate anxiety of "Anthropocene horror" (Clark). What pastoral fantasies and visions of the countryside (re)emerge in times of climate and social crisis? What imaginaries for living differently with nature are staged in Cottagecore? And how do these imaginaries compare to the apocalyptic scenarios of climate fiction novels and films? Taking Cottagecore seriously responds to a need to expand the imagination around the climate crisis and to understand how young people orient themselves towards the future and the

place of the rural in it within this imagination (Spyrou et al.). This requires an investigation into popular media, including social media, which have a "powerful influence on the way we view and treat our cultural landscapes, both urban and rural" (Bunce 2). For us, looking at Cottagecore in social media means probing how such platforms consider the rural as a site for imagined futures, characterized by a hopefulness that contrasts with dominant feelings of precarity and renditions of apocalyptic climate futures.

An exploration of Cottagecore in times of Anthropocene horror calls for reflexivity about the legacies that the idyll, as a "genre of rurality," reproduces (Valdés-Olmos 2) and about who and what is excluded from such legacies. People outside whiteness and heteronormativity have been traditionally left out of renditions of the rural idyll in popular media, as have the poor. Such "cultural constructions of rurality not only appear to render the identities of these individuals and groups as other but can also act to marginalize the people concerned" (Cloke and Little 1). Cottagecore deviates from heteronormativity by focusing almost exclusively on women, as we show in the next section, but it remains dominated by whiteness. The scenes that Cottagecore draws from are interconnected with genealogies of settler colonialism that tend to edit out its devasting effects (Gore) and thus "blatantly romanticiz[e] colonialism" (Mercado). Davies and Taylor, moreover, link the longing for countryside experiences during and after the Covid-19 pandemic with a new type of environmentalism of the rich that advocates "the deployment of private capital in pursuit of elite visions of 'nature,' 'wildernesses,' and a de-commodified existence" (n. pag.), which negatively affect already established communities.

We study Cottagecore visions of rurality and climate futures through an analysis of the 200 top-ranked images from Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and Google Images tagged with Cottagecore – 800 images in total. The methodology combines automated image analysis with participatory research and "evocative prompt design" (Niederer and Colombo 2024). We started by using the Memespector, a tool developed by Jason Chao that employs computer vision to automatically label features in the Cottagecore image collection, such as objects, faces, and backgrounds. Then, we visualized the results of the automated labeling as "computer vision networks" (Niederer and Colombo 2019; Omena et al.) with two types of nodes: images and labels. In these networks, images with the same label (e.g., "clothes") are clustered together, enabling a form of distant reading. We created one network per platform (Instagram, Facebook, Google Images, and Reddit) and asked participants to annotate them. They added labels such as "fantasy photoshoot" and "feminine energy." Lastly, with the participants, we created composite images (Figure 14.1), a

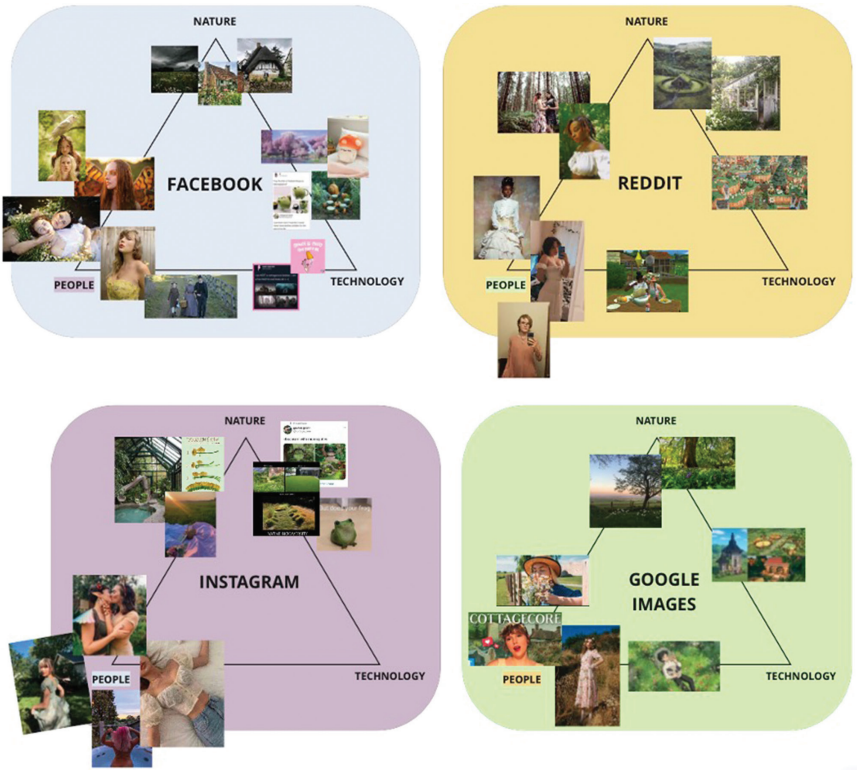


FIGURE 14.1 Composite images of emblematic cottagecore pictures from four datasets arranged around three themes

technique that relies on assembling emblematic images that best represent recurring narratives within image collections.

In the composite images, social media content is organized around three themes that emerged during the collective exploration of the images. In the lower-left corner are images featuring people, mostly young white women posing in solitude or as romantic partners. The presence of Taylor Swift in both Facebook's and Google's top results is worth noting; as mentioned earlier, she helped popularize the aesthetic. These images, we argue, privilege an aesthetic of isolation that excludes the notions of community vital to imagining viable climate futures. Nature in Cottagecore tends to be homogeneous, gentle, and predictable. As seen on the top side of the composite images, nature means green fields reminiscent of the British countryside, wildflowers, spring- or summer-time weather, and elegant gardens. These visions of nature as a gentle setting render invisible the urgent need to reconceptualize life in a changing climate. Cottagecore content also features objects and non-human beings: from flowy dresses, flowers, cottages, and teapots to birds, butterflies, and frogs.

It excludes digital technology, or any type of machinery associated with agrarian life, reinforcing the idea of the rural as a place outside of time while also promoting a sustainable lifestyle as one connected not to labor but to owning and consuming the "right" things. We illustrate this telling omission by leaving empty the space surrounding the word "technology" in the lower-right corner of the composite images.

We develop our critique of Cottagecore through close reading and by creating new content that reimagines the aesthetic, engaging in a speculative exercise with both its potential and shortcomings. To create new content, we used the generative AI tool Midjourney and engaged in "evocative prompting" (Niederer and Colombo 2024). Prompting means using natural language to describe a desired visual output; one could, for example, use Midjourney to generate images indistinguishable from existing popular Cottagecore content. Evocative prompting, in contrast, repurposes generative AI as a tool for thinking through image-making and, in our case, engaging in speculative "what if" work (Gümüsay and Reinecke) that offers alternative views of Cottagecore, both conceptually and by departing from its typical techniques of representation. The technique delegates agency to the tool by leaving prompts ambiguous. For example, by including the word "women" without specifying age or ethnicity, we leave it up the training and moderation embedded in Midjourney to fill in the gaps.

The resulting new images "become visual prompts for (human) speculation or reflection" (Niederer and Colombo 2024). Starting with a visual prompt to elicit imagination is a practice already employed in art teachings (Heijnen and Bremmer), design (Peters et al.; Kwiatkowska et al.), education (Veraksa et al.; Restelli), and psychology (Murray; Bessell et al.). This approach also aligns with work treating rural imaginaries as assemblages of ideas and materialities open for re-imagination. The rural idyll has been reinvented, for example, in depictions of rural America as a queer space (Keller) and in anti-idyllic horror cinema (Hutchings; McCollum; Bell).

We organized our analysis of existing Cottagecore content and visual prompts into three sections and a conclusion. The first section, Women Sitting Together, reflects on Cottagecore as a speculative rural setting mostly inhabited by (young, white, able-bodied) women, in which domestic labor is performed outside heteronormative and capitalist settings. Work is done for one's own pleasure and benefit, and with a sense of slowness, contrasting both with traditional rural domestic labor regimes and with anxieties about struggling for survival in current and imagined worlds devastated by climate and social crisis. Cottagecore content, however, also seems to endorse capitalism's tendency to individuate, depicting young women mostly by themselves. We counter this individualizing aspect of Cottagecore content by

designing prompts to produce imagery featuring groups of women. What could Cottagecore look like if it emphasized the communal living and collective action often highlighted as necessary in literature about potential sustainable lives?

The second section, (Un)gentle Nature, reflects on (and challenges) Cottagecore's depiction of exclusively gentle landscapes, where climate, animals, and vegetable life are always amenable to human needs, feeding into idyllic visions of the countryside as an escape for privileged urban dwellers in times of crisis. We use Midjourney to create new images that expand the frame to include Cottagecore-style dwellings in landscapes already affected by flooding, while retaining a sense of gentleness. Can we envision adapting to worlds affected by climate change beyond tropes of social upheaval? The third section, The Things of Cottagecore, reflects on the consumerist aspect of the aesthetic, where household items, clothes, buildings, and plants and animals become part of Cottagecore's must-haves. To further reflect on Cottagecore's objectification of nature and its consumerism, we generate new images that include objects often left out of the frame, such as mobile phones, commercial refrigerators, and rifles, deviating from the trope that the rural exists outside of the present time and excludes (modern) technology.

This speculative exercise with Cottagecore is part of our continued interest in developing visual methodologies that repurpose computational techniques to explore climate imaginaries online. In previous projects, we have, for example, trained machine learning algorithms using climate fiction novels and prompted them to produce new narratives about possible futures. The analytical findings and texts were used to create audio stories and tarot cards to discuss climate change (Brown). Another example is a speculative landscape workshop by Carlo De Gaetano and Andy Dockett on future visions of the Netherlands and Italy affected by sea rise levels and on how visualizing such scenes can help people start conversations about the future of their hometowns.[1]

2 Women Sitting Together

Cottagecore content stages fantasies predominantly inhabited by white women. Data from other platforms than the ones we are looking at here underline this as a problem with the aesthetic, as it reiterates the marginalization of

1 https://ariastest.humanities.uva.nl/projects/it-happened-tomorrow.

rural others (Kay and Wood 5). Some of the content in our dataset addresses this issue directly. A Facebook image, for example, shows a woman wearing a hijab, picnicking in the countryside. The caption reads, "Hijabi Cottagecore for the timeline because Muslim women do not get enough visibility." Queerness has a more prominent place in the Cottagecore aesthetic, which is seen as presenting "a constructed performance of rurality that combines frontier ways of life (like farming and tending to animals) with modern, Sapphic elements, including the online medium as the stage of performance" (Ryan and Tileva 171). Among the images in the dataset styled like fantasy photoshoots is one of two characters from the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Willow and her girlfriend, dressed in fantasy-inspired dresses. Medhurst argues that Cottagecore challenges the idea that queerness is exclusively an urban phenomenon, thus conversing with projects such as Landykes lesbian communes and eco-feminist literature in envisioning "nature-centered, post-patriarchal futures" (Harker 144).

Ease and rest emerge as prevalent themes. In Cottagecore, women drink tea, garden, read in the forest, walk through nature, bathe in rivers, and sleep on the grass. Notably, images in the dataset allude to domestic work (clothes hanging outside to dry, baked bread and pie appearing, as well as embroidering) without showing people actually performing such tasks. Cottagecore thus allows people to imagine a return to a rural lifestyle where domesticity is restful rather than exhausting, and there is no pollution or heteronormativity: "what if we could go back to a time before the planet was ravaged by industry, except with added protections for marginalized queer communities? What if we all lived like trad wives, minus the husbands?" (Barbeau et al. 24). "Trad wives" is short for "traditional wives," who feature in another online lifestyle imaginary known as "Trad-life" presenting a rural idyll in which conservative family structures remain central (O'Luanaigh). The politics of Cottagecore and trad-life are not identical. Where Trad-life "wants people to return to the past" of traditional patriarchy, Cottagecore wants people to use elements of the past to "evolve into a new future" (Fluently Forward n. pag.).

The resurgence of domesticity in Cottagecore, we argue, entails a rejection of the anxiety and exhaustion associated with present and future scenarios of economic and environmental collapse – people are "so exhausted by capitalism that we've become fascinated with any alternative, and so our generational yearning for a beautiful, agricultural, Cottagecore existence actually represents our desire to live out our deepest socialist fantasies through community building, resource sharing, and an anarchical, sustainable lifestyle" (Retta n. pag.). This vision stands out amongst the abundant post-apocalyptic societies of climate fiction, often ruled by violent groups of men who reduce

women to possessions and resources for repopulation. In these imagined societies, nature is conceived as aggressive rather than as nurturing, and there is no rest, only struggle, as poignantly shown in the television series *The Walking Dead*, where an idyllic sojourn on a farm is short-lived.

Even if orienting themselves to a utopian future, the restful visions of Cottagecore cannot simply be detangled from the cultural materials from which they draw. As noted, Cottagecore's fantasies tend to disregard the violent colonial histories and class struggles associated with the rural idyll. Scenes depicting women leisurely picnicking in the countryside, dressed like characters from novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, evoke elites treating the countryside as playground and the invisible labor of those tending to their needs. The romanticization of the rural was never shared by all: "to certain people, [the pastoral idyll] never really promised comfort to begin with but rather a differentially troubling experience" (Valdés-Olmos 24). As Harper Klotz puts it, those "who disapprove of Cottagecore doubt that fans of the aesthetic realize the true hardships of rural life. Visuals tend to be very polished and beautiful, failing to acknowledge how messy life in nature can truly be" (n. pag.).

To these by now familiar critiques of Cottagecore, we add another perspective aimed at its privileging of an aesthetic of isolation. Traditionally, the notion of community has been part of the rural idyll, which tends to present close-knit village communities as an antidote to the loneliness of urbanites. Cottagecore deviates, at least in our dataset, from such communal visions. Social media images tend to feature only one woman in a peaceful natural landscape. A similar preference for isolation is found in the posts by "off the grid" content creators, who frame their cabins and lands as situated away from everything and everyone (Larsson and Ingridsdotter). The image of the countryside as a place for escaping society and social responsibility also resonates in articles about how "many people dream of living alone in a cottage in the forest, away from the hustle and bustle of the city" (Goh n. pag.). It also appears in billionaires' doom fantasies of retreating to private bunkers located in the countryside, and in the aesthetic of tourist photography in which people visiting natural landmarks strive to make it look like they had the location to themselves. Climate future scenarios, especially those presenting post-apocalyptic visions, privilege lone heroes or small tribes as well, often in conflict with others.

Cottagecore's apparent rejection of community contrasts with the importance assigned to community in sustainability imaginaries. Studying recent American, Canadian, British, and German near-future novels "sheds light on those aspects best suited for effecting behavioral change in recipients' minds:

exemplary ecologically sustainable characters and actions, companion quests, cooperative communities, sources of epistemological innovation and spiritual resilience, and an ethics and aesthetics of repair" (Mackenthun n. pag.). We challenged the tendency for Cottagecore to be a fantasy of isolation by infusing the aesthetic with a sense of community and asking how this may spark different reflections about desirable sustainable futures.

Designing a prompt, in this context, involved describing Cottagecore imagery in ways that would recreate its generic look and feel while adding new elements evocative of community – in this case, groups of women. To aid in designing the prompts, we combined the insights gained from the analysis of the social media images with results from ChatGPT 3 when asked to define Cottagecore. ChatGPT provided examples of quintessential Cottagecore scenes and activities, including picnics, gardening, baking, knitting, and foraging. It also highlighted recurring values and moods associated with the genre, such as simplicity, sustainability, a deep connection with nature, a sense of warmth, comfort, and nostalgia, and a desire to escape the pressures of modern life. ChatGPT was also important for identifying details like the cameras, lenses, and filters most used by Cottagecore enthusiasts and influencers, namely vintage film cameras that produce soft and grainy qualities in photographs (the Canon AE-1, Olympus OM-1, and Pentax K1000). Additionally, results mentioned popular digital cameras and suggested prime lenses with wider apertures to enhance the vintage and dreamy aesthetic (the Helios 44–2, which creates swirly bokeh lens effects, or the Canon FD 50mm f/1.4). Soft focus filters, diffusion filters, and vintage-inspired filters were also mentioned as tools to achieve a whimsical and nostalgic feel in Cottagecore photography.

The Midjourney-generated images seen in Figure 14.2 are both reminiscent of and different from the Cottagecore content already circulating online. In images 14.2i and 14.2j, rather than Cottagecore's explicit focus on lone young women, we see a group of elderly women knitting together. These images retain a sense of easiness and cosiness in a domesticity now performed not in isolation but community, enabling speculation, for example, about new types of intergenerational living and resource-sharing, and potentially bringing Cottagecore closer to a reimagined version of eco-feminist communities. Images 14.2c, 14.2d, and 14.2e show the gardening tasks performed by individual women in Cottagecore content as group endeavors. In this reimagined rural idyll, notably, labor is explicitly present rather than only insinuated.



FIGURE 14.2A–J Midjourney-generated images



FIGURE 14.2A–J Midjourney-generated images (*Cont.*)

When producing these images, Midjourney is not simply recombining existing online images, but generating new ones based on complex pattern recognition in the existing training dataset, made up of billions of online images and their labels. Repurposing the tool to further de-familiarize the Cottagecore aesthetic is thus also a way to engage with generative AI as a site where rural imaginaries are captured and can be replicated or perhaps subverted. Can these tools, as they extend beyond our Cottagecore dataset, present unexpected or fringed visions of the rural idyll? To test this, we used the term "women" in the prompts and left the tool to make its own choices in terms of ethnicity. We also did not specify the type of dress, beyond referring to Cottagecore broadly. While the resulting images do show a somewhat greater diversity in the women depicted, both in terms of apparent ethnicity and age, they also effectively show the dominance of Western aesthetic repositories and highlight ChatGPT's and Midjourney's inability to interrupt them critically.

3 (Un)gentle Nature

Four major climate imaginaries compete in contemporary public discourse: climate apocalypse, fossil fuels forever, techno-market solutions, and sustainable lifestyles (Levy and Spicer). The latter "revolves around the notion of degrowth and propagates minimalism and restraint – thus offering an optimistic, or more hopeful, outlook on the future while at the same time rejecting the technological optimism of green tech" (Benner et al. 12). Sustainable lifestyle imaginaries depict less materialistic and simpler lives, "in line with a radical reinterpretation of what constitutes a good life" (Benner et al. 13). Cottagecore, as we have argued, is a sustainable lifestyle that draws from the rural idyll and thematizes going "back to nature" to achieve a simpler and more authentic life. In this section, we inquire into the type of nature that Cottagecore imagery suggests is involved in such a return.

Larsson and Ingridsdotter studied Swedish "off the grid" social media personalities who left the city for the Swedish northern lands to pursue a life without modern infrastructure. In "off the grid" imaginaries, depriving oneself of comforts such as running water and heating becomes a pathway towards connection, authenticity, and healing. The Swedish influencers document, for example, how they build a cabin from scratch. In such imaginaries, in which "rejecting certain materialities has become a class signifier," aesthetic choices reinforce an imagination of empty wilderness, despite these influencers actually "liv[ing] with neighbors within a walking distance" (Larsson and Ingridsdotter 47, 58). The pretence of isolation is designed to reinforce the way in which, in "off the grid" content, "nature and rurality can be perceived as enchanted, in contrast to urbanity that instead tends to be seen as a source of alienation and disenchantment" (Larsson and Ingridsdotter 51). The framing of the northern lands and nature as wild, empty, magical places open for settlement and offering the possibility of a frontier lifestyle is predicated on a settler-colonial imagination that has historically displaced and eradicated Indigenous people on a mass scale. In this regard, Larsson and Ingridsdotter specifically note how ideas about an empty Swedish wilderness ignore and promote the erasure of the history of Sumi communities.

Cottagecore's adherence to the rural idyll and its conception of nature as there for troubled city dwellers to discover and cultivate has also been seen as providing a platform for the romanticization of colonialism (Gore). Yet Cottagecore's depiction of nature does differ from the still-to-be-tamed wilderness depicted in "off the grid" content. Of the 800 Cottagecore images evaluated across all platforms and labeled using the Memespector tool, 50.5% showed images of "plants," 24.8% showed "grass," 22.3% showed "trees," and 18%

showed "sky." With 24% of the images showing "font," meaning some caption or text-based element, usually in a meme format, keywords and phrases tended to be "happy," "building," "flower," "people in nature," "window," "art," "wood," "sleeve," "organism," "house," and "natural landscape." These data reflect Cottagecore's thematic preoccupation with the natural world as tame and gentle, and its highlighting of idealized, peaceful places to live, devoid of urbanity. In this vision, nature is always welcoming and healing to humans. Rather than rugged wilderness spaces, it comprises gardens with manicured grasses and wildflowers, constructed fields, and typical English countryside dwellings (e.g., thatched cottages).

Figures 14.3 and 14.4 are examples of social media posts in which a person collects images matching their vision for the Cottagecore aesthetic. They show, respectively, gardens with moon gates, which are free-standing portals made of stones or bricks popular in British and North American gardens, and a screenshot



FIGURE 14.3 Cottagecore aesthetic featuring gardens with moon gates



FIGURE 14.4 Cottagecore aesthetic consisting of a screenshot from Animal Crossing: New Horizons

from the game Animal Crossing: New Horizons. Numerous world-building games have developed guidelines for players to design what constitutes a Cottagecore dwelling and the nature around it. Recommended features include designed rock pathways, secret hideaways in nature to be used as reading nooks, woodland picnics, shrubs, log furniture, and leaf piles (Zaidi). Although much of Cottagecore is purportedly inspired by English landscapes, in reality, in England, "the countryside is primarily a food factory, where a small fraction of the rural population works hard to make profits for an even smaller group of rich landowners. Wildlife is in freefall: in much of rural England you would struggle to hear a skylark, while more than 98% of traditional hay meadows have been destroyed, and more than 250,000 miles of hedgerow lost since the second world war" (Moss n. pag.).

There are abundant sources in popular media that imagine the world's end and social collapse after natural disasters. Often, cities are buried under snow or submerged in water, while forests burn, lands dry up, and people fight for resources. These "violent imaginaries of future climate change are not only particularly 'sticky' they are also highly mobile – traveling between the fields of science, popular culture, and politics" (Benner et al. 6). Visions of community resilience and enjoyment amidst climate change are scarce. From this perspective, Cottagecore's gentle vision of nature invites yet another critique. As a sustainability imaginary, Cottagecore depicts people already inhabiting idealized natural settings devoid of challenging weather patterns. Is there space in the rural idyll for resilience? We attempted to answer this question by introducing elements from other climate imaginaries into the Cottagecore aesthetic during a second prompting exercise,

which aimed to envision how it might capture the potential consequences of changing climate, such as climate-induced migration or flooding.

Figure 14.5 includes the results of prompting Midjourney to create images that combine elements associated with Cottagecore with flooded landscapes. Introducing the term "flooded" into the prompt was designed to challenge the gentleness of the Cottagecore landscape while avoiding falling into disaster movie tropes in which natural disaster invariably leads to social crisis. We also kept in the prompt the sense of community developed in the previous section by not focusing only on individual dwellings. For example, Figure 14.6 shows the development of a Cottagecore community centered around a dam acting as a protective barrier against rising sea levels. Like the worlds designed by players in the Animal Crossing game, this image includes designed pathways surrounding gardens. There are women herding sheep in the dam's shadow and



FIGURE 14.5 Midjourney-generated images associating Cottagecore with flooding



FIGURE 14.5 Midjourney-generated images associating Cottagecore with flooding (*Cont.*)



FIGURE 14.6 Midjourney-generated image of Cottagecore community centered around a dam

people tending to a vertical garden. In Figure 14.7, flooding seems normal rather than an emergency for this rural community, which has built its life around the water. The prompt, for example, included Cottagecore's tendency to depict picnics, generating an image of a picnic on an inflatable vintage boat. Such images integrate climate change into Cottagecore and transform its depiction of nature from a perennially calm realm to one that may undergo rapid change, while portraying such change as potentially inhabitable by resilient communities.



FIGURE 14.7 Midjourney-generated image of flooded rural community

4 Cottagecore's "Things"

Cottagecore is performed online mainly by collecting images of household objects, landscapes, clothes, houses, and anything else that conveys the desired feeling and atmosphere associated with the aesthetic. Figure 14.8 is a



FIGURE 14.8 Starter pack meme about Cottagecore

"starter pack meme" about Cottagecore found in the dataset. The meme format illustrates "the archetype of a celebrity, company or subculture through a recommended selection of fashion articles, multimedia, and other consumer products" (Know Your Meme). It breaks Cottagecore's vision of rurality into its most basic components by including interior design objects such as ceramics, clothing, and houseware decorated with floral designs (florals appeared in 23.5% of the images collected). Cats, frogs, deer, and foraged berries also fit the aesthetic. The line between nature appreciation and commodification in Cottagecore is thin, highlighting a more generalized tension between sustainable lifestyles and consumerism: it "is ironic that fast fashion, an industry especially detrimental to the natural environment, is profiting from an aesthetic promoting slow living and anti-consumerism" (Nicole).

Technologies such as laptops and smartphones and the tractors, harvesters, hunting gear, and irrigators that turn land into a productive space are not depicted in Cottagecore content. Rurality comes forth as idyllic and situated outside of current times, even if engaging with Cottagecore and creating content requires networked media. The last prompting exercise we undertook aimed to defamiliarize this aspect of Cottagecore by critically examining the place of technology in Cottagecore visions of returning to more primordial relationships with nature. We grouped the results of these prompts in Figure 14.9. One of the images (Figure 14.10) invites the question of who would assume the responsibility of hunting for game in Cottagecore fantasies, considering that this would likely be part of a self-sufficient lifestyle. With this image, we ask what a Cottagecore woman would look like if she engaged in a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. The prompt described, without ambivalence, a situation that would culminate in killing. However, Midjourney's moderation of violence resulted

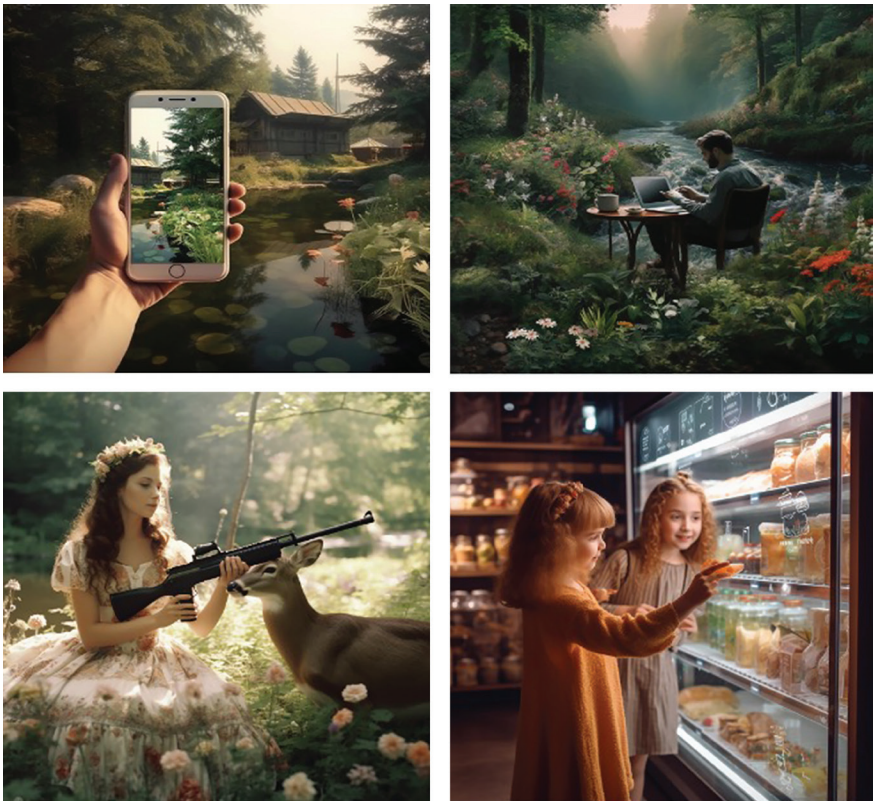


FIGURE 14.9 Midjourney-generated images of Cottagecore incorporating technology



FIGURE 14.10 Midjourney-generated image of Cottagecore hunter-gatherer

in something different: the girl shown with a rifle is not hunting but protecting the deer, which seems utterly accustomed to her presence. While this image could be seen as introducing an alternative climate change imaginary where people live in harmony with nature, it could also be critically read as a reiteration of a longstanding patriarchal discourse where the problematics of nature and gender are closely interwoven. In the latter reading, the girl and the deer both become subjects of the dominant male gaze perpetrated by the AI, which cannot imagine a girl hunter.

We also designed prompts to help us examine the unaddressed facets and potential complexities inherent to Cottagecore's desire for a simpler life under the condition of living in the digital age and using digital technology for the dissemination of the aesthetic. Can we create a vision of the rural idyll that includes high-tech without falling into techno-optimism – the belief that

climate change can be countered through technology alone? In Figure 14.11, we see two girls embracing the Cottagecore aesthetic in a highly technological setting resembling a supermarket where the storage of homemade organic preserves is efficiently organized and managed – a potential departure from the tech-free zone of current Cottagecore that retains an appreciation for low-tech rural practices as well, seeing high-tech and low-tech as complementary instead of mutually exclusive. In Figure 14.12, we see the hand of a white-presenting person of unknown gender holding what appears to be a late-model smartphone. On the smartphone screen, we see the landscape the person is facing. We imagine the person standing on a pond's bank or leaning over a low bridge across a pond while taking a photograph or a video of the cottage in the distance. The light is the soft and warm one of late spring afternoons, the meadow



FIGURE 14.11 Midjourney-generated image of Cottagecore girls interacting with the touchscreen of a supermarket fridge

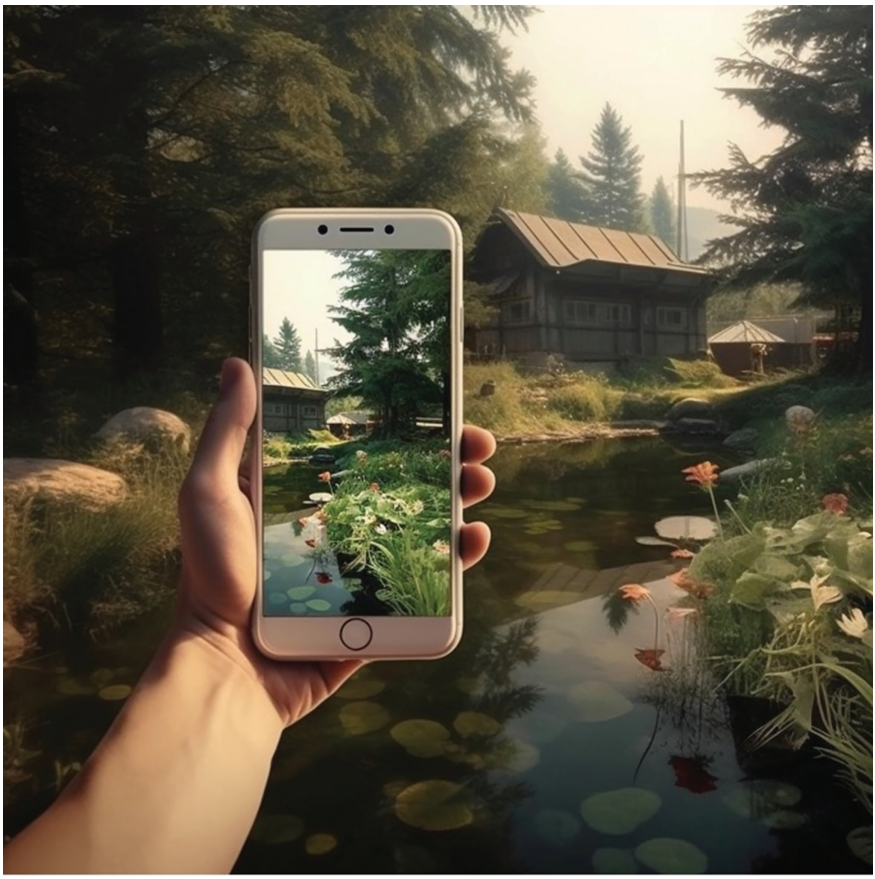


FIGURE 14.12 Midjourney-generated image incorporating a smartphone

is blooming, and we can almost hear the low buzz of pollinators. The image follows the Cottagecore canon to the letter, except for the element of technology. Here, the technologies with which Cottagecore images are recorded, edited, curated, and shared online are made part of its aesthetic. The prompt to generate this image used the word "ironic" and the result makes us wonder whether the AI can recognize Cottagecore's use of digital devices to create and share content idealizing an offline, nature-oriented lifestyle as ironic.

5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have engaged with Cottagecore as a contemporary manifestation of the rural idyll and a site for staging a vision of more sustainable

futures. Our main interest was in how these visions of rurality emerge and circulate as a reaction to Anthropocene horror. We discussed Cottagecore's focus on women and a new rural domesticity presented as unfolding outside of patriarchal structures while also calling for reflexivity about the unacknowledged histories of class struggle and colonialism behind such a romanticized vision of the countryside as refuge and playground. Our contribution to existing critiques of Cottagecore firstly focused on Cottagecore's fantasy of being the only person in nature. We created alternative images retaining Cottagecore's focus on women and sense of slow, restful domesticity, but restaging these elements in communal settings. Secondly, we reflected critically on the vision of a gentle and tame nature inspired by the British countryside that Cottagecore content puts forward. Expecting nature to be always accommodating to humans recreates colonial and utilitarian imaginaries and sidelines a vital theme in climate futures: the capacity to co-exist with a volatile natural environment and a changing climate. We created new images that retained the gentleness of Cottagecore's nature imaginary, while including flooding as requiring adjustments from human communities. Thirdly, we commented on the way Cottagecore is equated with owning the right things, which reduces the rural idyll to a decorative backdrop and thus a form of consumerism that is not compatible with sustainable lifestyles. We also reflected on and challenged Cottagecore's exclusion of digital and agricultural technologies, exploring how an undoing of this exclusion reimagines the rural no longer as a timeless scenery disconnected from society, where the practicalities involved in its upkeep are overlooked.

In line with the broader discussions of rural imaginaries in this volume, this chapter examined how digital aesthetics like Cottagecore resonate with long-standing practices that romanticize the rural, in ways that create visions that homogenize and disconnect the rural from the actual materialities of rural living (also referred to as spectralization). However, our intention has not been to dismiss rural fantasies like Cottagecore as mere escapism. Instead, we take forms of online daydreaming about desirable futures and the place of rurality within them seriously as worthy of being explored and critiqued. By looking into the tensions between rural nostalgia and sustainable futures found in Cottagecore, we also contribute to reimagining the idyllic rural as a site of both imaginative potential and historical critique, extending Williams's discussion in *The Country and the City* to contemporary online cultures, where one finds practices that replicate but can also potentially challenge existing capitalist and colonialist rural imaginations.

Climate futures have already been defined as too broad and complex to be effectively engaged through abstraction (Nordhaus and Shellenberger; Moser; Brosch), while research has shown that fiction can help people imagine future

life in a changing climate (Yusoff and Gabrys; Milkoreit 2016; Ortiz). In the end, "explicit visions of desirable (sustainable) and undesirable futures are necessary to motivate and guide any kind of change" (Milkoreit 2017: 1). Such visions should challenge the way corporations have tended to put forward fossil fuels as the only alternatives: "These sectors have engaged in public relations campaigns to portray a stark contrast between a prosperous world running on fossil fuels and a dark, cold, poverty-stricken future if these fuels are restricted to technological solutionism, climate governance, carbon futures" (Levy and Spicer 663). This has not always happened in Hollywood films and climate fiction, which often present apocalyptic scenarios of complete societal collapse (Svoboda; Shendruk). For us, Cottagecore, as a popular online culture, and tools like generative AI and evocative prompting offer not only alternative rural imaginations but also ways of critically reflecting on their potentials and shortcomings.

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CHAPTER 15

Feminized Idyllic Rurality? The Videos of Li Ziqi on Bilibili

Shao Shao

Abstract

This chapter critically examines the imagination of rural spaces and femininity in the videos of Li Ziqi, a popular rural-based Chinese lifestyle vlogger. Through visual and textual analysis, combined with online ethnographic methods, I show how Li's digital idyll idealizes rural life and femininity, often reinforcing patriarchal narratives, but also creates a discursive space for critiques of rural hardships, especially gendered labor inequalities. The *danmu* (comment overlay) feature serves as a site where nostalgic desires for a romanticized rural and critical reflections on rural realities coexist and interact.

1 Gender and the Politics of the Pastoral in Li Ziqi's Digital Idyll

In a short video posted on social media, the clip-clop of a horse can be heard in the morning mist as an elegantly clad woman on horseback appears. She dismounts with a flutter of her red cloak to pluck a few fragrant flowers. This is Li Ziqi, one of the most well-known representatives of today's surge in Chinese rural-based lifestyle vloggers, who encourage their followers to rediscover and idealize rural life. Li portrays life in her rural hometown in Sichuan Province, showcasing traditional foods and crafts like bamboo furniture-making, traditional embroidery, calligraphy, woodblock printing, and elaborate cooking.

Following the rise of *wanghong* (grassroots creators and social media entrepreneurs) in China since 2016, various aspects of Chinese rural life have been turned into content for short videos, enabling the long-neglected rural to gain unprecedented visibility (H. Li). It is noteworthy that among these digitized productions of varying quality it is those using sophisticated cinematography, presenting idealizing depictions of rural life, and fronted by rural women that succeed in capturing the hearts of domestic audiences and opening up lucrative business opportunities (Guo and Abidin; Liang). This indicates the rise of a gendered pastoral fantasy.

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Li Ziqi has the most subscribers among all providers of rural content on Chinese digital platforms. By March 2022, her videos had garnered over 1 billion views and more than 7 million likes on Bilibili, one of the most widely used video-sharing digital platforms in China.[1] Bilibili, initially focused on anime, comics, and games, has expanded into a broad online entertainment platform with 271 million monthly active users, mainly urban and well-educated (CIW). The platform is distinctive due to its unique video commenting feature, *danmu* (Figure 15.1). This allows live comments to overlay videos, fostering the creation of a virtual community (Wan et al.).

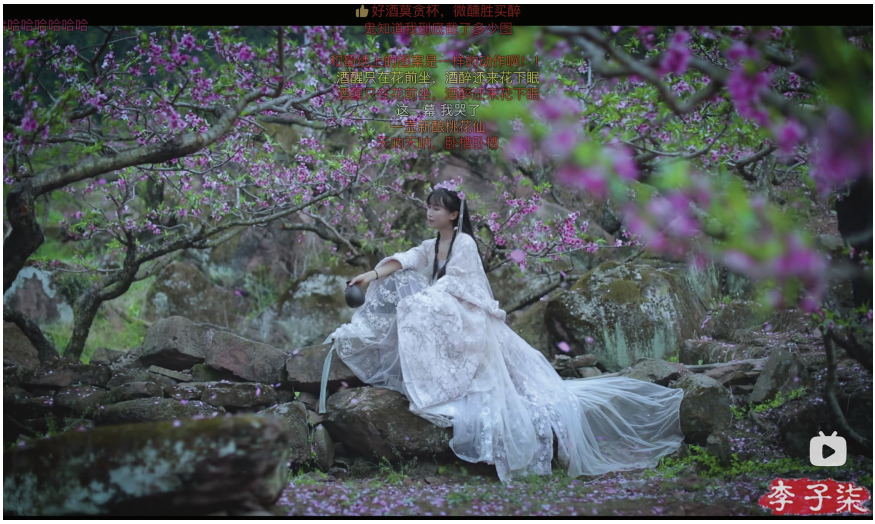


FIGURE 15.1 Screenshot from Li Ziqi's video "Silk Flowers" (2021), showing the danmu interface

Li Ziqi's success has been interpreted as feeding aspirations for female independence and entrepreneurship in the wider population, and as signaling the empowerment of Chinese rural women, who now have more opportunities to join the digital world, express themselves, and seek economic gains (Guo and Abidin). Still, media scholars have also pointed out the lasting effects of urban-centrism in packaging the Chinese countryside as a commodity (Lei; Liang), as well as an ongoing trend of gender re-essentialization in popular media cultural practices, including those by wanghongs that are commonly considered as emancipatory (Dippner; Guan; Xu and Zhao).

1 Li also enjoys great popularity on YouTube, with over 16 million subscribers.

In this chapter, I take a closer look at Li Ziqi's videos to answer the following questions: What kinds of rural spaces and femininities are presented? Do Li's videos, like other representations of women in China's post-Mao popular media culture, reinforce valuated dualisms between city and country, and men and women, or do they offer possibilities to resist or challenge normative imaginations in the idyllic mode that idealize both the rural and particular forms of femininity? Using an approach grounded in critical media studies (D'Acci) that integrates visual and textual analysis with online ethnographic methods, I not only show how Li creates idyllic pastoral scenes by following models from classical Chinese culture, but also position the video content and the viewers' responses in the danmu as a discursive site where ideal ruralities and rural femininities are negotiated.

Delving into the politics of idyllic rural representations in China, I focus on Li's content as both a product of and a reflection on the intersection between rurality, gender, and urbanization. In the context of China's rapid industrialization and urbanization, Li's idealization of the rural, with its advocation of pre-modern ideals of femininity, offers a refuge from the urban-industrial realities that many Chinese people experience – including the breakdown of traditional gender roles and the disorienting pace of development. In offering this refuge, Li affirms dominant cultural narratives that position rural spaces and rural women as repositories of tradition and moral purity. As such, she naturalizes conservative patriarchal social relations, while obscuring the realities of rural poverty and the feminization of farm labor brought about by urbanization. At the same time, I will show, Li's videos also provide a space for a critique of the social and economic changes wrought by urbanization, particularly through the danmu (comment overlay) feature. From this space emerge reflections on how modernization and urbanization have created inequalities – especially around gender and labor – by pushing many rural women into hard farm work while urban audiences can enjoy an idealized portrayal of this labor from a distance.

I begin with a survey of literature on the Chinese rural idyll, discussing the emergence of this genre in ancient texts and its modern resurgence as a cultural symbol in transitional China. I then investigate the role assigned to women in the idyll's romanticization of rural life and argue that the self-portrayal of rural women in today's Chinese popular media is characterized by a re-articulation of essentialized feminine characteristics. Having established this framework, I proceed to analyze the content and reception of Li Ziqi's videos, which, I contend, both reaffirm and challenge idyllic notions of rurality and rural womanhood in contemporary China.

2 Romanticizing the Rural in China

In recent decades, Anglo-European scholars have identified a cultural turn in rural studies, moving beyond considering the rural as a mere physical space to explore the symbolic imaginaries associated with it (Cloke; Pratt; Zografos). The rural idyll, one of the most (stereo)typical rural representations, refers to a romanticized construction of the rural as associated with positive elements like nature, freedom, escapism, and simplicity. In the West, the idyll evolved from its origin in ancient literature (Williams) to contemporary manifestations across literature, popular culture, and everyday life (Panzer-Krause; Pospěch et al.; Shucksmith; Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen).

In China, the concept of the rural idyll dates back to pre-modern times when literati considered the rural as particularly conducive to aesthetic pursuits, turning it into a symbol of hermitage (H. Wang; X. Zhou 1991). During the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589 AD), a time of political turmoil, disillusioned male literati, influenced by Daoism and Buddhism, sought refuge in remote mountains to escape the chaos reigning in population centers (Salazar and Zhang). This romanticization of rural life was also inspired by the rustic rhythms and ethical values associated with pre-modern Chinese agriculture, which was thought to enable a simple life in harmony with nature (Q. Zhang). These elements were incorporated into countless poems expressing dissatisfaction with the social order and painting the rural as an idyllic realm of seclusion and escape (Huo; H. Wang). In the twentieth century, the Chinese rural was transformed into a symbol of either feudal backwardness or unified revolutionary power (Y. Zhang). The urbanization drive in the 1980s reinforced the notion of rural backwardness by portraying the rural as a realm of poverty, misery, and humiliation, leading to mass rural-to-urban migration (Willis).

Since the 2000s, however, the rural has re-emerged as a source of nostalgia in the wake of a modernization triggering various individual and collective identity crises (D. Wang), ranging from the condemnation of feudalist traditions in the early twentieth-century New Culture Movement and the Mao era's Proletarian Revolution to the loss of a supreme spiritual leader and the introduction of westernized neoliberal values in the post-Mao Era (X. Cao; Zhao). As D. Wang argues, confronted with western knowledge systems and values in urban areas, those who grew up in rural areas with non-western indigenous cultural traditions experienced psychological alienation, feeling as if they had lost their home and "real" self.

The recent wave of revived rural cultural traditions emerged to cater to the nostalgia that emerged as a counterpart to this alienation, also in the wider

Chinese population (Zhao). This nostalgia taps into the rural as a spiritual homeland capable of preserving the roots of Chineseness (Qian; Zeng and Shi). As Bell argues, the rural idyll can serve as "a receptacle for national identity" and as a reminder of a golden past lost in the rush to modernity (151). The official discourse of China's Dream of Great Rejuvenation integrates rural nostalgia into national development plans, fueling a mass media focus on rural charm (Tang). In 2015, for example, CCTV (China Central Television) produced and broadcast a documentary series with a total of 9 seasons, called *Nostalgia in Mind* (记住乡愁), containing interviews with villagers and showing scenes of life and historical stories from various rural areas (Tang). Since 2016, rural microcelebrities and short videos depicting rural life, often playing up to this state-fostered nostalgia, have gained immense popularity (H. Li).

Instead of bridging urban-rural divides, romanticizing narratives that play up to rural nostalgia perpetuate "urbanormativity" by shaping an idealized rural environment that appeals to urban tastes, while downplaying the actual rural's less desirable aspects (Bell). Such narratives foster disdain for rural backwardness or a paternalistic attitude (Fulkerson and Thomas). In the Chinese context, the former can be found in the explicit contempt for rural people as low *suzhi* (素质) groups under the *hukou* (household registration) system (Han), while the latter is apparent in the boom in domestic nostalgic tourism to a rural conceived as a scenic spot for urban escapism and entertainment that should remain unchanged (Park). When it embodies the rural "as an object of desire (because it is not modern in a good way) and of dread (because it is not modern in a bad way)" (Bell 150) and flattens it into a monoculture opposed to the urban, with no exploration of its internal tensions and diversity, or how it changes over time, the rise of rural-based digital content, too, exacerbates urban-rural discrepancies (H. Li).[2]

3 Women in the Romanticized Rural

Jo Little points out the important role the essentialization of gender plays in sustaining an idealized rurality where women's domestic roles and their centrality within rural communities are prioritized to sustain a paternalistic web of relations (Little; Little and Austin). As Bell also notes, within the monocultural framework of the rural idyll, gender identities are often anchored in traditional ways. Stereotypical rural femininities from "productivist rural femininity"

2 In China, the rural is highly diverse, geographically, socially, and culturally, including agricultural heartlands, mountainous regions, coastal villages, and ethnic minority areas.

to "transformative country chic" have been explored in Western contexts (Keller et al.).

In China, rigid rural gender identities emerged under the influence of Daoist and Confucian philosophies. While Daoism emphasizes balance and fluidity, Confucian interpretations introduce a gender hierarchy, privileging men over women (Nelson). Different attributes are associated with masculinity and femininity on the basis of yin-yang concepts, with femininity linked to passivity, submissiveness, and softness (C. Li). In line with this, women are expected to take on a nurturing role, similar to that of nature, and not to challenge male dominance (Chan). As R. Wang observes, in a poem in *The Book of Songs*[3] celebrating the labor of peasants, the scene of men working the fields and women bringing them food indicates the Chinese ideal of harmonious solidarity in rural communities, where gender roles, though complementary, are asymmetrical. During the Mao era, gender differences were downplayed as women were encouraged to participate equally in industrial and agricultural production, resulting in a "masculinizing of the feminine" (Dongchao). After the 1978 reforms, neoliberal ideals, individualism, and feminine ideals gained prominence, with Chinese women in urban areas asserting their autonomy (Rofel).

Significantly, traditional gender roles persist in the contemporary Chinese rural, where the subordinate status of women is naturalized. Rural women face widespread gender inequalities, including limited rights and influence in areas like land ownership, political leadership, education, and income-generating activities (Fan and Chen; Kelkar; Xu et al.). In addition, most of the farming, household chores, and elder care falls to women due to male migration to urban areas (Jacka). While e-commerce has improved economic opportunities for some rural women, patriarchal traditions persist, reinforcing their position of cultural inferiority (Yu and Cui).

Moreover, normative notions of Chinese femininity are exhibiting a turn to the past. Traditional clothing and values associated with domestic roles, such as being virtuous wives and good mothers, are increasingly emphasized in urban areas (F. Liu; Man 2016). This trend is visible in beauty pageants, costume dramas, and national pride displays where Chinese women celebrate their physical appearance and domestic qualities (Y. Cao; Man 2013; X. Zhou 2008). While this in part mirrors aspects of western postfeminism in the wake of the take-up of neoliberal individualism after the 1978 reforms (Gill), it also reflects a distinct Chinese phenomenon of a revival of traditional femininity

3 *The Book of Songs* (诗经) is the oldest of the Chinese classics, a collection of 305 songs/poems that dates back over two thousand years to the Zhou kingdom. It is of great importance to Confucianism and Chinese literature.

in reaction to the erasure of sexual difference during the Maoist era (Chen; L. Li; Liao).

Despite the resurgence of rural romanticism, the increased visibility of rural women has not led to more attention for their wellbeing (Pini et al.). Instead, within this resurgence, they are reduced to one-dimensional figures sustaining traditional lifestyles (Zeng and Shi) or objects of nostalgic desire offering others refuge from modern life's uncertainties (Felski), while they are expected to adhere to norms of feminine purity (DuPuis). In China as in the West, therefore, the rural idyll's celebration is closely tied to the construction of idealized, monolithic rural femininities.

While existing studies of Chinese digital rural content have largely focused on how these videos negotiate urban-rural discrepancies, neglecting their portrayal of rural gender roles (H. Li; Liang; an exception can be found in Ran and Xie), my analysis of Li Ziqi's productions will focus on how her self-presentation as a rural woman and its reception by her fans invokes the revival of both the rural idyll and traditional femininities in contemporary China.

4 Li Ziqi's Rural Wonderland

For this analysis, I selected three videos by Li Ziqi, based on their popularity and their thematic alignment with my research objectives. Visual and textual analysis were employed to determine how the videos represent rural space and rural femininity. Word count analysis was used on the danmus and comments placed under the videos to establish how viewers responded. All danmus and comments were anonymized and translated into English to ensure privacy.

The settings in Li's videos mainly consist of her rural courtyard and nearby natural areas, both of which are purposely constructed and filmed to create a fantasy of a rural wonderland. The courtyard is constructed on the basis of the Chinese classical garden aesthetic (中国古典园林美学), creating a multi-layered landscape. This garden aesthetic features an exquisite and flexible layout that blends in with nature to produce poetic and harmonious scenes conveying an atmosphere of serenity and vividness (H. Wang). Traditionally, it served as a tangible expression of wealth and education, a symbol of social status, and a space for the elite to cultivate their cultural and intellectual pursuits in imperial China (W. Zhou).

The pavilions and plants featured in Li's videos are elaborately designed to fit in with this classical aesthetic. One pavilion, where Li often does handicrafts or cooks, is planted with vines spiraling upward to the roof, and the other is decorated with white gauze and a grey cloth sofa for resting. Plants are

arranged according to their height to enhance the sense of a layered landscape. Li's deliberate borrowing from imperial Chinese gardening traditions designed to symbolize wealth, education, and status, suggest a Chinese version of what Bell calls "retrofitting rurality," which is rooted in manifestations of social, cultural, and intellectual privilege, and caters to rural nostalgia.

Areas outside the courtyard that appear in Li's videos are framed by the camera as part of an isolated wonderland uncontaminated by worldly concerns. What is particularly noticeable is how the manipulation of time and space to construct an ideal rural environment is realized through professional filming and editing skills. Condensed through the adoption of time-lapse in close-ups or panoramic shots, slow natural processes such as the sprouting of a bean, the blooming of flowers, the melting of ice, and the movements of clouds are made accessible in an awe-inspiring manner that emphasizes their vividness and vitality, and their rootedness in rural landscapes.

Different rural places are connected through the editing, which shows, in close succession, various impressive natural tableaus of flower seas, endless snow-covered mountains, misty forests, and vast terraced fields. In reality, the sites shown are not close to each other or to Li's home. Notably, to make her "Silk Flowers" video, Li traveled to Longquanyi, a peach blossom scenic resort that is around 171 kilometers from her village. In the video, nonetheless, a shot showing Li opening the door of her courtyard is directly followed by a panoramic shot of the spreading peach blossoms (Figure 15.2). In this way, the illusion is created that Li is living in this idyllic landscape many Chinese long for.

As the danmus superimposed on the video indicate, viewers see it as recreating Peach Blossom Spring (桃花源), a place created by the Win-jin Dynasty pastoral poet Tao Yuanming that developed into an influential cultural symbol in the Chinese spiritual world constituted by Taoist and Buddhist traditions (Y. Li). The isolated but scenic village filled with peach blossoms stands for an ethereal utopia where the people lead an ideal existence in harmony with nature, unaware of the chaotic outside world (Xu). As such, it evokes the



FIGURE 15.2 Screenshots showing consecutive shots from Li's video "Silk Flowers" (2021)

Chinese dream of fleeing from unsatisfying realities and turning to a peaceful nature for comfort (Zeng and Shi). The rural, in Li's videos, becomes the place where this old escapist dream may be fulfilled in contemporary times.

Li's delicate way of dressing, which matches the picturesque presentation of nature in the rural, is designed to fulfill viewers' desires for a return to classical ideals of feminine beauty. In shots that garner high praise in the danmu, Li appears dressed like an ancient noblewoman in the midground, with specific natural elements organized as foreground and awe-inspiring scenery set as background. In a typical scenario in the video "Magnolia Flower" (Figure 15.3), the camera is statically set at a low angle between a big tree trunk and multiple magnolia blooms, which are employed as a foreground for framing, offering viewers a sense of voyeurism.



FIGURE 15.3 Screenshot from Li's video "Magnolia Flower" (2019)

This visual strategy of integrating women into the landscape can be traced back to the ancient Chinese Paintings of Noble Ladies, which included depictions of natural surroundings to re-create the romanticized atmosphere of ancient literary works (Shan; Yuan). Notably, the ideal feminine appearance in ancient Chinese literature is established through comparisons with various plants, with references to, for example, "'Lotus face," "willow eyebrows," and "peach cheeks." This is based on an assumed essential connection between women and nature, where the plant's shape, color, and growing stage were thought to correspond with women's bodies, makeup, and reproductive duties (Feng). Accordingly, in another popular scene in the "Silk Flowers" video (Figure 15.1), set against the background of a peach blossom sea, several flower-bearing branches are

used as the foreground, subtly establishing a frame for Li to appear within. Li's long traditional dress, featuring floral patterns, consists of layers of gauze that render her body partly hidden and partly visible, thus sexualizing it. As Shi argues, Chinese noblewomen's outfits, whether fully wrapping or subtly exhibiting feminine bodily curves, served as a crucial site for satisfying male desires. Li's videos reconstruct the legacy of paralleling feminine beauty with nature through purposeful camera framings that assign both herself and the natural scenes an objectified status, offering the audience the pleasure of consuming the image and everything in it.

The statement "A fairy comes down to earth"[4] appears frequently in danmus, implying that viewers perceive Li as a fairy from old Chinese myth. Images of female supernatural beings in imperial Chinese folktales and legends developed from showing the active position of omnipotent goddesses who created and dominated humans to stressing the passive status of beautiful fairies who gave up their magical powers when they fell in love with ordinary humans (Jin). Fairies, still prevalent in contemporary Chinese dramas and animations, usually manifest as young, beautiful, white-skinned girls dressed in flowing dresses, who look delicate and in need of protection, living in an unpolluted heavenly world (Lu). As Brunner argues, the visual evocation of "mythical impotence" is part of a patriarchal rhetoric of containment. By admiringly comparing Li to an ancient fairy with a mainly decorative role, viewers convey how affectively appealing feminine ideals sprouting from the historical Chinese male gaze still are today.

Li's videos articulate femininities that are not just aimed at pleasing male viewers; they are also identified with by female fans. As indicated by other danmus, Li has revived "many girls' childhood dreams of being a fairy beauty" (Z. Li 2021, 18:26). However, a portion of these danmus also use terms like "free and easy" and "chivalrous spirits" (潇洒、侠气)[5] to express an affinity with aspects of Li's behavior that ancient Chinese women in fact had limited access to do, such as riding a horse and drinking under a peach blossom tree. These actions run counter to the norms of ideal femininity in imperial China, when women were supposed to stay in the domestic sphere and live in submissive, dependent ways (C. Li).

A considerable number of danmus, perhaps aware of this discrepancy, relate Li's videos to the present, suggesting that she is, in fact, "the perfect

4 On 29 July 2022, there were 900 danmus containing the key words '仙女''下凡' '神仙' (fairy, coming down to earth) in the videos "Silk Flowers" and "Magnolia Flowers."

5 On 29 July 2022, there were 30 danmus containing the key words '侠' '潇洒''酷' '飒' (heroine, unconstrained, cool, chic) in the "Silk Flowers" and "Magnolia Flowers" videos.

incarnation of the protagonists in contemporary female-oriented costume dramas and time-travel online fictions" (Z. Li 2019, 05:10),[6] who travel back to pre-modern China with a modern mind. These protagonists not only possess a classical Chinese fairy-like beauty, but also exude the modern vibe of independent, free-willed women. The videos' spectatorship thus indicates that Li's exquisitely posed and dressed body, besides offering itself up for the objectifying male gaze that persists from the past, can also be read as a site of feminine empowerment in the present, critical of the past.

Still, it should be noted that although the traditional clothes Li wears in her videos range from long silk dresses and cloaks to rough linen clothes, the outfits that make her resemble an ancient noblewoman or fairy, especially when integrated with awe-inspiring landscapes, receive the most lyrical and desiring comments. For most viewers, Li's self-presentation as a noble (upper-class) feminine figure in a rural wonderland functions to affirm the male gaze by "supply[ing] a glossy front …, holding the eye in fascinated distraction away from its mechanics of production" (C. Li 2000). This prevents the structurally subjugated position of rural women in China's present and past from being exposed and naturalizes idyllic notions of rural femininity.

5 Rough Hands

Despite receiving much less attention than her ancient Chinese noblewoman and fairy outfits, Li's rough hands do appear in some videos, and she is regularly shown doing farm work dressed in coarse clothes. These elements at first sight seem to counteract the romanticization of contemporary rural femininity. The camera frequently shows close-ups of Li's hands, which are tanned and have wrinkles and calluses. Sometimes, mud can be seen under her fingernails, detracting from the ideal femininity her otherwise impeccable makeup and outfits evoke, and signaling that contemporary rural life is not only composed of leisure and entrepreneurship, not even for a successful wanghong.

Upon taking a closer look, however, it becomes clear that Li's rough hands are incorporated into the idyllic rural her videos present by being related to the imagined pre-modern rural lifestyle that Chinese urbanites of today nostalgically long for. In a video entitled "Harvest Season" (Z. Li 2020), the time-consuming process of growing peanuts is displayed through close-ups of Li's hands (Figure 15.4), accelerated editing, a soundtrack featuring soft music, and

6 On 29 July 2022, there were 131 danmus containing the key words '剧' '小说''穿越''女主' (drama, time-travel fiction, female protagonist) in the "Silk Flowers" and "Magnolia Flowers" videos.



FIGURE 15.4 Screenshots of close-ups of Li's hands from the videos "Harvest Season" (2020) and "Silk Flowers" (2021)

intercut time-lapse shots of natural scenery and individual plants. Li's hands are also displayed in close-ups when she does handicrafts, demonstrating the satisfaction that comes from making things from scratch (Figure 15.4). The terms "healing," "leisurable," "comfort," "patient," "peaceful," and "the life I aspire to" are frequently used in reaction to this idealizing portrayal of manual work.[7] As a comment under the "Harvest Season" video claims, "… it is so healing to see Fairy Li doing all kinds of work by hand peacefully, including farming and cooking …"[8] The pre-modern, low-productivity way of working manifested by Li's rough hands is disassociated from the activities of present-day low-quality rural subjects and attached to a slow, simple lifestyle that the urbanite, stressed by the high-speed pace of urbanization, feels has been lost (Zeng and Shi). By playing into the collective desire for this lost lifestyle through visual and acoustic effects, the videos turn Li's rough hands from indexes of the challenges actual rural life presents women with into symbols of a rural idyll capable of offering comfort to urbanites. Instead of evoking disgust, like the coarse hands of rural migrant workers in the cities, Li's rough hands become objects of desire.

The scenes of Li doing arduous farm work do lead some viewers to reflect on the romanticization of rural life in her videos. In the harvesting video, for example, one danmu draws attention to the dissonance between Li's idealized portrayal of her life and her rough hands: "Many people envy Li Ziqi's life, but not many people see the contrast between a peaceful quiet life and the calloused hands" (Z. Li 2020: 01:04). Pointing to Li's polished appearance and her status as a social media entrepreneur, another comment notes that "… it

7 On 29 July 2022, there were 150 danmus containing the key words '舒服' '舒适''治愈''耐心' '平静' ('Leisurable' 'Comfort' 'Patient' and 'Peaceful') in the "Silk Flowers" video.

8 Commenter A commenting on Li Ziqi's "Harvest Season" video on Bilibili, 15 October 2020. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1HT4y1w7HX/?spm_id_from=333.880.my_history.page.click&vd_source=d321b7f6bad2cb5b005e1035b320cd39.

is impossible to make a living like this only by farm work in real rural lives" (Commenter B, 2020).[9] Comments like these directly challenge the nostalgic affirmation of the rural idyll and potentially inform those without direct experience of rural China about the discrepancy between idyllic representations and rural realities.

More playfully, some viewers profess their admiration for Li's agrarian skills and her ability to endure the tiring work by mocking rural life as portrayed by Tao Yuanming (the ancient poet who created Peach Blossom Spring) in his poem "Returning to My Farm (III)" (归园田居其三).[10] One danmu states: "(Seeing Li's uncomplaining but laborious farm work, it is clear why) Tao Yuanming can only end by saying: The peas are few, but weeds grow in their stead" (Z. Li 2020: 07:44). By deliberately quoting the line from Tao's pastoral poem, this danmu ridicules the poet's meager harvest, which is ascribed to his farming skills being more limited than Li's, as well as to his penchant for complaining about the hard, dirtying labor involved in growing peas, where Li happily gets on with her farm tasks. This suggests that some in Li's audience take a critical stance rejecting Tao's idyllic vision of the rural and foregrounding the rural labor engaged in by Li as an integral part of a real rural life incompatible with the notion of the Chinese countryside as a realm of calm contemplation. Another danmu repeats the comparison between Tao and Li: "The bragging Tao yuanming would immediately quit the live broadcast (if he were also a rural wanghong in the present competing with Li)" (Z. Li 2020: 03:58). Live broadcasts featuring competitions between wanghongs are common on some Chinese digital platforms, and this commenter predicts that, in such a competition, Tao would quickly realize his farming skills did not match those of Li. This danmu again indicates a fading of the idyllic rural fantasy derived from Tao's writings and a validation of a more realistic depiction of rurality that includes Li's rough hands and the possibility of a woman being a better farmer than a man.

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9 Commenter B commenting on Li Ziqi's "Harvest Season" video on Bilibili, 11 October 2020. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1HT4y1w7HX/?spm_id_from=333.880.my_history.page.click&vd_source=d321b7f6bad2cb5b005e1035b320cd39.

10 "Returning to My Farm (III)" is a pastoral poem providing a detailed and vivid description of the poet's experience of working the land. The poem expresses happiness and pride about his return to his rural homeland. The full version of the poem is: "I planted peas beneath the southern hill; The peas are few, but weeds grow in their stead; At dawn I rise to clear the dust and filth, Bring back my hoe with moon above my head. The way is narrow, grass and shrubs are high. My clothing all is stained with evening dew; For stains upon my clothes I do not care, If I am free my wishes to pursue." Translation taken from: https://m.kekenet.com/kouyi/201503/364252.shtml.

Whereas the comments comparing Tao and Li position Li as a model of rural and female strength, other danmus express heartbroken feelings when Li's rough hands are shown, linking them to the struggles of rural women. One danmu explicitly critiques the way Li's videos normalize the feminization of farm labor, noting that "I would like to see a man working with her next time" (Z. Li 2020: 06:04).

All these comments, though representing a minority of the views in the danmus, indicate a degree of acknowledgment within Li's audience of the real rural hardships hidden behind the rural idyll and its idealized femininity, and a desire to make these visible. The highly artificial rural settings of Li's videos and the strong desire of many viewers for an alternative to their stressful urban lives can easily overshadow such potentially meaningful revelations, which are not always welcomed, as is shown in one much-liked comment: "… everyone knows rural work is hard, but who would like to consume videos overwhelmed with negative energy showing how tired you are?" (Commenter C 2020).[11] Here, the affective work the rural nostalgia many of Li's most popular videos does is highlighted: even viewers who have no illusions about actual rural life being hard may prefer to just enjoy the idyllic fantasy and ignore Li's rough hands.

6 Conclusion

The idealized rurality and rural femininity produced by Li evoke an idyll with Chinese features, as, in most of her videos, she constructs a rural wonderland enjoyed by a woman modeled on ancient notions of female nobility described in imperial literary works, as well as on the fantasy figure of the fairy. Li's videos focus on surfaces and appearances, and, in their framing, assign to Li a status of to-be-looked-at-ness, of objectification for a male gaze. By integrating idealized pre-modern noble feminine bodies into contemporary picturesque rural landscapes, with the editing obfuscating the distance between these landscapes and less scenic ruralities, the videos appeal to (especially urban) viewers' nostalgic desire for the rural idyll. These viewers are asked – and appear happy – to suspend their disbelief and buy into this romanticizing distortion of Chinese rural lives.

Still, as my analysis of the danmus has shown, Li's videos do not only appeal to a traditional male gaze but are also appropriated as sites of feminine

11 Commenter C commenting on Li Ziqi's "Harvest Season" video on Bilibili, 11 October 2020. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1HT4y1w7HX/?spm_id_from=333.880.my_history.page.click&vd_source=d321b7f6bad2cb5b005e1035b320cd39.

empowerment by some of her fans, who link her retrofitted appearance with a modern, independent femininity that allows her a degree of agency in the rural wonderland not available to ancient Chinese noblewomen and fairies. In addition, Li's inclusion of her rough hands, plain clothes, and manual labor on the farm allows her viewers to highlight the artificiality of the rural idyll, as well as the hardships of contemporary rural life, especially for women, in their comments. At the same time, the close-ups of Li's rough hands can also be seen as endorsing the idyllic perception of farm and craft work as offering an escape from the overwhelming demands of urban life.

It is clear from my analysis of the danmus that most viewers prefer the videos in which Li plays up to rural nostalgia and affirms the existing gender hierarchy that disadvantages women, particularly in the rural, by emphasizing awe-inspiring natural scenes over agricultural or village ones, and by enacting traditional noble or fairy-like femininities designed to please the male gaze. But the danmus also allow for a more critical assessment of the rural idyll and traditional ideals of (rural) femininity to emerge. Even if such a critical assessment is that of a minority of Li's audience, its imposition onto the videos can draw other viewers' attention to the possibility of reading Li's rural wonderland differently or of using it to open up discussions about pressing rural issues like the feminization of farm labor. Li's double role as at once the main performer in the videos and their producer (and thus the one who benefits financially from their popularity), moreover, allows the videos to point to a new form of entrepreneurial rural femininity that may not be feasible for all or even most rural women, and that may still have to draw upon the rural idyll to ensure success, but that does provide a way for some rural women to have (more) control over their own lives and to engage in a wider variety of activities.

Finally, my analysis has revealed the crucial role of digital platforms in mediating the production and consumption of traditional and emergent ideas of the rural and rural femininity in China. Bilibili, especially through the danmu interface, which makes comments part of the video instead of just posting them below it, affords an evolving negotiation between the images, ideas, and experiences contained in the videos' content and images, ideas, and experiences from other media and from the lives of viewers. In discussing the tourist idyll, Craik reveals that "cultural experiences offered by tourism are consumed in terms of prior knowledge, expectations, fantasies and mythologies generated in the tourist's origin culture rather than by the cultural offerings of the destination" (118). This is adopted by Bell to describe the ongoing social and cultural process of idyll-making dominant in rural tourism. In Li's case, her videos are designed to fulfil the nostalgic expectations and desires of urbanites and the danmu interface further facilitates the idyll-making process by inviting

viewers to superimpose these expectations and desires onto the images she has created. However, because the danmu interface does not rank comments (Zhang and Cassany), minority readings remain as visible (if not as numerous) in this negotiation as majority ones, allowing the interface to serve as a site where disturbances of the idyll that draw attention to what parts of rural reality the idyll denies or excludes may occur as well.

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CHAPTER 16

Rural Mythologies, Fresh Air, and the UK's National Parks

Rosemary Shirley

Abstract

Centering on the role of consumer commodities in the construction, circulation, and consolidation of romanticized rural imaginaries, this chapter takes a set of air fresheners, produced through a partnership between the UK's national parks and a home fragrance brand, as a starting point from which to consider how concepts such as "fresh air" activate extractivist wellness narratives associated with rural places and how such imaginaries can render existing rural health inequalities illegible. Drawing on Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, it proposes that thinking through "rural mythologies" can generate new understandings of the relationship between consumer cultures and contemporary globalized rurality.

1 Breathing Spaces

In this chapter, I examine one of the first collaborations between the UK's national parks and a corporate partner, Air Wick (a fragrance brand owned by the British multinational Reckitt). Through a detailed analysis of the national parks themed air fresheners that resulted from this partnership, I examine the function of consumer culture in the construction of romanticized relationships with rural places. Beginning with an olfactory encounter with both a real national park and its reproduction in air freshener form, I consider how aroma is used to construct romanticized and imaginary relationships with rural places. Then, drawing on Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* – an analysis of the connections between cultural artefacts, branding, and ideology – I develop the concept of "rural mythologies" as a productive analytical framework for understanding the impact of consumer cultures on contemporary globalized rurality. Finally, I examine how the concept of "fresh air" as a wellness commodity operates at a nexus of power and pastoral ideology which can render illegible health inequalities experienced as part of the lived conditions of contemporary rural places.

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Once upon a time, I was wandering through the aisles of my local supermarket when I came across an air freshener. I do not often buy air fresheners. Why do I feel the need to tell you that? My desire to distance myself from these products could stem from constructions of identity based on indicators of social class and an urge to guard against potentially gender-related feelings of shame around having a house which might be perceived as smelly (Brown 236; Pink 67). As I said, I do not often buy air fresheners but this one caught my eye because it seemed to be telling me that it smelled like the Peak District national park. At that point, I was living in a village in the Peak District, not within the national park, you understand, as house prices rise significantly inside its boundaries (Ng), but still less than a mile from one of its official borders. The supermarket itself was certainly within smelling distance of the national park.

I purchased the air freshener and took it home to conduct an experiment. Standing in my garden I took a deep breath, inhaling the aromas of the Peak District. It is difficult to immediately identify smells. Most European languages have a dearth of olfactory vocabulary, meaning that although the human nose can recognize thousands of different scents, Western societies only have the words to accurately describe a narrow range of aromas; smells are most often identified by the things from which they emanate: bread, drains, feet, etc. (Classon et al. 109; Lindborg and Liew 2). I stood in my garden for a while, even though it was coming on to rain, trying to tune in to the fragrances carried on the air. The aromas I detected were: a smell of deep fat frying coming from the extractor fan of the pub a couple of doors away, a whiff of manure from the pub landlord's horse that grazed in the field behind my house, something a bit wet and greenish – probably a mixture of the field, my garden, and surrounding vegetation – and finally exhaust fumes from the nearby road.

The next step was to open the air freshener. I ripped away the cardboard backing and shucked the air freshener from its plastic shell. It was a circular piece of clear plastic, about the size of my palm. It had waves engraved onto its surface and inside there was a translucent yellow gel; this was where the fragrance was held. There was no need to bring it to my nose, as the fragrance was already spilling out of the wave-shaped lines and into the Peak District air. I was not surprised, and I am sure you will not be either, to learn that the air freshener did not mirror my Peak District smell-scape of frying, manure, grass, and exhaust fumes. It smelled of a sort of floral sweetness, like many air fresheners do.

This particular product was part of range of room fragrances produced by the company Air Wick in partnership with the UK's national parks. In previous years, Air Wick had entered into a similar arrangement in the United States, producing fragrances themed around four of North America's national parks.

This sort of activity was part of a wider push to increase commercial opportunities within the parks through closer involvement with consumer brands (Usborne). At the time of the partnership with Air Wick (2013–14), the organization that manages the UK's national parks had recently established a unit to cultivate corporate connections in response to a cut in public funding and a government recommendation that the shortfall should be made up through partnerships with the private sector (Shirley 109). This collaboration with Air Wick was one of the first of these corporate ventures. In addition to the Peak District, other parks included in the UK range were the Brecon Beacons in Mid Wales (now known by its Welsh name, Bannau Brycheiniog), the Cairngorms in Scotland, Exmoor in Devon, the Lake District in north West England, the New Forest in Southern England, Snowdonia in West Wales (which is also now known by its Welsh name, Eyri), and the Yorkshire Dales in the North of England.

At this time, UK national parks were marketing themselves as a family of locations badged as Britain's "Breathing Spaces." The term "breathing space" connotes a moment or a location for relief from the pressures of everyday life and an idea that aligns with the abundant media rhetoric and scientific research linking mental wellness with time spent in green spaces. It could, however, also be thought of as the action of breathing a space, the intertwining of a body and its location that takes place in the action of inhaling and exhaling, pointing to the permeability of the perceived boundaries between human and non-human. Although at first glance the national parks and Air Wick, purveyors of products that are experienced through the action of breathing, might be considered complimentary, they are in fact rather strange bedfellows: an organization tasked with preserving and promoting the use of open spaces and the manufacturers of fragrances for the home – fresh air and air fresheners are not the same thing.

Since my experiment in the garden had established that the Peak District fragrance bore little resemblance to my olfactory experience of the site, I wondered what fantasy smell-scapes had been devised to represent the other parks and what these aroma-based stories were telling us about our imaginings of rural places. Each air freshener carried a short description of the fragrance in addition to its national park branding: Spring Breezes and Golden Lily for the Peak District, Mountain Sunset and Vibrant Zest for Snowdonia/Eyri, Sea Spray and Ocean Minerals for Exmoor, Wild Blossom and Fresh Mountain Dew for the Brecon Beacons/Bannau Brycheiniog, Spiced Apple and Snowy Mountains for the Cairngorms, White Roses and Pink Sweet Pea for the Yorkshire Dales, Golden Woodlands and Sweet Nectar for the New Forest, and, finally, Midnight Berries and Shimmering Mist for the Lake District.

Few of these fragrances descriptors had anything but a passing relationship with the parks they represented. They might reference generalized geographical features – mountains, woodlands, ocean – matching the park's location, but beyond that the relationship was less clear. The Peak District, for example, is not known for its golden lilies and the Lake District is not particularly associated with berries. Whilst having the appearance of a bespoke fragrance created to depict specific rural places, these aromas remained generic, so that a discerning consumer might cut through the poetic descriptions and correctly identify the citrusy one, the floral one, or the spicey one. Moreover, many of the air fresheners included descriptors which do not have an associated smell: sunset, midnight, snow. This points to the product promising the creation of certain feelings or atmospheres rather than aromas alone, in accordance with the everyday business of the perfume industry, where selling a concept rather than a definable smell is often the key to success: Calvin Klein's Obsession, Eternity, and Euphoria are popular examples (Classon et al. 107).

In these ways, products like the air fresheners are vaporous and free floating. Removed from any meaningful relationship with the places they at first seem to represent and evoking the smell of things without smell (mountains, sunsets), they lose their grounding. Even the more familiar aromas which they continue to mobilize (apples, roses, lilies) seem disconnected from real fruit and flora. Significantly, Classon et al. refer to such artificial odors as "a sign without a referent, smoke without fire, pure olfactory image" (205). Apart from the very real materiality of their manufacture and distribution, these products occupy an almost entirely imaginary realm; they are pure rural mythology.

2 Rural Mythologies

Here I am borrowing Roland Barthes's use of the term "mythology," because I think it is a useful lens for understanding contemporary rural imaginaries and their expression and circulation in mainstream cultural forms, like these air fresheners. In a collection of essays written in 1954–56 and published as *Mythologies*, Barthes uses myth as a tool for reading hidden ideological messages in elements of everyday French culture, from detergent adverts to steak and chips. For Barthes, myth functions to naturalize dominant beliefs, attitudes, and values, making them seem to be simply the truth of things or common sense rather than a set of culturally constructed ideas. He wanted to "track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there" (11, emphasis in original).

For Barthes, this work was so important because what goes without saying is usually the inequity of power and the many forms and levels of violence this produces.

Barthes grounded his approach to mythology in semiotics. This and the associated diagramming of linguistic terminology in his essay "Myth Today" can date this work and make it feel both too simplistic and over-complicated. In the preface to the 1970 edition of *Mythologies*, Barthes notes that the work is of its time and that semiological analysis has necessarily moved on since its original publication. However, the spirit of mythologies, and the ideological criticism that it inspires and enables, continues to be a useful framework for cultural scholars from a broad range of disciplines today (see Al-Kadi and Alzoubi; Bennett; Conrad; Houze; Huppatz; Mavor).

So why is myth particularly useful for understanding how certain ideas about rural places develop, circulate, and find purchase in contemporary society? Firstly, critical scholarship generated by a wide range of disciplines has revealed the UK's countryside to be a highly contested site, and our encounters with it, be that eating farm-produced food, visiting heritage properties, or walking on public footpaths, are shot through with ideological currents. There are many recent powerful examples of this, including Corinne Fowler's mappings of the legacies of colonialism in English country estates, Vron Ware's deep analysis of the Hampshire countryside in relation to power and empire, Guy Shrubsole on landownership, and Neil Chakraborti on rural racism. Thinking on the contested nature of rural places has also moved beyond the academy, reaching interested publics through recent art exhibitions (see Blanchard and Spira; Koolhaas), the popularity of landscape-related autobiographies exploring intersectional relationships to rural places (see Carthew; Le Bas; Parker; Sethi) and high-profile media coverage of protests over access to land (see, for example, Wall 2023). A myth-focused approach helps to read representations of the rural for the ideologies they feed on, perpetuate, and circulate.

Secondly, Barthes's focus on the flotsam and jetsam of everyday and popular culture reminds us of the importance of attending to the low-grade noise of the objects and practices which surround us. It may seem absurd to spend so much time thinking about a set of air fresheners, but the reach of these objects and the representations of rural places they carry is tremendous. For around 12 months they were on the shelves of all major UK supermarkets, and for some of that time they were part of special promotions which saw them displayed prominently in the much-coveted end of aisle spots. There was a TV advertising campaign and they sponsored the popular Channel 4 show *Come Dine with*

Me and the US Crime Drama slots on Channel 5. There was even a series of pop-up promotional events in London's Covent Garden.

Barthes's mythologies enable a shift in emphasis from thinking only about experiences of the places themselves by acknowledging the important role that practices of consumption play in defining and expressing our relationships with rural places. In his study of the rural idyll, historian Jeremy Burchardt notes that for most people the countryside is now experienced and thought about as "an object of consumption rather than as a means of production" (2). Burchardt may be thinking of the types of consumption that relate to tourism and leisure experiences, but many other types of products draw on imaginary relationships with the countryside, from the supermarket Tesco's use of fictional farm names on its budget food ranges (Shirley 113) to the clothing company Joules using the slogan "Embrace your countryside" to promote its Autumn 2023 collection. These products carry messages like the wholesomeness of the family farm, or the luxury of the wealthy country set, and the decisions we make around these items, whether it is to make a purchase or walk away, expresses at some level an imaginary relationship with the countryside.

This relationship takes place in the imagination but is nevertheless real. Geographer Michael Woods alerts us to the idea that the rural is not simply a set of specific locations; it is also a range of places that are constructed in the imagination through different forms of discourse. Woods defines discourse broadly as including "images, sounds, bodily actions such as gestures, habitual thoughts and practices" (31); products like those discussed above could also be usefully added to this list. For considering the question of why mythologies are productive for thinking about rural places, it is relevant that Woods connects these imaginary encounters with rural places with the production of real ruralities: "discourse … is not just a representation of reality, it creates reality by producing meaning and setting the boundaries of intelligibility" (31). In this way, the discourse about rural places circulated by consumer products can have real effects on rural places.

Finally, in thinking about why myth is a useful tool of analysis in relation to the rural it is worth considering the alignment of rural places with nature. In *The Country and the City*, a text that has become a touchstone for thinking through cultural constructions of the countryside, Raymond Williams identifies sets of assumptions about these locations that have accumulated in literary forms over the centuries, noting that "On the country has gathered the idea of a *natural way* of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue" (9, emphasis added). However, we need to be aware that the "natural life" can have a double meaning: 1) natural as in inherent or innate, free from manipulation, and 2) being close to nature, a connection with plants, animals, and the landscape.

Barthes tells us that part of his motivation to write *Mythologies* was that he "resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn" (11). Here, Barthes is using the word "nature" in the first sense to mean truth or the inherent state of things, and objecting to ideas that have been formed through the political processes of history being thought of as naturally occurring. However, I would argue that it is the rural's close association with nature in the second sense (plants, animals, land) as well as the first sense (simplicity) that makes ideology doubly obscured in that our ideas about plants, animals, and land in relation to humans have been subject to centuries of manipulation, often in the interest of powerful landowners. A text I keep returning to on this is Lowenthal's identification of a set of persistent narratives that have become central to understandings of the English landscape (24). One of these narratives is *artifice*, which he defines as the idea that the rural is in constant need of stewardship and management. This finds expression in agricultural subsidies for certain forms of land management, actions to control the presence of specific plants and animals, and various ways of regulating access and use of land. This is powerfully combined with a sense that such processes are designed to merely maintain nature in something like its raw form. For example, the unexamined feeling that the walls and hedges bordering the green pastures which dominate large areas of the UK are not the result of laws like the enclosures act and agricultural business models relying heavily on grazing for animals, but instead are "natural," the way that the countryside has always looked, and that land management processes merely maintain it.

Myth can help us to think critically about the representations of rural places by not only asking what it is that appears to be nature rather than history, but also how our understandings of the idea of nature itself have been formed through ideological processes. So what might a mythological reading of the national park air fresheners reveal about contemporary imaginings of rural places?

3 Fresh Air

There is a white woman in her early thirties standing on a cliff top. She is experiencing the feeling of fresh air. Fresh air is invisible, but we know that is what she is feeling and we can almost feel it too as it gently wafts her loose wavy hair. Eyes closed, she inhales deeply and smiles. This woman, appearing in the Air Wick national parks air fresheners advert, is experiencing the "pneumatic sublime." This beautiful piece of nomenclature is the work of Steven Connor in his book *The Matter of Air*, where he describes a sensibility "which prospered at the end of the eighteenth century and encouraged the belief in the curative

and uplifting powers of various gases and vapours" (325). Connor tracks how this conviction continued through into the nineteenth century, with the Victorian insistence on the powers of fresh air for the treatment and prevention of a variety of maladies, and into the twentieth century through the popularity of carbonated drinks to enhance mood.

The wonders of aeration also make an appearance in Barthes's *Mythologies* in his critique of the laundry detergent Omo, where he observes that a key element in the marketing of this product is foam. "As for Foam," he says, "it is well known that it signifies luxury … its abundant, easy, almost infinite proliferation allows one to suppose there is in the substance from which it issues a vigorous germ, a healthy and powerful essence" (Barthes 37). He goes on to assert that "it gratifies in the consumer a tendency to imagine matter as something airy … which is sought after like that of happiness … [and can] even be the sign of a certain spirituality" (Barthes 37). Health, happiness, and spirituality are a lot to expect from a laundry detergent or indeed an air freshener, but these tacit promises continue to be effective forms of marketing and in the advert we find them intertwined with culturally constructed relationships with nature.

The emergence of the pneumatic sublime accompanied the development of the painterly romantic sublime, and, hand in hand, they went into the woods and mountains together to take the air and seek out new sensory experiences of nature and landscape. One product of this relationship can be seen in the work of the German romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, who famously depicted, in his work *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), not a woman on a cliff top like the Air Wick advertisers, but a gentleman walker perched atop a rugged peak looking out at the breath-taking landscape. In this visual representation of the romantic but also pneumatic sublime, the fog which shrouds the mountains and trees does double duty by making the air a visible presence in the image and also obscuring the true extent of the peaks, making their reach indeterminate, a key element of the Kantian sublime (Kant 251). The registers of both the pneumatic and the romantic sublime find their contemporary echoes in the air freshener fragrances with descriptions that draw on both the drama of sublime landscapes and the sensational effervescence of the airy: Mountain Sunset and Vibrant Zest; Sea Spray and Ocean Minerals; Wild Blossom and Fresh Mountain Dew; and Spiced Apple and Snowy Mountains.

I assumed the trees depicted in Friedrich's mountainous landscape were pine, but on closer inspection it is difficult to determine. They lack the pointed Christmas-tree formation of deep pine forests, but there are many types of pine tree and I am not an arboriculturist. My assumption that they would be pine could stem from the longstanding association of Germanic landscapes

with dark pine forests (Schama 75–134) but it could also be linked to the pneumatic sublime, for as well as the invigorating mountain air and refreshing mist, the aroma of pine exists in the realm of rural mythologies as a bringer of cleanliness and health. Clare Hickman, in her study of the perceived health-giving properties of pine, traces this belief back to Pliny, who noted the beneficial properties of being amongst pine forests for those suffering from a range of afflictions. It was this association that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries supported the siting of new hospitals and sanatoria close to wooded areas, in some cases using pine wood, thought to emit beneficial chemicals, as a building material (Hickman 106).

It is interesting to note that the Air Wick national parks range does not feature a pine fragrance, despite several of the parks included in the range having substantial pine woodlands (Cairngorms, New Forest, Lake District). One reason for this could be that in the UK most of the large areas of pine woods are plantations belonging to the Forestry Commission. Characteristically, they consist of thousands of identical trees planted in evenly spaced rows, designed to produce uniformly straight trunks. Although the national parks are home to many of these plantations, the large-scale farming of trees as a crop, and the often highly managed nature of the access to these plantations may not feel so desirable as a leisure experience. Another reason for the lack of pine fragrance despite its links to the parks and to the pneumatic sublime could be that it has fallen out of fashion. The association of the smell of pine (real or synthetic) with cleanliness led to its ubiquitous use in disinfectants, which in turn led to its olfactory association with toilets and hospitals, meaning that whilst it remains acceptable for a bathroom cleaning product to smell "pine fresh," it is less desirable in other parts of the home (Hickman 104).

It is no coincidence that the emergence of both the romantic and pneumatic sublime took place during the industrial revolution, as populations shifted towards newly formed urban centers of industry and the extraction of natural resources to power these industries intensified. The migration from country to city left the poor alienated from former agricultural and seasonal ways of living (which were often as harsh as new industrialized forms of work, but offered more direct connections with nature). For the rich, it created a desire to see nature represented as a majestic resource linked to their own success, both materially, through the resources it provided, and metaphorically, as a powerful force tamed through the industry of man. The pollution which blackened every surface in the cities, produced by the intensification of industrial works and the concentration of households burning domestic coal fires, left both the poor and wealthy hankering for fresh air – a desire which is still very much a motivator for visits to the countryside today.

Taking a deep breath of fresh air continues to be part of the performative expression of being in nature (Edensor 7). During the Covid 19 pandemic, lockdowns imposed strict regulation on time spent outdoors, and police enforced the restriction of access to parts of national parks and other outdoor recreation areas. This was a moment when the notion of fresh air became loaded with significance as fear of the airborne virus intensified. As soon as lockdowns were lifted, the media carried a plethora of stories showing the national parks flooded with visitors. Images of long traffic jams and detritus from irresponsible visitors seemed to cast those seeking fresh air as pollutants themselves (Wall 2020).

Examining the idea of fresh air through a mythological lens reveals that the desire for the transformative properties of air is deeply intwined with nature. This powerful desire was mobilized to market a range of air fresheners on the part of Air Wick and to raise the profile of the parks with new and existing audiences on the part of the national parks. However, the mythological lens also encourages us to ask what these myths make us take for granted and what they are obscuring.

What is being taken for granted in the myth of fresh air is the ideology that nature is a resource to be extracted from in order to support individualized or neoliberal notions of wellbeing. The idea of the country providing for the needs of the city is well-established, especially in terms of food production (Steel 53–102). But the mythological discourse that circulates around concepts like fresh air also situates the countryside as service provider, delivering healthy experiences to be consumed like vitamin pills. Whilst wellness services can provide the basis for important rural economies, the reliance on mythological thinking around the health-giving potential of rural places perpetuates an unequal relationship between the country and the city, and supports colonial-like conceptualizations of nature as a resource.

What is being obscured by the myth of fresh air is chronic underinvestment in rural infrastructure and services. A recent parliamentary report showed that provision of health services in the UK is generally poorer in rural areas, and that factors specific to rural places, such as poor public transport, expensive and energy-inefficient housing stock, poorer educational provision, fewer day centers, slow digital connectivity, and the economic precarity of agriculture and tourism industries, mean that "[it] is not just access to healthcare that is compromised in rural areas, but the very determinants of health themselves" (UK.APPG. 4). Returning to Woods on the connection between discourse and intelligibility, we could usefully ask: can we see the need for improved health care access in rural places when dominant cultural discourse continually signals the links between access to nature and wellness?

4 Conclusion

There is more to say. As vaporous and throwaway as the air fresheners seem (although the plastic which encases them is anything but ephemeral), they are replete with rural mythologies; the self-generating, overflowing abundance of Barthes's foamy soap suds would be an appropriate image here. Further investigation of the rural mythologies contained within these objects would lead to conversations about the myth of transportation; the ways in which the adverts associated with these products make use of the idea that smell has the power to transport us to other times and places. In one advert, an inhalation of fragrance transports a kitchen/dining room and its inhabitants into an idyllic rural setting. Such easy access to the countryside, through the air freshener portal, becomes interesting when read alongside some of the conditions of contemporary rurality which create considerable barriers to accessing rural spaces, such as aggressively enforced land ownership/management, lack of public transport infrastructure, racism, and other intersectional discrimination.

The power of transportation would also be a relevant mythology to explore in attending to the national parks' most recent brand collaboration with BMW, which has seen the company installing charging points for electric vehicles in selected car parks in the Lake District (BMW – Recharge in Nature Project). This is a move that signals strategic thinking about sustainable transportation for visitors, but also raises questions about the availability of charging points more widely in rural areas, and again points to the dearth of public transport options, not only for accessing the parks but for everyday life in rural places.

Using the concept of rural mythologies as a framework for the critical analysis of cultural representations of rural places enables the close scrutiny of "the decorative display of *what-goes-without saying*" (Barthes 11, emphasis in original) in how understandings of romanticized relationships with rural places are constructed. An attention to rural mythology reveals the important role that consumer cultures play in constructing, circulating, and consolidating myths about rural places. Furthermore, by revealing how mythologies can obscure inequality, such attention plays an important role in understanding how discourse circulated in cultural artefacts contributes to the production of the lived conditions of contemporary rurality.

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CHAPTER 17

"After You've Taken Everything, What Will Be Left?": Rural-Urban Relationalities in Folk Horror from the Celtic Margins in the UK

Kate Woodward

Abstract

Focusing on two of the Celtic regions of the UK, this chapter will explore two films that are positioned as folk horror, which, in a British context, has been conceived of as "the ultimate Brexit genre." It is argued that this classification, which portrays the rural areas as regressive, xenophobic, and perilous for city-dwelling cosmopolitans, perpetuates a conventional binary perception of rural-urban relations. This chapter will demonstrate how the films counter this by de-romanticizing the rural while also deconstructing the urban-rural binary. Using the concept of *cynefin*, it demonstrates how contemporary political realities have led to the erasure of relational epistemologies of spatialized subjectivity.

1 Cynefin: Rooted in Place

Focusing on rural-urban relationalities in two Celtic regions of the UK, this chapter explores two recent folk horror films that focus on the relationships between people and their *cynefin / cynevin*, their being rooted in place.[1] Examining *Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019) and *Gwledd* (*The Feast*, Lee Haven Jones 2021), I will show how these films question traditional conceptions of "British" Folk Horror and how their locatedness within specific rural landscapes and cynefin enables a critical discussion of contemporary political realities in Wales and Cornwall that destabilizes clear-cut understandings of both "rural" and "urban" insideness and outsideness (Relph).

1 *Cynefin* (Welsh) and *cynevin* (Cornish) have no direct English translation, but their meaning is understood as "rooted in place."

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Cynefin, as well as *milltir sgwâr* and *bro*,[2] are terms that signify specifically Welsh ways of engaging with spatiality. Nevertheless, there are different understandings of cynefin. For Pearson and Shanks, for example, it refers to Welsh cognitive maps that are "not precise territorial zones, rigorously defined, delineated and patrolled" (148), while for Matthew Jarvis it renders "the physicality of the Welsh environment as a vitally *human* space" (141). Bedwyr Lewis Jones locates cynefin in the place where Welsh people were brought up, the area that impresses itself on someone during the formative period between five and fifteen years old (121). Cynefin thus describes lived landscapes, not scenery; for Jones it is "the Welshman's first and foremost window on the world" (121), and for the painter Kyffin Williams it is "not just a landscape but a landscape with everything in it" (121; 16–17). In these understandings, cynefin appears to signify a habitat or territory with people at its core, allowing Wales to be seen as a tapestry of *cynefinoedd* where men and women have lived out their lives, and where the landscape is a major component to the drama of human life (B.L. Jones 122).

Cynefin, moreover, can also point to a more complex environmental ideology, where the interrelation between humans and the more-than-human world is emphasized, and it emerges as a way of understanding human beings' sense of place and entanglement with the natural world. For Adams and Beauchamp, cynefin is "a conceptual gateway to thinking about 'the landscape' as a living, breathing changing world, a world we participate in, are dependent on and a part of" (14). It stands in opposition to an anthropocentric view of the world and represents a marginalized epistemological viewpoint that reinstates us to a more balanced relationship with the more-than-human word (Adams and Beauchamp 15). From this perspective, cynefin recognizes human and more-than-human as co-constitutive, and as standing in marginalized opposition to the colonial, capitalist separation of human and nature, and its legitimization of the violent extraction of rural land. It sets itself against long-standing approaches to Wales, notably "the classic English Romantic colonial representation of the country as barren of indigenous cultural interest but as precious for its scenery" and natural resources (M.W. Thomas 4–5).

Gwledd is set in Wales, and *Bait* in Cornwall, another Celtic region considered peripheral in the UK, where cynefin is known as cynevin. The term "Celtic" has been widely used to describe the people of Wales, Cornwall,

2 *Milltir sgwâr* translates as "square mile" but its meaning reaches beyond physical locality and represents deep ties of identification and belonging. *Bro* translates as "region" or "area" and has the same meaning in Cornish. It is also used in the phrase *bro fy mebyd*, which means "place of my childhood."

Brittany, Ireland, the Isle of Man, and Scotland. These areas are often described as a "Celtic fringe" due to their geographical location, with the very notion of fringe suggesting a skirting or peripherality of location. For Steven G. Ellis, the term "Celtic fringe" is an "English and metropolitan – and so an outsider construct," which brings with it "ideological baggage" due to England's historically fraught relations with the Celtic people (221). It "implies a relationship with some other region or territory that is in the nature of core and periphery or centre and frontier" (Ellis 222). This echoes the landmark work of Michael Hechter, who, already in the 1970s, characterized the relationship between England – the supposed "national core" – and its periphery – "the Celtic fringe" – as one of internal colonization (1975). The critic Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) and the scholar Ernest Renan's "La poésie des races celtique" (1854) are considered to have inaugurated a discourse known as Celticism, which, in its function, resembles Orientalism: "Just as orientalism describes a discourse composed of blanket statements about other cultures classed as 'Oriental' so 'Celticism' is composed of blanket statements about Celts made from a particular point of view" (Jones et al. 19). *Bait* focuses on the experience of the rural insider, making visible the urbanist-colonial fetishization and romanticization of Cornwall by outsiders and the repercussions of this for insiders. *Gwledd* also challenges the binary of insideness/outsideness relating to human relationships with space, by demonstrating how one can move between the two. Both films reveal the political, cultural, and social realities of marginalized places, and emphasize the painful significance of losing the understanding of relations of belonging in and to the land encapsulated by the cynefin/cynevin epistemology.

Wales and Cornwall are very different, but share a Celtic heritage and a geographic situatedness on the fringes of the UK. Both currently face an unprecedented housing crisis due to the rise in second home ownership. There are over 13,000 second homes in Cornwall, making it the local authority with the largest number of second homes in England (Action Empty Homes). In some parts of Wales, 40% of the houses sold are bought as second homes. There are significant repercussions for communities, with local people driven out and local services put under extreme pressure in peak seasons. Both films tackle this crisis through the genre of folk horror.

In his expansive definition and assessment of the topography of folk horror, Adam Scovell (2017b) attempts to anchor the genre according to a set of aesthetic and thematic traits. His "Folk Horror Chain" facilitates the identification of a folk horror canon that transcends time and space, not being limited to one nation or one time period. There are four links to Scovell's chain, consisting of motifs he argues can be found in folk horror texts: firstly, the usually rural

"landscape" is depicted as having an adverse effect on the social and moral identity of the inhabitants (2017b: 17). Secondly, the inhabitants are perceived as "isolated," which, thirdly, means that they possess a "skewed belief systems and morality." The final link in the chain is the occurrence of a "Happening/Summoning," a climactic supernatural or cultural ritual the narrative has been building up to (Scovell 2017b: 17–18). A key part of this folk horror blueprint, therefore, is a culturally and politically Othered (rural) community seen, crucially, from the outside. As Jamie Chambers notes, "folk horror can be … understood as a cinema of culture clash, as it frequently employs the narrative device of an outsider encountering an Othered culture" (25). In this chapter, I interrogate the way the landscape and Othered isolated community are positioned in Scovell's and Chambers's accounts of folk horror, which seem to replicate urban-rural and metropole-periphery binaries and hierarchies.

There have been many writings about folk horror set in rural communities (Barnett; Packham; Paciorek; Scovell 2017b), but the political nature of such configurations has not been adequately interrogated. David Bell, in his important writing on rural horror and the anti-idyll, argues that "in Britain, the rural idyll is a settled landscape mapping out a social order across a picturesque terrain – especially its construction as 'village England'" (94). Peter Hutchings suggests that, apart from emphasizing the urban experience, another way of resisting this conceptualization is to focus critically on the rural itself. One way of doing this is to render it "as a disturbing and alienating location" (Hutchings 34). He goes on to say:

> This often involves moving away from the South-East to the geographical fringes of England (Cornwall, for example), or leaving England entirely for Scotland or Wales or islands off the coast. All of these provide locations for nasty stories about the countryside and what happens to outsiders – usually urbanites who provide figures of identification even when they themselves are not especially attractive – who venture there. (Hutchings 34)

As a result, the rural settings of folk horror cinema often get ideologically constructed according to an urban-rural binary (informed by an English ideology of metropole-colony) that, from an anti-idyllic perspective, casts the rural as a dangerous, regressive, and potentially lethal space for urbanites to visit or relocate to. That is, conceptualizations of folk horror tend to employ an urbanist anti-idyllic gaze to imagine rural and peripheral regions and places.

Numerous critics, Scovell included, have noted how folk horror is the ultimate "Brexit genre," drawing attention to how the landscapes of folk horror,

their rural communities, and these communities' response to outsiders reflect tendencies towards a narrow-minded form of nationalism (Newton; Scovell 2017a; Smith; Waites). In this respect, it is relevant that a majority in both Wales and Cornwall voted to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum, despite receiving the highest levels of EU structural funding (Nice). Using cynefin as a way to read and make sense of these two films, however, I problematize readings of folk horror as (only) nationalistic. In addition, I challenge existing definitions of folk horror that presume that folk horror, and specifically British folk horror, affirms an urbanist/English/imperial gaze towards the (ruralized) periphery of Wales and Cornwall, by arguing that *Bait* and *Gwledd* play with this gaze and, by invoking cynefin/cynevin, bring into view these peripheralized spaces and communities, not through urban/rural or English/colonized fringe binaries, but rather from an entangled perspective that evades clear-cut understandings of insider/outsider dynamics and relationships between rural people and land, and that demonstrates the ethical implications for both rural dwellers and urbanites.

2 *Bait*: Horror without the Horror

Bait demonstrates the tensions between two different imaginings of Cornwall: that of the locals living in a traditional fishing village, for whom the struggle to make ends meet is a daily reality, and that of the urban-centric, moneyed "tourist gaze" aimed at precisely the same village and way of life (Urry 2002). At the heart of *Bait* is Martin, a struggling fisherman without a boat, deeply resentful of the Londoners who have bought his childhood home, pushing him to reside in a newly built neighborhood on the periphery of the village. He also resents his brother, Steven, for using the old family boat to take partying tourists on pleasure tours. Martin refuses to capitalize on the outsiders' exploitative desires, which result from the idealizing gaze they direct at the village, preferring instead to trawl the shores by hand for fish and lobster with his nephew Neil, painstakingly laying out nets and fixing lobster pots.

Central to many of the tensions exposed in *Bait* is the concept of ownership, centering on Martin and Steven's family home. The fishing cottage has been sold to the Leighs, an affluent family from London. They have decked the house in faux-fishing paraphernalia: ropes, nets, portholes, and a miniature anchor as a door knocker. Even as their purchasing power corrodes Martin's way of life, they are commodifying and fetishizing it. Jenkin juxtaposes a close shot of Sandra Leigh's expensive slip-on shoes as she steps out of the Range Rover upon arriving at the cottage with a close shot of Martin's solid

work boots. The camera then focuses on Sandra's hands unpacking the goods bought in and transported from London – numerous bottles of sparkling wine, imported cheeses, organic yogurt, a watermelon, a pestle and mortar – and contrasts them with Martin's roughened hands toiling with nets, knotting rope, and fixing lobster pots. This shot sequence highlights the different physical relationships the two characters have with the landscape around them. Noticing the decorative buoys dangling on the holiday cottage wall, Martin comments "They could be mine, I've lost plenty"; Sandra's riposte is "I doubt it, I got them online," once more signaling how different their perspectives and their lives are.

Edward Relph's taxonomy of insideness and outsideness is relevant here:

> From the outside you look upon a place as a traveler might look upon a town from a distance: from the inside you experience a place, are surrounded by it and part of it. The inside-outside division thus presents itself as a simple but basic dualism, one that is fundamental in our experiences of lived-space and one that provides the essence of place. (49)

The outsiders in *Bait* fetishize the village's history, re-imagining and repurposing a version of the past that is still being clung to by Martin and other insiders. Through the fishing paraphernalia decorating the walls for aesthetic reasons, the tourists and second-home owners attempt to re-create a version of what they perceive to be a romantic past, thus complicating the idea of what comes from the inside and what comes from the outside, what is local and what is distant, what is historical and what is contemporary. As Kennedy and Kingcome note in their discussion of Cornwall, "the combination of heritage and tourism has serious and demoralizing implications. There is the uneasy sense of living in a theme park, where sites are misappropriated, preserved and commodified by others for others; whilst the economic base and familiar landscapes of the living community are under pressure" (qtd. in Moseley 54).

Bait does not necessarily bear the hallmarks of a horror film and Jenkin himself has spoken of how his films are often described as "horror without the horror" (Lizotte). While Scovell's folk horror chain focuses on plot development, it is mainly the *form* of Jenkin's film that prompts a sense of the uncanny. Shot in black and white on a 16mm clockwork camera, hand-processed and post-synched, the film utilizes temporal leaps and flashforwards to create a foreboding atmosphere that suggest that Martin might take his battle against a changing society that is encroaching on his way of life as well as his family's and community's history into the realms of the horrific. The texture of the film bears the hallmarks of its production, showing flickers, cracks, and

grain where wool, pollen, and light have affected the celluloid in the process of development. Rather than induce any form of nostalgia for the past, the imperfections anchor the film to its location and draw attention to its materiality. The environment and cynefin of where the film was created is thus quite literally embedded into the form of the film; as Ian Mantgani says, the film "feels pounded into existence by hand, or possibly belched up by the angry sea."

Although, in line with Scovell's folk horror chain, outsiders do encounter an Othered culture in the fishing village, crucially, rather than representing that community from the outside, *Bait* flips the perspective by focusing on the experience of the exoticized *insider*. The dissimilitude between insiders and outsiders, between local and distant, and the resultant economic, cultural, and geographic conflicts collide, leading to violence and ultimately, death. Martin's simmering resentment leads the viewer to expect that the violence will come from him and be targeted towards outsiders, when, in fact, countering Scovell's folk horror chain, it is an insider, Martin's nephew Neil, who is killed by an outsider, the Leigh's son, Hugo. Furthermore, the climatic event of the film is not a gathering that exposes the perverted morality of the rural insiders, but a murder that lays bare the perverted morality of the outsiders, exemplified by Hugo's sister Katie, who keeps the murder, committed by her brother, a secret.

Bait demonstrates the structural forces impacting rural life, with tensions between locals and tourists/second-home owners manifesting spatially. Martin continues to park his truck outside the cottage whenever he is fishing on the beach to the chagrin of the Leighs, who claim the space as private parking for their bed and breakfast guests. Similarly, a battle is waged over the pool table at the local pub. The incomers challenge the local practice of "winner stays on," claiming that this is their right as they have "put money down." This constitutes an attempt to destabilize a local custom by imposing a capitalist gaze on it. The entitlement of this gaze is emphasized when Hugo, the Leighs' teenage son, asks Martin if he may borrow or hire a lobster pot and Martin refuses; Hugo immediately announces that he will buy one instead. His father, Tim, consistently argues for the might of money, claiming that the family are part of the community and contribute to the "local industry." To this, Martin's furious riposte is that, in actuality, they only visit for a fortnight, bring everything with them that they need, and spend the profits from their holiday home in the Maldives.

Bait shows a way of life being suffocated due to the metropolitan elite buying properties, resulting in a housing market full of Airbnbs, holiday homes, and short-term lets. "You didn't have to sell us this house!" claims Sandra Leigh. "Didn't I?" answers Martin, as the economic and cultural contexts of the sale linger between them. The logic of colonization peripheralizes the local people in

their own communities and peripheralizes their own knowledges in relation to the land. At the same time, Martin, as a fisherman, partakes in the extractivism of his rural location (albeit on a small scale), and thus is also implicated in the very system that undermines cynefin – the relations between land and community.

Edward Relph's conception of insideness and outsideness in *Place and Placelessness* (1976) is useful in making sense of Martin's function within this rural imagination. According to Relph, a phenomenological geographer, insideness and outsideness are ways of articulating the range and depth of human relationships with space, and as such an essential component in the formation of identity. Insideness conveys the degree to which a person belongs to and identifies with a place. Relph suggests that the more deeply inside a place people feel they are, the stronger their identitarian attachments to that place will be (55). People can also feel alienated or separated from a place when they live with a divide or separation between it and themselves, a mode of experience Relph describes as outsideness. For Relph, the strongest sense of place is existential insideness, a deep immersion in a place felt to be a home or community. The opposite is existential outsideness, an experience of place marked by alienation and strangeness "such as that often felt by newcomers to a place or by a people who, having been away from their birth place, return to feel strangers because the place is no longer what it was when they know it earlier" (Seamon and Sowers 43–52).

Bait complicates Relph's phenomenology of space by showing that how people feel they relate to a space is only part of this configuration: how others think they relate to a space is also important. Martin feels an existential outsideness even though he has never left, and the Leighs feel an existential insideness even though, to Martin, they are outsiders. In addition, not all the locals see the outsiders in the same way; Martin's brother, for example, is happy to offer the tourists a sense of authenticity by taking them on tours on the old fishing boat. The film therefore blurs the lines between insiders and outsiders, introducing fluidity between and around these categories.

Urry's work on travel and tourism, which focuses on economic and cultural power, complicates Relph's account, and illuminates the structural imbalances that underpin tourist/local relations as portrayed in the film (Urry 1995). It is the tourist gaze that casts Cornwall as a playground where anyone with enough money can play at being an insider that turns Martin from someone experiencing existential insideness to someone experiencing existential outsideness, not because he has been away, but because his space has been taken over. In this way, the film makes visible the emotional damage caused by the urbanist-colonialist fetishization and romanticization of Cornwall, which has its roots in ideas of Celticism.

3 *Gwledd*: Insideness and Outsideness

Whereas *Bait* emphasizes that the insider can also be made to feel like an outsider, *Gwledd* emphasizes that the insider can become the outsider. It focuses on an affluent family of four – Glenda, her husband Gwyn, who is the local Member of Parliament, and their two wayward adult sons, Gweirydd and Guto – who live predominantly in London, but also have a constituency retreat in the Welsh countryside. Gweirydd, previously a doctor, now trains obsessively for a triathlon, and Guto is a drug user who has been forced by his parents to leave London to dry out. When the film starts, preparations are afoot for a highly significant feast. That evening, they will host Euros, a businessman whose company has been drilling the family's land for some time to extract precious minerals. Also invited are the couple who own a neighboring farm: Mair, a childhood friend of Glenda's, and her husband Iori, with the intention of convincing them to let Euros's company drill their land as well. Into this situation comes the enigmatic Cadi, a local girl employed to help Glenda prepare and serve the food.

Scovell's folk horror chain recognizes landscape as an inherent part of creating the sense of horror, but the landscape in *Gwledd* is only prominently present in the opening sequence. As the opening credits appear on a black screen, bird song, the sound of a car door being slammed, footstep, and vehicles moving can be heard. The first shot of the film reveals a field situated between green rolling hills beneath a blue sky. In the center of the frame is a towering industrial drill, belching smoke in an otherwise idyllic landscape. A man, dwarfed by the drill, stands beneath it, clad in a hard hat and ear defenders. A close shot reveals the drill itself, plundering the ground violently as earth and debris flies. The noise is first that of metal hitting metal, and then gives way to a high-pitched, ear-piercing tone. The camera is positioned at an extreme low angle, on the ground among the grass, and we follow the man as he staggers away, discarding his hat and ear defenders before collapsing, his ears covered in blood. The drill continues to plunder as the title of the film appears vertically across the screen – a graphic match with the vertical movement of the drill. Subsequently, the action moves into the ultra-modern house. In the opening scene, then, the film foregrounds the disintegration of cynefin, with relations between land and people disrupted by the drilling and the cold modernist architecture of the house, which seems out of place.

The narrative of *Gwledd* takes place within the limited geographical space of the house and the surrounding land. Indeed, this is Glenda's "*milltir sgwâr*" or "square mile," identified by D. J. Williams as a specifically Welsh way of

engaging with spatiality in his memoir *Hen Dŷ Ffarm* (1953), where he says the following of the area in which he grew up:

> Dysgais ei charu, mi gredaf, cyn dysgu cerdded. Ni theithiais y darn yma o wlad erioed … heb deimlo rhyw gynnwrf rhyfedd yn cerdded fy natur – cynnwrf megis un yn teimlo penllanw ei etifeddiaeth ddaearyddol ac ysbrydol yn dygyfor ei enaid. Dyma wlad fy nhadau mewn gwirionedd. Fe'm meddiannwyd i ganddi; ac, yn ôl y gynneddf syml a roddwyd i mi, fe'i meddiannwyd hithau gennyf innau …. Y brogarwch cyfyng hwn, os mynner, a'i ganolbwynt yn y "filltir sgwâr", yn Hen Ardal fach fy mebyd … (67)

> I learnt to love it, I believe, before I learnt to walk. I have never travelled this part of the country … without feeling strangely stirred in my nature, like one who feels the full tide of his terrestrial and spiritual inheritance surging through his soul. This, actually, is the land of my fathers. It took possession of me, and I have taken possession of it in accordance with that simple property of my nature that responds … This close homeland love … concentrated upon the square mile in the old locality of my boyhood … (68)

The family live on the land where Glenda was born and raised. But the ties that bind her to this "locality of her girlhood," as Williams would have it, and her cynefin, have utterly disintegrated. It is in a black-bricked, windowless contemplation chamber within the family home that the viewer first encounters Glenda, her face blackened from a charcoal face mask as she prepares for the evening's feast. Glenda and her family are not outsiders and, against Scovell's conceptualization of folk horror, are not part of an isolated, othered community viewed from the outside. Rather, she has deep roots in the landscape and its traditions, as evidenced by the ease with which she skins rabbits for the feast. Nevertheless, the family's new-found wealth has led to her demolishing the family farmhouse, set on three hundred acres of land, to make way for her dream home. A celebration of ambition and wealth, its interior of pale and dark bricks, sterile, stark corridors, polished concrete floors, and an absence of decoration is utterly at odds with the landscape in which it rests.

Like Martin in *Bait*, but in a different way, Glenda challenges Relph's conceptualization of insideness and outsideness. Although historically rooted in the Welsh locality, and therefore aligned with Relph's existential insideness, she, as now also a Londoner, has come to conceive of the rural area as backwards and lacking. She shows traits of existential outsideness, as she bemoans how

"the architect was keen to source the best materials. He tried to buy locally but it wasn't always possible" and considers the local supermarket as only acceptable for everyday needs. Glenda, then, is another folk horror character situated somewhere between Relph's insider and outsider.

Despite the family's claim to insideness, nothing about their relationship with the land is authentic; they are indifferent to their surroundings and view it as a commodity. At the very heart of *Gwledd* is the idea of consumption, of food but also of the land through excavation and mining. Gweirydd, obsessed with the aesthetics of his body, spends his time cycling not through the landscape but in the house, on a stationary bike, while Gwyn only pretends to have shot the rabbits that form the centerpiece of the evening's feast. Glenda's late mother's possessions, most significantly her Welsh blankets, symbolic of Welsh identity, the continuation of tradition, and the bond between mother and child, are dismissed by Glenda as "primitive" and disposed of.[3]

According to the geographer John Wylie, "landscape is tension" and folk horror depicts the rural landscape as harboring "a tension between proximity and distance, body and mind, sensuous immersion and detached observation" (1). This complex tension is at the heart of the film, as Glenda and her family consistently valuate distance, the mind, and detached observation over the proximity, body, and sensuous immersion associated with cynefin: they only see the landscape in terms of how it may be consumed. While for D.J. Williams the relationship between human and land is one of mutual possession, Glenda has foregone the relationality that cynefin provides. For Glenda, the Welsh land is not something that took possession of her – and that she took possession of, affectively – in her childhood, but a resource ripe for capitalist ventures that can fund her extravagant lifestyle, and a blank canvas for the building of a dream home. Therefore, *Gwledd* not only challenges binary understandings of insideness/outsideness, but also demonstrates how people who were once insiders can participate in an extractive logic that has pushed cynefin and local epistemologies of rurality to the margins. This is echoed in *Bait*, in the contrasting attitudes of the brothers towards the outsiders; Steven accommodates the tourists with his boat trips, while Martin resists their encroachment.

The marginalization of cynefin, and its potential repercussions, are emphasized through the character of Glenda's neighbor, Mair. When, coaxed by Euros, Glenda and Gwyn discuss the opportunities for mining her land, Mair

3 Catrin Nia Thomas, writing on Welsh blankets, articulates the way in which they provide "an unexplainable feeling of content; the cloth has somehow acquired human qualities, providing care and comfort as well as protection from the outside world. We are almost transported back to our childhood, swathed in a blanket by our mothers" (15).

responds not only that the land is their livelihood, but also that she sees herself as a part of the landscape, suggesting a relation of entanglement. Hanging in Glenda's kitchen is an enormous abstract painting which purports to be a representation of the surrounding landscape. Glenda proudly shows it to Mair, claiming that the colorful painting is "*y fro*" (the district). The word used is significant, and demonstrates that Glenda is still somewhat connected to, or perhaps haunted by, a more local epistemology of human-land relations. The painting, however, is so abstract that visitors tend to see big themes in it – love and hope – while Glenda, as she laughingly remarks, simply sees "the holiday in Mauritius I could have had with the ten grand we paid for it." The monetary value of the land, it seems, has usurped any emotional ties to "*y fro*," which is not recognizably referenced anywhere in the house. Tellingly, Glenda utilizes this abstract version of the landscape as a map to point out to Mair where Euros would like his company to excavate: in The Rise, a location, according to local folklore, that should not be disturbed as it is the resting place of a goddess. Mair is horrified, but unaware that, in fact, The Rise is already being drilled, as demonstrated in the pre-opening credit sequence.

Glenda dismisses Mair's concerns as superstition, but the unfolding of the film's narrative suggests that the goddess rises up against those who disturbed her in the form of Cadi. An enigmatic, unnerving but silent presence from the moment of her arrival at the house, Cadi is shown to respond in extreme ways to the skinned rabbits, to leave traces of earth along the walls and floors, and, in the final quarter of the film, to kill Gwyn, Guto, and Gweirydd one by one. In this way, *Gwledd* enacts the fourth part of Scovell's folk horror chain, the supernatural "happening or summoning," here aimed not at outsiders but at (former) insiders complicit in the rural's capitalist commodification. Gwyn hears a high-pitched agonizing noise – reminiscent of the drilling in the opening scene – as Cadi inserts a skewer into his ear. Guto's leg is chopped off, replicating an earlier scene in which he chopped wood with the same axe. Finally, Gweirydd, who was sacked from the hospital where he worked as a doctor due to sexual misconduct, is seduced by Cadi and mutilated by a shred of glass she has inserted between her legs. Cadi's actions can be seen as nature – The Rise – rising up and taking revenge on the family for their greedy, rampant consumption of the land and everything belonging to it. Paul Wells describes revenge-of-nature horror films as "based on the idea that the everyday things that humankind take for granted in nature … will one day cease to operate in the anticipated manner, and inexplicably rise to take its revenge on the exploitation and insensitivity of human beings" (115). Cadi is cast as a more-than-human figure taking revenge on the family for their urban sins and the plundering of the land.

It could be argued that the film stereotypically constructs Nature as a feminized force wreaking revenge on humanity, playing into an eco-anxious narrative (Roach). Yet, although Cadi is associated with a natural, maternal force, this is not a purely destructive one, as becomes clear when, after killing him, she cradles Gwyn and sings him a traditional lullaby. She is not after humanity as a whole, but after those who do most damage to nature. This is reinforced by Mair, who tells Glenda: "your mother would be ashamed to see the person you've become." Much like Martin's late father appears to him in the fake porthole in the remodeled family home in *Bait*, Glenda sees a vision of her late mother in the window. Later, she appears to have transformed into her mother, wearing her old dress and earrings, before killing Euros and slitting her own throat.

Unlike in *Bait*, here the horror does manifest, as the film's latter part invokes features of the slasher genre. However, it could be argued that the true horror at the heart of *Gwledd* is the fact that the pillaging of the land is not an act of extractive capitalism undertaken by a foreign company, and the demolishing of the farmhouse not a decision by a second-home owner without roots in the local area, but both acts committed by Welsh people who have abandoned cynefin in favor of capitalist consumption. Utilizing Welsh ways of engaging with spatiality, *Gwledd* counters both Scovell's horror chain and Relph's phenomenology of space by demonstrating how the insider can transform into an outsider. While Glenda rejects notions of cynefin and Williams's entangled, mutually possessive conceptualization of the relationship between the human and non-human world, the land ultimately turns on her, takes possession of her, and kills her.

4 Conclusion

Both *Bait* and *Gwledd* have been persistently described as folk horror (Felperin; Gower; Ludewig; Mantgani; Dalton). Ever since the Unholy Trinity of *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971), and *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973), critical conceptions of the rural within folk horror have tended to treat rurality and the landscape in a homogenous way (Gatiss). This denies the multiplicity of the rural by representing the rural landscape and its folk as unmodern, and as virulent protectors of the idyll not as an ideal but as a perverted, supernatural realm. The homogenizing spatial politics of the folk horror genre work to alienate rural communities from the contemporary world and to privilege a metropolitan gaze on rurality that

evaluates it as a threatening space where outsiders are targeted by insiders and these groups can always be clearly distinguished.

To Scovell's contention that "Folk Horror unusually and accurately maps the nationalistic elements of post-Brexit Britain" (2017a: n. pag.), Dawn Keetley responds that one cannot reduce folk horror to a representation of the rural as populated exclusively by Brexiteers, and should instead use a critical methodology to pay attention "to the ways particular stone structures, rivers, valley, mountains and border regions have dictated their own stories" (n. pag.). In this chapter, I have argued that *Gwledd* and *Bait*, as different as they are, recalibrate the genre of folk horror through their rootedness in particular *cynefinoedd*, and their portrayal of this rootedness as something that may be threatened by outsiders and insiders alike, as the insideness/outsideness boundary is blurred by tourism, counterurbanization, and various forms of extraction. *Bait* firmly locates itself within the local culture, but the main local perspective it offers is an alienated one. Meanwhile, the perspective of the second-home owners is portrayed as claiming insider status, and to some extent achieving it. It is here that Scovell's folk horror chain is transformed, by making "the happening" a crime committed by the outsider. Notably the crime comes about by the outsider adopting a traditional patriarchal perspective on his sister's sexuality, and the film therefore associates this backwardness with the urbanite rather than with the rural community. Both *Bait* and *Gwledd* problematize the binary of insider/outsider and Scovell's folk horror chain, albeit in different ways. *Bait* emphasizes that the insider can be made to feel like an outsider (and that the violence can, in the end, come not from the insider but from the outsider); *Gwledd* emphasizes that the insider can become the outsider.

By transforming the folk horror chain, the films counter the conventional binary perception of urban-binary relations within the genre. Through its deconstruction, they subscribe to the complexity and flexibility of Relph's conceptualization of place experiences. By demonstrating that insideness and outsideness is a continuum, Relph provides a terminology for describing how and why the same place can be experienced differently by different individuals (Martin and the Leighs) or how, over time, the same person can come to experience the same place differently (Gwenda) (Seamon and Sowers 43–52). By embracing Relph's conceptualization, folk horror can function as a cultural imagination that illuminates, in line with this volume's aims, how people inside and outside the rural make sense of the rural and conceive of their own relation to it. In addition, despite the apparent contrast between *Gwledd*'s blood-soaked ending and *Bait*'s lack of conventional horror elements, both films code as horrific the move away from a local epistemological viewpoint,

the move away from cynefin, and the resulting political, cultural, and ecological repercussions of modernity (as involving capitalism and colonialism) in the contemporary Celtic landscapes in which the films are set.

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CHAPTER 18

A Place Like No Other: Exploring the Relationship between Amusement Parks and Queer Men in the Midwest

Marcel Strobel

Abstract

This chapter investigates the queerness of rural amusement park spaces, challenging the assumption that queer spaces are exclusively urban. Through film analysis of Todd Stephens's *Edge of Seventeen* and ethnographic semi-structured interviews with former employees of Cedar Point, a Midwestern amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio, this chapter argues that amusement parks are inherently queer spaces which disrupt traditional rural-urban dichotomies when located in rural areas. Consequently, it elucidates the significance of space and place in forming and shaping queer identities and experiences in rural America, opening new queer attachments to the rural and challenging the spectralization of queer bodies and identities in these contexts.

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> What's the difference between a straight man and a gay man at Cedar Point? – One season.
>
> DAVID, 31, Sandusky, OH

• • •

1 Reimagining America's Heartland

This is the story of becoming and being queer at America's Roller Coast.[1] On 26 June 2014, I boarded a plane from Frankfurt, Germany to Cleveland, Ohio to

1 I use "queer" as an umbrella term encompassing sexual desires or practices outside traditional sexual and gender norms. While this chapter primarily focuses on the lived experiences of queer men working at Cedar Point, I am situating their experience in the broader queer

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go and participate in a work and travel program with the Council on International Educational Exchange that would place me as a ride operator at Cedar Point, an award-winning amusement park in rural Sandusky, Ohio.[2] I had just come out to my mother as a queer man a few days before my departure. My father still believed that I was straight and going abroad to improve my language skills, which I needed for my English literature degree. But my primary ambition was to work at an amusement park that I had admired from an early age. As a roller coaster enthusiast on the other side of the Atlantic, I never thought I would ever visit Cedar Point, let alone work there. Little did I know back then that I would discover a whole different world *aside* from, and yet *part* of record-breaking roller coasters, cotton candy stands, and nostalgic carousels. In America's "heartland," understood as "an imagined, national middle or average … that allows for normative claims about the state of the nation," an entire community of queer employees decided to work and live where others vacationed (Halvorson and Reno 2). Nine years later, this life-changing experience inspired me to inquire about an amusement park as a site of becoming queer in the Midwest – both literarily and literally.

In *Fairground Attractions: A Genealogy of the Pleasure Ground*, Deborah Philips defines the pleasure ground as a leisure space with infinite possibilities (1). This includes pleasure, desire, and satisfaction, with sexual pleasure as one possibility. In this chapter, I argue that amusement parks offer insight into queer subjectivity formation in rural North America. I investigate the relationship between rural amusement parks and queer subjectivities, analyzing how they intersect with, challenge, and reflect queer experiences by studying Cedar Point as a place of queer subjectivity formation.[3] Using an interdisciplinary

community and academic field of queer rurality and urban studies, providing the potential to study other identities not mentioned in this chapter. Throughout my study, I also want to honor my interviewees' use of "gay" to refer to their male same-sex desire, knowing that the term "gay" is now also widely used to refer to a distinct white urban upper-class sexual identity.

2 See Golden Ticket Awards by *Amusement Today* from 2010–2013. https://goldenticketawards.com/past-gta-winners/.

3 The terms *space* and *place* have a complex history with a multiplicity of meanings that have changed over time, particularly in the context of postcolonialism, human geography, feminist studies, and literary studies (see Gregory et al. 767–773). They are crucial for understanding social and cultural life in geography (Johnston and Longhurst 15). Drawing from Doreen Massey's idea of space as a dynamic "configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity," I use *space* to represent distinct configurations of "social relations," particularly queer space, emphasizing its dynamic non-static nature (4). These various spaces are essential to the study of gender, sexuality, and their intertwined power dynamics, where space is viewed as complex, changeable, discursively produced, and infused with power relations that intimately connect bodies

approach that sits at the crossroads of cultural, historical, and queer studies, I am drawing on both fictional and non-fictional sources by analyzing the 1998 coming-of-age film *Edge of Seventeen*, directed by David Moreton and written by Todd Stephens, and three semi-structured interviews that I conducted with former Cedar Point employees, including screenwriter Todd Stephens, in 2021.

Both primary sources deromanticize the pastoral/idyllic notion of the rural as a heteronormatively gendered and sexualized heartland by offering insight into the formation of queer subjectivity in the rural Midwest. While these sources are complimentary in their focus, they serve distinct roles within the analysis: the film provides a cultural and historical lens for elucidating the broader socio-cultural context of queer life in the Midwest during the late twentieth century, whereas the interviews offer first-hand, experiential insights that ground the analysis in contemporary lived experiences. Together, they trouble the opposition of imagined and real, global and local, highlighting the interplay between global cultural forces and local lived realities, and showing how the global and local are mutually constitutive in shaping queer subjectivities in the rural Midwest. This interplay relates to the broader argument of this volume, exploring how rural spaces, often idealized or overlooked in globalization studies, are in fact sites where global and local forces intersect.

The dominant trope of the urban in the life of queer individuals has largely prevented us from acknowledging the existence of rural queer communities in general, let alone associating them with rural amusement parks. As Kristin Hoganson has suggested, "what if, instead of treating these components of the heartland myth [meaning '[l]ocal. Insulated. Exceptionalist. Isolationist. Provincial. The ultimate safe space'] as forgone conclusions, we approached them as questions, as invitations to explore?" (xxiii). In contesting the dominant trope of urbanity equals liberation equals visibility in queer studies, this interdisciplinary exploration of the relationship between queer rural sexualities and amusement parks is guided by three major questions: What's so queer about Sandusky, a Midwestern town? What's so queer about Cedar Point? And what do cultural representations tell us about real-world queerness?

My argument is two-fold: first, I follow a trend in queer studies that rejuvenates US rurality as a space of thriving queer culture and social circles without making the rural appear "better" or more worthy than the urban. Second,

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and their experiences (Johnston and Longhurst 16). In this context, *place* serves "as a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings" (Massey 5). Cedar Point, for instance, serves as a material place within a heteronormative space. It acts as a setting where subjects, particularly amusement park employees, experience emotions related to their sexuality.

perhaps intuitively, I assert a link between queer subjectivity and amusement parks. Amusement parks are sites of queer production and self-exploration, serving as *carnival spaces* that temporarily suspend social norms and allow for queer (re)orientations to emerge, shedding light on queer subjectivities in North America and beyond. My analysis transcends multiple spaces and places (imagined and real), including literal and figurative borders, urban space and suburban space, as well as private, public, and semi-public spaces like amusement parks.

2 The Sexuality of America's Roller Coast

In contrast to ostensibly more queer-friendly urban settings, the Midwest, primarily rural in character, is not traditionally associated with queer communities. Halvorson and Reno, in *Imagining the Heartland*, argue that the Midwest links to a whiteness, white supremacy, imperialism, and nativism that has been imagined as "middleness" and averageness (4). This perception allows a justification *for* and a projection *of* norms onto people and places that produce structural violence for everyone who lives outside the traditional white heteronormative binary. It reinforces a problematic white heteronormative masculinity, as the heartland is used as a canvas for projecting whiteness, labor, and masculinity (Halvorson and Reno 16). Rural space in general is stereotypically imagined to be hostile to queer individuals, prompting many to migrate to coastal urban centers, perpetuating the urban/rural binary (Halberstam 36). Scott Herring notes that the nonmetropolitan is often seen as a "perpetual site of isolation and exclusion," resulting in the rich documentation of urban queer histories (10). Jack Halberstam's neologism "metronormativity" denotes "the conflation of 'urban' and 'visible' in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities" and the temporal-spatial equation of out and proud in the city versus closeted and ashamed in the rural (36; see also Abraham; Chauncey; and Houlbrook). This stereotypical view is rooted in perceptions of conservatism and sexual conservatism associated with rural values (Gray et al. 4). A small town like Sandusky, in this sense, would be an unlikely place to find queer subjectivities.[4] However, this perception changes when considering the role of a local amusement park.

Distinguishing theme parks from amusement parks is key for understanding their potential as queer spaces. Both offer escapism, but theme parks center on specific themes, while amusement parks prioritize thrill and fun

4 For a comprehensive overview of rural queer studies, see Beemyn; Brown-Saracino; Gray et al.; Herring; Nicolaides and Wiese; and Thomsen.

without a unifying theme (Mittermeier 4). For this chapter, I emphasize the concept of *amusement* in amusement parks to underline the relationship between amusement and pleasure. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that theme parks as we know them today emerged with the opening of Disneyland in California on 17 July 1955 (Mittermeier 4). However, precursors to amusement parks already existed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as pleasure gardens offering recreational places that replicated rural environments within burgeoning industrial cities.

In her article "The American Path: From the Pleasure Garden to the Amusement Park," Naomi J. Stubbs traces the evolution of the cultural and social functions of pleasure gardens (7). As places with the simultaneous function of an idyllic garden and site of entertainment, commemoration, celebration, retreat, and technological advancement, they ultimately served to navigate the complexity of national identity (8). Pleasure gardens were grounds for "explor[ing] through performance (subconsciously and consciously) a variety of issues concerning American identities in a manner unlike other contemporaneous forms" (8). They already acted as places of inclusion *and* exclusion along race, class, and gender lines, as well as offering a mix of the rural *and* the urban, at the turn of the nineteenth century. According to Stubbs, they functioned as early sites of escapism from urban city life, promising a rural retreat within the comfort of the urban where one could let loose. Pleasure gardens, initially free and open to various populations, promised mixing and mingling if patrons adhered to genteel behavior. However, when patrons observed non-genteel characters, admission fees were introduced to guarantee exclusivity. The reputation of pleasure gardens had dropped by the mid-nineteenth century after they attracted more unruly behavior. Despite their complexities, pleasure gardens acted as places of identity performance and expression, blurring the urban-rural boundary. Similar to Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, they were early examples of spaces where normative identities could be performed *and* subverted. They also quickly became industrialized by modern technology, paving the way for other venues such as public parks and world fairs, which would lead the way to the modern idea of an amusement park.

What is important to note here is the complex dynamic between vice (popularly imagined to be located in the city) and virtue (associated with the rural). The rural has been imagined as a place of manners and peace and bringing it to the modern city in the form of pleasure gardens resulted in these norms being adapted. Sarah Graham argues in "Unfair Ground: Girlhood and Theme Parks in Contemporary Fiction" that modern theme parks, like the pleasure gardens of old, reproduce heteronormative expectations and gender roles, and conservative attitudes, while at the same time revealing them to be social

constructions (590). The concept, cited by Graham, of expressing one's identity through the physical and social characteristics of one's surroundings, as well as through their inclusivity and/or exclusivity, feeds into my argument about amusement parks being spaces where gender and sexual subjectivity are formed *and* performed, in accordance with but also against the norm.

When amusement parks are located in rural spaces, they challenge the assumption that rural settings only accommodate normative sexual behavior. While limited research has explored the influence of such environments on queer sexuality, Sean P. Griffin and Karen Tongson stand out as noteworthy exceptions. Griffin's work, a rare monograph-length project, delves into the potential link between Disney parks and products and the gay community (98). Combining textual analysis with theoretical approaches, first-person accounts, and historical analysis, Griffin links the US gay liberation movement to the presence of gay and lesbian employees within the company, providing an alternate history of the Walt Disney company (94). He examines how the creation of LEAGUE (Lesbian and Gay United Employees) within the company has exemplified the possibility of queer readings of Disney products to mass audiences (93).

Furthermore, Tongson's chapter "Behind the Orange Curtain" highlights the importance of considering new destinations and changing migration patterns in queer studies, and underscores how late capitalism has blurred distinctions between urban, suburban, and rural lifestyles and architectures (73). These works remind us that amusement parks are spaces where not only heterosexual but also gender and queer sexualities are formed and performed.

Also relevant to my understanding of amusement parks is Mikhail Bakhtin's medieval carnival concept. Bakhtin has argued that the carnival "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (1984: 10). The carnival created a two-world condition that

> offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. (Bakhtin 1984: 6)

Amusement parks, too, create a world within a world, an in-between space (between rural and urban), allowing non-normative subjectivities to exist without societal repercussions during admission. Florian Freitag reminds us that entering a park means entering a distinct isolated world; amusement parks are "self-contained worlds which are geographically, visually, and ritually separated

from the rest of the world – the acts of buying a ticket and going through the turnstiles, for instance, signal the entering of a different space" (706).

Freitag's reference to going through the turnstiles invokes Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope or time-place of the threshold, which "is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis" and linked to "the chronotopes of the street and square" as "places where crisis events occur, the falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, decisions that determine the whole life of a man" – to which the amusement park could well be added (248). As a liminal space of in-betweenness, associated with a time that seems to have "no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time," the transition marked by the turnstiles between the world outside the amusement park and the apparently extra-political realm inside it produces a sense of tension that offers the potential for personal exploration and reorientation (Bakhtin 1996: 248).

Borrowing from Sara Ahmed's framework of orientation, I argue that amusement parks are places of sexual and gendered (re)orientation. If, as Ahmed states, "orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit space as well as 'what' or 'who' we inhabit spaces with" (1). Accordingly, the amusement park becomes a place in which queer subjects orient themselves sexually and spatially. They turn toward the amusement park as a form of escapism from the heteronormative outside world, position themselves as queer subjects in the park, and experience and perform their sexuality in the process of orienting themselves in this environment with other queer subjects. In that sense, it is a circular movement of arriving, becoming, and being, which ultimately leads to a reshaping of their personal sexual narrative in a way that does not necessarily remain confined to the amusement park.

3 Borderland Sandusky: the Road to Crystal Shores

Set in the year 1984 within the confines of small-town Sandusky, Ohio, the 1998 film *Edge of* Seventeen, conceived by screenwriter Todd Stephens and director David Moreton, depicts the coming-of-age and coming-out story of Eric (Chris Stafford), a 17-year-old teenager, who lives with his parents and two younger brothers in a predominantly white residential neighborhood. Todd Stephens's trilogy, starting with *Edge of Seventeen*, delves into the theme of coming of age in Sandusky. The inaugural installment is followed by *Gypsy 83* (2001) and *Swan Song* (2021). While *Edge of Seventeen* explores the journey of growing up gay in Sandusky, *Swan Song* addresses the narrative of aging within the queer context of rural America. Collectively, the trilogy not only captures individual journeys

of self-discovery and growth but also contributes to the broader narrative of the queer experience. Furthermore, the films highlight the evolving nature of Sandusky, portraying its transformation from a rural town to a significant backdrop in the exploration of identity and community.

Gilad Padva, in his comparative analysis of new queer cinema, has construed *Edge of Seventeen* as a "melodramatization of queer adolescence," elucidating how the film employs extravagant and emotionally charged spectacles of tears, cries, and emotional turmoil to interrogate and disrupt the rigid and unchallenged norms of heteronormative institutions (358–359). Most interpretations of the film focus on Eric's melodramatic transformational story from the confines of the closet to openly embracing his queer identity. While *Edge of Seventeen* is indeed a coming-of-age story, focusing on the location *where* this transformation is happening, the *becoming*, the in-between of sexual identities, and the space where sexual identity is formed, allows for a nuanced comprehension of the significance of rural Sandusky and its amusement park in Eric's personal sexual roller coaster ride.

When Eric and his closest companion Maggie embark on their inaugural workday at Crystal Shores, an imaginary amusement park in Sandusky inspired by Cedar Point, we see a front windshield shot of two young people in an old Volkswagen car. This image captures the exuberance of youth as both protagonists joyfully sing along to Toni Basil's resounding anthem "Hey Mickey." Their journey commences in the streets of downtown Sandusky and takes them onto the highway that, along a causeway, guides them to the peninsula housing the amusement park (Figure 18.1). The scene physically and metaphorically



FIGURE 18.1 Screenshot from *Edge of Seventeen*

separates the town from the park, resonating with Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *Borderlands* as an ephemeral realm materializing "wherever two or more cultures edge each other" (xx). Anzaldúa expounds upon how

> [b]orders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (3, emphasis in original)

The recurring visual juxtaposition facilitated by the shot/reverse shot montage cutting between Sandusky and Eric in the car effectuates a schism between Eric (*us* being the queers) and the inhabitants of Sandusky (who are turned into the *them*, the ones who position queers as unsafe and as such make life out of the closet unsafe for Eric). *Edge of Seventeen* thus suggests that Eric escapes the confines of the "normal" by driving along the causeway and working at the park. The park, across the border of the causeway, provides a welcoming place for people, especially queers and racialized minorities, who, in town, are turned into outcasts by a white heteronormative society, made to live on the edge of rural society. The park appears as a liminal space they can navigate as insiders.

The park's remote location positioned on a peninsula's steep edge sets it apart from the town. This spatial divide is reinforced by the absence, at the park, of Eric's family and the traditional gender norms they affirm (Eric's dad works, while his mother stays home and performs domestic tasks). Initially, Eric works at the amusement park to save for college in New York City, alluding to a narrative of progress that will lead him from rurality to urbanity. As he begins to explore his sexuality, however, the park evolves beyond a financial means, becoming a space where he can navigate his queerness in a rural context. Every time he moves across the causeway, Eric passes from the heterosexual private space of a conservative family to the homosocial semi-public space of a second family that accepts him for who he is. Eric's journey to and from the park represent not only a physical transition but process of sexual (re)orientation that moves him away from heteronormative expectations of his town towards a queer self-understanding. His movement can be understood as a form of queer migration, aligning with Ahmed's definition of migrations as a "process of disorientation and reorientation" (9). Eric moves away and arrives as he reorients himself in new and old places. Precisely because Eric keeps moving between these spaces, he becomes a threshold character straddling and challenging the boundaries of what the social environment defines as the good (heterosexual)

and the bad (homosexual). His repeated geographical transition aligns with Anzaldúa's borderlands metaphor, mirroring Eric's metaphorically transitional position on the "edge of seventeen" – about to come of age and about to come out as he reorients himself in this borderland of queer disorientation.

Eric quickly learns how to navigate this transitional borderland, but ultimately lets both worlds melt together, when his appearance, also outside the park, gradually takes on a rebellious aesthetic, including colored hairstyles and androgynous attire reminiscent of Boy George, David Bowie, and Billy Idol. The increasingly blurred division between the mainland and the peninsula of the amusement park thus reflects the changing relationship between Eric's closeted sexuality in the private realm of his home and his openly queer character in (semi-)public spaces such as the local gay bar or the amusement park (Figure 18.2).



FIGURE 18.2 Screenshot from *Edge of Seventeen*

The amusement park's significance for Eric's coming out is highlighted in a few scenes during the first thirty minutes of the film and later on, when Eric walks along the marina after a confrontation with his mother, who found matches from the local gay bar in his jacket and accused him of being gay. In the latter scene, Eric is walking along the shore right across from Crystal Shores, and we are shown a shot/reverse shot sequence cutting between Eric and his view of the amusement park. This sequence emphasizes the pivotal role the amusement park plays in Eric's self-discovery. These sequences can be read as cinematic representations of Ahmed's "queer (re)orientation, visually depicting Eric's shifting orientation towards his own identity and the space he occupies during his queer migration to a home of his self. Screenwriter Todd Stephens

has noted that the lack of scenes set in the amusement park itself results from a filming ban by Cedar Point, but the way the park serves as a backdrop for encounters he would not have experienced in Sandusky makes clear that it acts as a catalyst for Eric's questioning of his hitherto presumed heterosexuality and his coming out at the end of the film.

4 A Place Like No Other: Cedar Point

Located between Toledo and Cleveland, Sandusky hosts the real-life counterpart of Stephens's envisioned Crystal Shores: Cedar Point, America's roller coaster capital. Southeast of Lake Marblehead and Kelleys Island, Cedar Point connects Sandusky's Bay with Lake Erie (Figure 18.3). Established in 1870 as a beer garden with "water slides, a bathing beach, a dance pavilion, a twenty-room hotel, and the area's first roller coaster," Cedar Point became a popular beach resort at the turn of the century and would eventually grow into a modern amusement park with record-breaking thrill rides owned by Cedar Fair (O'Brien 58). Besides being "just a place to ride rides and have fun," it emerged as a destination for queer individuals to explore their sexuality, build a community, and liberate themselves from heteronormative constraints (O'Brien 58).

Drawing from my own work experiences at the park in 2014 and 2016, which led to enduring friendships with colleagues and guests, I conducted three



FIGURE 18.3 Skyline view of Cedar Point, Sandusky, Ohio
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCEL STROBEL

semi-structured interviews via Zoom in 2021 to highlight the presence of a queer community among Cedar Point employees and to demonstrate the rural space's role in fostering such a community. These interviews featured Todd Stephens, the screenwriter of *Edge of Seventeen*, a white American filmmaker and film professor who grew up in Sandusky and worked at Cedar Point during his teenage years; Bryan, a former Australian-Lebanese-American Cedar Point employee I met during my initial park visit in 2012; and David, a white American former park employee whom I encountered during my 2014 work experience. They all graciously agreed to recount their life at America's Roller Coast for me.[5] Their narratives and experiences underscore the significance of rural amusement park space in their coming-of-age journeys, marked by the emergence of their sexual desires and the catalyst for their coming out.

Significantly, among my interviewees, the decision to work at the park had no connection to their sexuality. Born in Kansas, David, who was an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Colorado in 2012, learned about the benefits of working at Cedar Point during the summer from a friend at *Theme Park Review*, an American roller coaster enthusiast club that includes a forum for written exchange among its members. David found the enticing perks, including on-site housing and the opportunity to earn money to cover travel expenses and tuition, reason enough to make the cross-country move for a summer job as a ride operator, despite his lack of familiarity with the amusement park lifestyle.

Bryan, describing himself as hailing "from many places" due to his American, Lebanese, Syrian, Turkish, and European heritage, considers Sydney, Australia, where he was born and raised, his home. He identifies as gay but generally avoids categorizing his (sexual) identity. His primary reason for working at Cedar Point stemmed from his passion for amusement parks, a rarity in Australia. In contrast, Todd, a Sandusky native now residing in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and New York City, remembers Cedar Point as "a place that [he] was aware of as far back as [he] can remember." During his childhood, his family would take him there once a year.

When I inquired about my participants' relationship with Cedar Point, and its role in their life, David's first response was:

> I mean, that's where I had my entire coming-of-age. It was basically what shaped my whole adult life. It determines where I am living now, and who my friends are. I went to college for one year but that was it. I guess

5 While Todd Stephens granted permission to use his real name, I am using pseudonyms to protect my other participants' privacy.

> I had my young adult fun college time at Cedar Point. That's where I did my growing up. That's where I went from being a teenager to an adult.

For Bryan, Cedar Point was also essential to making him who he is now, although besides defining it as a space of fun and excitement, he describes it as a safe space where he could figure out who he was, what career path he wanted to pursue, and where he wanted to live. He acknowledges that when he initially moved to Cedar Point he had not yet come out, and that living and working at the park significantly contributed to his sexual self-discovery and eventual coming out. Bryan had harbored fears that his world would crumble if he revealed his sexuality, but the amusement park environment provided a supportive backdrop for him to do so: "I came out to my best friend at Cedar Point, and I distinctly remembered riding Magnum, one of the roller coasters I was operating, and thinking that nothing changed. I was still the silly person that I am." Notably, echoing themes from *Edge of Seventeen*, Bryan's narrative underscores the divide between the amusement park and the external world; he describes feeling as though he resided on the border between the accepting environment of the amusement park and the hostile realm beyond it.

Todd's experience was similar to Bryan's in terms of finding a supportive queer community at the amusement park. During his first summer at Cedar Point in 1984, Todd met his co-worker Rod, whom he instantly developed a crush on. After one season of flirting, Todd and Rod had sexual intercourse at Cedar's, the on-site dorm for employees since demolished, on the day before the season ended. Todd remembers "walking out of there, down the midway, after the park had closed, still in his work uniform, realizing that his life had changed." For Todd, the park was the place where he had his first sexual encounter and his first contact with other queer people who would serve as role models: "Sometime during the season, Angie, a butch-type lesbian I came out to, really was like a role model. She really had a major influence on my life, of just being like it's okay to be queer. This was the summer that I came of age, and these people had a big impact on my life."

A compelling contrast unfolds in all the narratives between the private and fully public spaces of Sandusky and the semi-private domain of the amusement park. Notably, Bryan and Todd embarked on their coming-out journeys at Cedar Point before sharing their truths in more private settings. The park's ticketed and enclosed environment provided them with a secure sanctuary. Unlike the open streets of a town where anyone can freely come and go, Cedar Point's restricted access and controlled entry created an enclosed atmosphere where queers could feel like insiders. In the streets and neighborhoods of the town, as *Edge of Seventeen* underscores, individuals are exposed to the gaze of

a broader public, including neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers. In contrast, the enclosed nature of the amusement park allows for a level of anonymity and control over one's interactions. The coming-out experiences of Bryan and Todd, and that of David's coming-of-age at Cedar Point highlight the significance of this semi-public space, which offered them a degree of safety and freedom to explore their identities without the fear of immediate exposure or judgment from their broader social circles. A non-discrimination clause in their work contracts highlighted the amusement park's status as a safe space for queer employees.

There appears, then, to be a unique connection between amusement parks and queer communities, as David suggests when he notes:

> Coaster nerds and coaster enthusiasts in general have a high amount of queer people in it, and Cedar Point is like the mecca of amusement parks, so plenty of people travel there very very far to work. I mean, I drove for 24 hours in my car to get there. It was horrible but I did it. And so, I think that when you have a large population of people that travel to work at Cedar Point and a large percentage of those people are queer anyway because of their coaster enthusiasm, maybe that's just how it all comes together?

Cedar Point's status as a mecca for amusement park lovers attracts a diverse population, including a significant queer presence, to a dominantly rural environment. Bryan describes Cedar Point as having a profound impact on Sandusky, transforming both the town and its people, attributing this to the park's welcoming and inclusive environment. He notes:

> Yes, it was a rural community and it felt extremely accepting but that was because of the park. That shows that it can coexist meaning rurality and LGBTQ communities. But without Cedar Point, the town wouldn't be the same.

Bryan also emphasizes that "the environment is particularly welcoming because creating memorable experiences is a big part of the attraction's business"; the surrounding community, members of which are not only likely to repeatedly visit the park but also to find employment there, cannot but be affected by this atmosphere. Todd concurs with the notion that amusement parks serve as safe spaces for queer individuals, crediting Cedar Point as the place where he found the courage to be himself: "It really is the place. I can't

imagine I would have had the courage to be myself as much had it not been for working at Cedar Point."

All my interviewees could relate to the idea that amusement parks and their values of openness, amusement, and non-normativity contributed to their queer sexual subject formation. This association has also manifested historically. For instance, on 14 June 1969, members of the activist group ONE held an outing called "Gay Day" at Cedar Point, which turned into a huge annual event for the queer population in the area (Labadie Collection at UMich, Sexual Freedom Vertical File). In 2002, in *The Blade*, Toledo's daily newspaper, Ms. Rogers, a park visitor, recalls that Gay Days at Cedar Point were "why [they] came … – because [they] feel comfortable. … Here [they] can be open. [They] are happy and have fun" (Blake). People from the Midwest, from other parts of the United States, and from all around the world, including me, were brought to this place because of an already existing passion for amusement parks, to make money, or simply because the park promised a thrilling time. Once there, as David jokes in the quote used as an epigraph for this chapter, "it only takes one season to turn a straight man into his true 'gay' self." In 2018, Cedar Point trademarked the slogan "A Place Like No Other," capturing the power that this place holds for its (queer) visitors as a place out of the ordinary capable of accommodating non-normative subjectivities.

5 The Future of Queer Community-Making at Rural Amusement Parks

The purpose of writing this chapter was to process my own coming-of-age and coming out experiences at Cedar Point by looking at the film *Edge of Seventeen* and my interviewees' responses, creating an awareness of the influence of space and place as defined by Massey (1994) and Gregory et al. (2000) on queer subjectivity formation at an amusement park set predominantly in a rural, heteronormative space. I sensed that taking Cedar Point as a site of research would spark new knowledge about rural queer subjectivities and dispel the myth of the heartland as a realm of uncontested straightness in the United States (Manalansan et al. 1).

In line with Bakhtin's chronotope of the threshold, the park creates a timeless in-between space where sexuality can be freely reoriented from an adherence to heteronormativity toward a liberating queer affirmation. The complex process of queer identity formation within what Anzaldúa terms a "borderland" leads to a challenging and reimagining of heteronormative structures

that define queers as the unsafe *them* to a safely straight *us*. The image of the Midwest as a white supremacist and heteronormative middle-class regional space becomes contested when considering unruly spaces within it like Cedar Point that adhere to and project different, more inclusive values.

My reading of the film and of my interviewees' stories also evokes a critique of the queer visibility discourse, which dominantly associates coming-out narratives with becoming visible as queer in the urban. The image of the rural as a "flat, homogenous, and the type of conservative, anachronistic place where queer people necessarily suffer" is deconstructed by the fictional experiences of Eric and the real-life experiences of Todd, Bryan, and David (Thomsen XIV). This does not imply that the rural or the Midwest, as a whole, are peaceful havens for queer people; hate crimes and (structural) violence against queers occur in both urban and rural areas. What it does show is that queer individuals have created community in times and places traditionally associated with an absence of or particular hostility to queerness. By demonstrating how Cedar Point operates as a site of queer community formation within a rural setting, my chapter directly engages with this volume's larger argument about the "spectralization" of the rural. It challenges the notion that rural areas are mere sites of regressive social structures that haunt society, and instead presents them as dynamic spaces where alternative identities can flourish. In this respect, my work contributes to the undoing of the rural as a space that "only some bodies can comfortably inhabit," challenging the "enduring prevalence of the idyll and pastoral as lenses for looking at the rural." Instead, it opens new kinds of attachments, *queer attachments*, to the rural.

Ultimately, acknowledging these queer attachments, including lived experiences, struggles, achievements, and narratives of queer people, requires a thinking *beyond* the rural-urban binary, and a focusing of attention on specific spaces in the urban *and* the rural, such as amusement parks, that challenge the spectralization of queer identities and foster the becoming and recognition of queer communities in urban *and* rural realities.

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CHAPTER 19

Rural Authenticity and Homonationalism in Filmic Representations of Central-Eastern European Migrants in the Italian and British Countryside

Dominika Mikołajczyk

Abstract

This chapter explores the intersection of rural idyll and homonationalism in the films *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003) and *God's Own Country* (Lee, 2017), questioning the roles and agency of Central-Eastern European migrants in European countryside imaginations. It examines how and at what cost these films sustain or reshape the rural idyll, focusing on the sexualized politics involved. Both films depict migrant characters as essential to preserving rural authenticity, yet they also highlight the tensions introduced by globalization. By framing Polish migrants' integration as romance and assigning a queer Romanian the task of restoring the rural idyll, both films contribute to re-romanticizing the countryside with traditional, patriarchal values.

1 Migrant Workers in the Globalized Countryside

A common characteristic of European nationalist-populist discourses in the twenty-first century is the idea of "going back to the roots" in search of a "true" national culture and pride seen as having been lost due to rapid processes of globalization. Such "going back" often takes the shape of a nostalgia for life in the countryside. In contrast to the heterogeneous representation of the urban – portrayed, on the one hand, as liberal and inclusive, and, on the other, as hosting the turmoil of different identity categories coming together – the rural tends to be perceived as an idyllic place untouched by modernity and globalization, and as retaining the cultural practices, ideologies, and sense of community associated with a good life (Shucksmith 163–164). European nationalistic discourses appropriate this narrative of the rural as morally pure or upholding national heritage (Fuglestad et al. 1), and use it to politically construct the countryside as a space of whiteness and heteronormativity. The rigid opposition of the rural to the urban in idyll-based nationalistic imaginations ignores the possibility of a common ground between the two, rejecting their

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reciprocal relationship. It fails, moreover, to recognize the complex dynamics of rural spaces, often informed by the same forces of globalization that affect urban areas.

Despite their prominent presence in the history of the European countryside, migrant laborers – and their agency in shaping the countryside – are considered out of place in nationalistic rural imaginations, grounded in the idyll, due to their roots lying elsewhere. This causes them to be rendered invisible or expellable. In this chapter, I look at two contemporary films, *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003) and *God's Own Country* (Lee, 2017), in which the Western European countryside is imagined as co-shaped by Central-Eastern European migrant workers. However, while the imagination of the migrant workers attests to a consideration of the countryside as globalized, these migrant subjects also cannot fully dispel the rural as idyll, as the countryside continues to be configured as a space of therapeutic nostalgia and rustic authenticity. Thus, whereas the films present a complex array of sometimes contradicting imaginations of the globalized countryside, their re-imaginations of Western European rurality also to some extent uphold the countryside as an idyllic space where migrant subjects are forced to navigate racialized and gendered dynamics of (national) assimilation and exclusion.

God's Own Country, by centering on a queer romance, adds the dimension of sexuality, invoking another characteristic of contemporary European nationalistic discourses: "homonationalism." Jasbir Puar develops homonationalism as a conceptual framework for understanding how "acceptance" and "tolerance" of LGBTQIA+ people has evolved into an indicator by which the right to national sovereignty is assessed (2007: 4). Puar presents homonationalism as a facet of modernity marked by a historical shift within the relation of state, capitalism, and sexuality: some, usually white, homosexual bodies have been rendered worthy of protection by nation-states, whereas other "othered" bodies, often racialized ones, remain unprotected (2013: 337). Like idyll-based nationalism, homonationalism excludes migrant workers. While celebrating supposedly "transgressive" neoliberal queer subjects as part of the nation, it pathologizes and criminalizes deviant and unruly populations, including racialized migrant laborers (Puar 2007: 24).

This chapter explores the convergence of nationalist discourses based in the rural idyll with those relying on homonationalism by asking: What kinds of space and forms of agency are available to the Central-Eastern European migrant within the Western European imaginations of the countryside offered by *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *God's Own Country*? Does the becoming visible of Eastern European migrants in these films sustain idyllic conceptions of the countryside or reshape them? And, finally, what sexualized politics are at

stake within these imaginations? In the first part of the chapter, I focus on the nuances in the representation of idyllic rural imaginations across the two films, specifically in terms of how they portray migrant workers as simultaneously challenging and safeguarding the authenticity of rural spaces. In the second part, drawing on Jacques Derrida's "right to hospitality," I explore how, in these films, the assimilation of the Central-Eastern European migrants is contingent on an interplay between different imaginaries of rural space. In the case of *God's Own Country*, the imagination of the rural as a "Western queer utopia" (Feldmann 104) notably extends a *rural homonationalist* imagination. I argue that, in the end, the films align in emphasizing that, unlike non-white migrants, Central-Eastern European migrant laborers, including queer ones, can find a place within the Western European rural idyll on account of its association with "whiteness" (MacKrell and Pemberton 50). However, this place is contingent upon their willingness to sustain or repair an idyllic rural authenticity. In addition, *God's Own Country* presents a homonationalist queer idyll that remains linked to an exclusionary, racialized, and classed good-life fantasy (Berlant).

2 The Migrant Worker and Idyllic Rural Authenticity

The nostalgia attached to the rural in Western cultural representations romanticizes the countryside, constructing it as peaceful and therapeutic. The therapeutic value of the rural is contained within the framework of authenticity, which paints the countryside as a space that allows people to realize themselves as what, deep inside, they already are, and thus to (re)connect with an essential core that is considered invariable (Bosma and Peeren). Such an imagination of the countryside overlooks the rural as a working environment – a space, for many, of poverty, deprivation, oppression, and exploitation (Shucksmith 163). Although the portrayals of Central-Eastern European seasonal migrant workers in both *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *God's Own Country* somewhat disrupt classical idyllic imaginations of the rural by underscoring that rural space has different meanings for different people, depending, among others, on what they do in it, the migrant workers are also assigned a vital role in safeguarding an idyllic rural authenticity.

In *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the traditional Western idyllic imagination of the countryside as offering a relaxing, authentic lifestyle is evoked through the perspective of the American protagonist, Frances, who views the Italian countryside as a therapeutic space – an escape from her stressful urban life and divorce. The therapeutic value assigned to the countryside by idyllic

imaginations gives it the power to promise "self-realization" and to allow individuals to "find themselves" (MacKrell and Pemberton 53). Such a quest to find herself is precisely what motivates Frances's spontaneous purchase of a house in the Italian countryside. For Frances, who has the funds to treat the countryside as a rehab facility to recover from the urban, moving there is a lifestyle choice. Her chosen presence in the rural – which she could easily leave again to return to the city – is contrasted with the situation of a trio of Polish migrant workers who have a much more fettered relation to the same space. The film presents these workers' presence within the rural as a structural effect of global capitalism rather than a lifestyle choice; their reasons for being in the Italian countryside are primarily economic and their situation is not portrayed as allowing for "self-realization" but as involving a loss of who they were. Jerzy, one of the three, looks like an intellectual, clothed in a vest and wearing small glasses and a beret. In a scene featuring his unsuccessful attempt to fix a lamp, Frances asks him if he is a licensed electrician, to which Paweł, another Polish worker, replies: "No, he is a licensed literature professor." Here, the film highlights a particular dissonance between the migrants' advanced education and their current position as transnational manual laborers. A book Jerzy owns by Czesław Miłosz, a Polish émigré writer who often wrote about the urge to return to his homeland (which at the time was under the influence of the USSR), is a recurring motif in the film. The way the book is pictured as accompanying the migrants' work signals their continuing attachment to Poland and to who they used to be there, as well as their inability to return before they have made enough money. In this way, the Italian countryside is not portrayed as offering them a good life; it is, rather, a space they feel forced to navigate while working towards economic safety in their homeland.

Under the Tuscan Sun portrays the Polish men at work in several scenes showing the gradual refurbishment of the house bought by Frances. The film accelerates these scenes, which, on the one hand, allows more of their work activities to be included and emphasizes that the countryside for these migrant workers is not a realm of rest and relaxation but of ceaseless toil and movement. On the other hand, this stylistic choice obfuscates the actual time that goes into creating Frances's fantasy of idyllic rural authenticity and reduces the Poles to marginal characters whose actions do not warrant the same sustained attention as hers. Nevertheless, a sequence depicting how Frances picked the Poles to do the renovations does counter the common depiction of migrant workers as interchangeable and as less skilled than local craftsmen but preferred for their cheapness. Short scenes portraying Frances's conversations with the different candidates for the job make clear that although the Polish workers were competing with more "rustic" Italian farmers and even

an educated, eloquent Italian interior designer, Frances's decision to hire them was not based on price, but on their manager ensuring her that they had worked on the same property before.

Frances's decision to turn down local farmers shows that her fantasy of living in the Tuscan countryside does not include a desire to replicate their way of life. At the same time, however, the more cosmopolitan and cultured interior designer does not embody the life she desires either, perhaps because his unapologetic sexism (displayed in the way he ogles Frances's breasts) associates him with the rural idyll as a patriarchal realm. Her confident decision to hire the Polish workers could be read as affirming her need for Tuscany to be an idyllic getaway supporting her journey to authenticity or "self-realization": hiring them ensures that she does not need to labor herself, but can have the house done up as she wants it, with her calling the shots rather than being dictated to by local customs or a designer who objectifies her. The fact that the Poles have worked on the house before, moreover, authenticates them as experienced and trustworthy purveyors of the rural idyll she was attracted by in the first place, an authentication that enables Frances to envision a future in which she belongs in the Italian rural, despite not having roots there.

Crucially, Frances's embrace of the rural as a globalized space comprising diverse migrant demographics, of which she can become a part, can only take place under the condition that the migrant workers adhere to her conception of idyllic authenticity, which may reject overt sexism but still includes an endorsement of a rural masculinity linked to "heavy and dirty physical labour" (Bosma and Peeren 120), as visualized in a scene where the migrants refurbish Frances's home. That Frances is able to attain "self-realization" in the rural is not only exemplified by how she comes to learn and understand the values of rural community life but also by her active shaping of her rural idyll. In contrast, the Polish migrants do not have the agency to materially change the Italian countryside in accordance with their desires; they can only remake it through labor that is directed by others. Therefore, although the notion of idyllic rural authenticity proves to some extent malleable for Frances, the migrant workers remain bound by their position in the global economy. They provide the labor necessary to sustain her rural imagination, which, by remaining in the idyllic mode, obfuscates the exploitative dimensions of this dynamic. The idyllic rural authenticity pursued by Frances is central to the film's imagination of the Tuscan countryside, and although the Polish migrants' presence and work are not completely invisibilized, the narrative framing makes it seem as if Frances is doing them a favor – a favor they repay by working to her specifications and affirming her idyllically-imagined rural retreat as available not just to locals but also to some specific newcomers like herself.

God's Own Country presents a different perspective on rural authenticity by focusing on the discrepancies between how the British farming family at the center of its narrative views the countryside they live in and the ways in which different characters invest rural space with meaning, which is not as visible or emphasized. The Saxby family – consisting of a grandmother, a father, and a son – understands the rural differently than Frances does in *Under the Tuscan Sun*; for the Saxby's, the countryside is not a leisurely space but a space of endless backbreaking, dreary farm work. The rural for them is not a therapeutic realm to escape to but a place they are rooted in and a space, moreover, that the Saxby son – Johnny – does not feel he can leave. Early in the film, in a dialogue between Johnny and an old schoolfriend of his who has migrated to the city for university, Johnny tells her: "That's what I love about folks like you, you fuck off to your posh colleges and then you swing back here on your holidays thinking you know it all, some of us just have to get on with our lives." This statement paints both urban life and those temporarily returning home from the urban as inauthentic by suggesting that city life is inauthentic, elitist ("posh"), and patronizingly intellectual.

The scene continues with the friend encouraging Johnny, whom she knows is gay, to meet her male fellow student, whom she says is funny "like you used to be," to which Johnny responds: "Before I had to join the real world." The "real world" in his understanding is the tough reality of farm life as an adult, which, although it enables him to be close to the land and animals, is also a source of worry and misery, and possibly an impediment to building a romantic homosexual relationship. In the dialogue between Johnny and his friend, class discrepancies are brought to the fore as part of the rural. Similar to Frances, the friend, who, unlike Johnny, could afford to leave her rural home, can now afford to treat the countryside as a place one comes back to in pursuit of rest and relaxation. For Johnny, however, the countryside seems to encumber his happiness.

It is not just through this scene that *God's Own Country* imagines the British countryside in a manner that seems to refute the rural idyll: Johnny's work is portrayed as unrelenting and exhausting; his family is cold and querulous; and his father, by assuming the authority of the rural patriarch, orders him around and refuses to listen to Johnny's perspective when they discuss how to run the farm. The film also challenges idyllic rural imaginations of the family farm by portraying farm animals being treated as pure commodities; for the Saxby's, engaging with the animals is about making a profit and lacks any particular emotional attachment. At the beginning of *God's Own Country*, a sequence of shots with high-contrast lighting portrays Johnny and his father disposing of a stillborn lamb (Figures 19.1 and 19.2). The dark background highlights the



FIGURES 19.1 AND 19.2 Screenshots from *God's Own Country*

bloody corpse of the lamb. The abject feeling evoked in the viewer by the focus on its flesh and the father and son's unceremonious disposal of it contributes to the film's initial construction of an anti-idyllic imagination of the Yorkshire countryside.

However, the film also holds on to the promise of an idyllic restoration. A sense of countryside sentimentality, of a close-knit community of families who genuinely and lovingly care for their land and cattle, is regained by the arrival of Gheorghe, a Romanian seasonal worker who shows love and care for the Saxby family and their animals alike. Juxtaposed with the matter-of-fact

handling of the stillborn lamb by Johnny and his father is Gheorghe's immediate emotional attachment to the Saxby's sheep. He is framed as nurturing the lambs as he holds them close to his heart and feeds them milk from a bottle, which is seen to produce fruitful results in the form of healthy lambs (Figures 19.3 and 19.4). Notably, the scenes showing Gheorghe assisting with the lambing are much brighter than the earlier ones. It is, then, not the native Welsh farmer but the migrant laborer who is imagined as understanding the animals as more than capital. Rather than rendering the Central-Eastern European migrant invisible or assigning him a peripheral position in someone else's fantasy of the rural good life, *God's Own Country* suggests that the migrant may revitalize



FIGURES 19.3 AND 19.4 Screenshots from *God's Own Country*

the Western idyllic imagination of the rural in times where small-scale family farming is under threat from a globalized agricultural sector driven by large-scale industrial farming.

Nevertheless, as idyllic imaginations of the rural are often related to the past, using a migrant body to perform its recuperation in the present resonates with and risks affirming the dominant Western (European) imagination of Romania, Gheorghe's country of origin, as underdeveloped compared to the UK. As part of the former Eastern Europe, Romania falls under the purview of the discourse on "backwardness" established after the end of communism, according to which the former Eastern Europe needs to "catch up" to Western standards of liberal democracy (Mies 56). In the film, the two imaginations – that of the rural idyll as a lost idealized past and that of Eastern Europe as "backward" – merge and are reaffirmed in the representation of the Romanian migrant as more authentically rural, as instinctively closer to the land and animals, than the Yorkshire farmers. Moreover, Gheorghe's representation as nurturing, both in his treatment of farm animals and of Johnny when they become lovers, constructs him as a feminized Other who also stands in for Johnny's absent mother (Johnny lives with his father and grandmother; his mother is said to have left them).

Similarly to the Polish characters in *Under the Tuscan Sun* who work to sustain Frances's imagination of a Tuscan rural authenticity, Gheorghe's representation as a caring, friendly, and mothering Other – an idealized good migrant – allows him to repair the rural idyll for the Saxby family. Hence, rather than renegotiating the terms of Western imaginaries of the rural, the representation of the Central-Eastern European migrant characters in the two films shows them laboring to continue an idyllic legacy of authenticity in the Italian and British countryside. This representation, however, acquires a much more complex dimension in the films when the migrants forge romantic relationships with local characters. In the following part, I explore the representation of the assimilation of these migrant characters into the Western European countryside and how this romance-driven process reinforces idyllic imaginaries of rural spaces.

3 The Sexualized Dynamics of Rural Assimilation

Under the Tuscan Sun and *God's Own Country* integrate the migrant laborers into the local community through a process of assimilation driven by their involvement in romantic relationships. I read the two films' portrayal of this process through Jacques Derrida's inquiry into the ontology of hospitality. Derrida

points out that the right to hospitality encompasses the reception, or welcome, that a foreigner receives under a strict and limited jurisdiction, comparable to that of receiving a guest in one's home (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 45). He adds that there is a thin line between hospitality and hostility, as the former is always conditioned by and conditional upon meeting the host's expectations (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 45). In *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *God's Own Country*, the migrant characters' agency is limited by the local characters' expectations of assimilation, which, in Derrida's terms, curtail their "right to hospitality." This part of the chapter zooms in on the ways this curtailment manifests as the romantic relationships entered into by the migrants progress. Through an analysis of the sexualized dynamics of assimilation portrayed in the films, I argue that the "right to hospitality" is shaped by the imaginations of Western European rurality and Central-Eastern European migrants at play. In questioning the intersection of these imaginations through the conceptual framework of *rural homonationalism*, I am able to show how a sexualized national imagination normatively shapes queerness through an othering of migrants.

In *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the homogeneity of the Tuscan rural is interrupted by Frances's arrival as part of a romantic tour aimed at gay couples, the "Gay & Away tour." Even though Frances is not gay, her friends, who had initially bought the tickets but were not able to go at the last minute, assure her that the tour will be a relaxing environment to recover from her divorce trauma. As they traverse the Italian countryside, Frances and the others on the tour form a group that does not visually fit with the homogenous aesthetic of Tuscany that the film conveys. The ethnically and sexually diverse tourists wear baseball hats, vibrant shirts, and shorts, where the local people exhibit a more conservative and traditional dress style. Frances, nonetheless, is more of a fit with the locals, as she is clothed rather modestly and in a neutral color scheme. There is also a disparity between the way that Frances relates to the rural environment and the way the other tourists do; whereas for them the Italian countryside is solely a holiday destination, a place meant for the consumption of "romantic" Tuscan sceneries, for Frances it is a place where she could potentially settle down. This portrayal of the American urbanites' entry into the Italian countryside sets up the film's representation of migrants to the rural as received with hospitality only if they do not differ too much from the established norms of the local community. Notably, Frances, as the only white heterosexual on the tour, is the sole participant to remain in Tuscany. By suggesting that for the others on the tour the Italian rural can only be a romantic (and romanticized) holiday destination, the film regurgitates the dominant imagination of queer subjects being both unwelcome and unable to live in rural spaces more permanently (Herring 10).

Frances, after some initial missteps, smoothly integrates into the rural and starts a romantic relationship with a local Italian man that is unquestioned by the local community. The Polish migrant workers, on the other hand, face much stricter conditions of (nationalistic) hospitality and their integration proves more difficult, even though they have been in the Italian countryside longer than Frances has. Despite their visual fit with the imagined whiteness and heteronormativity of rural space, the Polish laborers are portrayed as more alien to the Italian rural community than Frances. Taking a closer look at the film's representation of the interwoven relationships between American, Polish, and Italian characters, an ethnic hierarchy can be observed. Due to a combination of the geopolitical and cultural dominance of the US and her upper-classness, Frances is almost immediately respected and welcomed by the local community as someone who can belong and put down roots. In contrast, the Polish migrants' lower position in this hierarchy, both in terms of their class status and in terms of the geopolitical peripherality of Poland compared to Italy within the EU (and the US on a global level), renders their journey towards integration more difficult and demanding.

This is most clearly demonstrated by Paweł, the youngest Polish worker, who maintains a serious relationship with a local Italian girl, which marks him as a migrant willing to assimilate and settle in the community. Nevertheless, his desire to be accepted is unmet, as her family members reject him as an unsuitable partner because of his ethnicity. Paweł's rejection resonates with Derrida's concept of "conditional hospitality," where, instead of responding to the ethical injunction to receive a foreigner with absolute hospitality, not asking for anything, not even the foreigner's name, the host offers a welcome with defined conditions (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 25). The film portrays Paweł's arduous attempts to earn the family's, and the community's, respect: unlike Frances, he is not accepted on his terms, but has to mold himself into what is considered an acceptable, properly behaved guest. Most notably, Paweł must participate in a flag-throwing contest, solely performed by men, to prove his familiarity with and absorbance of the local culture, and his ability to outrun the Italian competitors (Figure 19.5).

The contest makes clear how the Italian nation is imagined as rooted within its rural, patriarchal space. In the flag-throwing scene, Paweł's Polish ethnicity is disguised by his wearing of a traditional Italian costume, so that the migrant's appearance is no longer visually different from that of the local participants (Figure 19.6). After Paweł manages to outrun the other contestants, he is finally granted the "right to hospitality." This right, which is contingent upon his adopting an Italian cultural identity and hiding his Polishness, allows Paweł to marry the Italian girl he is in love with and assimilate into her family. There is a strong suggestion that the community's hospitality would have



FIGURES 19.5 AND 19.6 Screenshots from *Under the Tuscan Sun*

come with even more conditions if Paweł had not fit within the whiteness and heteronormativity of the rural idyll.

Interestingly, in both films, the laborious integration of the Central-Eastern European migrants into the Western European rural communities is represented through the metaphor of building walls. In *Under the Tuscan Sun*, short scenes throughout the film show the Polish migrant characters building a wall on Frances's property the purpose of which is never specified. In the scene in which Frances says goodbye to the Polish migrants, after they have finished their work for her, the Poles reveal an engraving on the wall reading "Polonia." This signals the migrants' bringing their homeland into the Italian countryside, marking it as a site of multinational relationality and globalization. However, the necessity for the workers to make the engraving also points to the fact

that the work of migrants in the West tends to be un(re)marked and, as a result, forgotten. The precarity of migrant workers as those who only get to stay when, like Paweł, they marry a local and are willing to assimilate culturally, contrasts with the solidity of the wall, which, in the film, ensures that their contribution to shaping the Italian rural idyll cannot be erased.

Whereas in *Under the Tuscan Sun* Frances constructs an idyllic refuge for herself, which includes having a wall built to her specifications by the Polish workers, in *God's Own Country*, the traditional stone wall on the property of the farm is repaired by Gheorghe and Johnny's joint labor. Metaphorically, this act of wall-mending expresses the restoration of the fading rural idyll represented by the Saxby family. Before Gheorghe begins to repair the cracks in the stone wall, he is represented as an outsider. Accommodated in a small caravan beside the farmhouse, the film highlights his status as a seasonal migrant worker, to whom the "right to hospitality" does not have to be extended as he is only there temporarily, and only to work. Nevertheless, the narrative changes when Gheorghe and Johnny start working together on the wall and begin to form an intimate relationship, enabled by their joint labor at a distance from the farmhouse, unmonitored by Johnny's father. As the stone wall – and with it the rural idyll – is reconstructed, the metaphorical wall that Johnny has built around his emotions and sexuality is torn down, with the implication being that he can now "find himself" in MacKrell and Pemberton's sense, returning to being an authentic rural subject and becoming an authentic queer subject too.

Importantly, in terms of his queer subjectivity, the film does not represent Gheorghe as a "backward" migrant, following the common Western European portrayal of Central-Eastern European otherness; rather, he is depicted as the "progressive" figure in the film because he exhibits a healthy relationship to his emotions and sexual desires. Gheorghe sets an example for Johnny, who is portrayed as emotionally inhibited, unable to form intimate attachments that go beyond casual sexual encounters. In their conversations during the wall-mending, they jokingly and affectionately refer to each other as "freak" and "faggot," invoking but also rejecting the homophobic rural environments they were both raised in. Gheorghe, much like he did in relation to the farm animals, models for Johnny how to give and receive care instead of closing himself off to emotional and sexual attachment. Similarly to the wall in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the wall in *God's Own Country* metaphorically expresses, on the one hand, Gheorghe's ability to materially affect the English countryside, whilst, on the other, highlighting the sexual politics of belonging that this imagination of the rural relates to the recognition of the migrant as a national subject.

As Gheorghe and Johnny's relationship advances and they become less discreet, Johnny's grandmother finds a used condom in Johnny's bedroom and

realizes that he is sleeping with Gheorghe. In the next scene, after Gheorghe has left the farm, upset about Johnny's sexual encounter with another man, it is the grandmother who tells Johnny where he has gone, so he can find him and apologize. The scene suggests her acceptance of both Gheorghe as someone to whom the right to hospitality can be extended and Johnny as gay. By the end of the film, Gheorghe has not only guided Johnny to self-realization, but has also realized himself as more than just a seasonal worker who will do as he is told or who will accept a relationship wholly on the other's terms (as Paweł appears to do in *Under the Tuscan Sun*). He is reshaping the farm (suggesting ways of diversifying that would bring in extra money and insisting that the farm cannot continue to be run in the same way) and has made it clear that he is unwilling to accept a relationship lacking emotional attachment and openness.

Gheorghe has more agency than the Polish migrant workers in *Under the Tuscan Sun* and is a much more central character, but in his role as repairer of the rural idyll – and of Johnny's family – he ends up reaffirming traditional rural values and effacing the tensions within the contemporary rural and the unsustainability of the rural idyll laid bare in the first part of the film. While Gheorghe and Johnny's queer relationship disrupts the heteronormative space of the rural idyll, it ultimately – also through Gheorghe's function as a stand-in for Johnny's mother – affirms the monogamous (white) couple as the center of the rural idyll and, by extension, the British nation. The only friction that remains is the racism Gheorghe encounters, which suggests that his right to hospitality in the rural remains contentious on account of his Eastern Europeanness.

Puar's framework of "homonationalism" makes it possible to recognize the representation of homosexual romance as a product to create a brand for queerness in rural spaces which enforces racial, sexual, and national norms (2007: 2, 31). In *God's Own Country*, Gheorghe restores the rural idyll for the Saxby family with a particular (homo)normativity based on heteronormative and reproductive models of relationality. The right to hospitality, signaling his recognition as a subject at home in the British countryside, is extended to Gheorghe not as a racialized migrant worker but on the basis of his participation in sustaining the norms established by *rural homonationalism*.

The development of Johnny and Gheorge's relationship in the film can be criticized for establishing a "Western queer utopia" related to a fantasy of the West as a uniquely tolerant, liberal, and accepting place (Feldmann 104). Such a critique becomes even more trenchant when considering the placement of this fantasy within the migrant body. The often state-endorsed homophobia that governs most Central-Eastern European countries drives the construction of an imagination of a counter-world in the West, where being queer is accepted, if not celebrated. This imagination parallels the imagination of the

rural as less tolerant of queerness than urban areas. Together, these imaginations mask the existence of queer communities in Central-Eastern Europe and the rural, as well as the existence of homophobia in the West and the urban. *God's Own Country* appears to challenge these imaginations by portraying Gheorghe as the progressive and Johnny as the repressed queer, and by integrating their relationship into the rural idyll – even conceiving it as what allows the idyll to be re-established. Yet, the film's merging of the seemingly exclusive fantasies of the queer utopia and the rural idyll only works because Gheorghe and Johnny's relationship is primarily framed as facilitating the handing down of the family farm to the son (as the rightful patrilineal heir) and his feminized, mothering partner. What is integrated into the rural idyll here is not queerness as proposing an alternative to normative family structures, but a queer relationship that follows monogamous and patriarchal models.

Even though *God's Own Country*, in its early parts, challenges the rural idyll by highlighting the tough conditions, discrimination, and violence that can be found in the British countryside, the film's ending proposes a rather uncritical return to the idyll that portrays all characters as successfully finding their place in a countryside re-romanticized by the queer relationship blossoming within it. This countryside is not structurally but only marginally changed by Gheorghe's integration into it, with this change ascribed to his queerness more than to his migrant status. In *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the rural idyll is similarly reaffirmed as not in need of change by the integration, through romantic relationships with locals, of Frances, and, after a more extensive and demanding assimilation process, Paweł.

4 Conclusion

The close readings of *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *God's Own Country* bring to the fore the different stakes at play in (de)romanticizing and re-romanticizing rural imaginations that, instead of rendering migrant workers in the rural invisible, include them as part of a globalized countryside. Studying the representation of migrant labor through the lens of the rural idyll and the queer perspective that homonationalism evokes reveals the different power dynamics in Western European national politics of rural assimilation and authenticity and how they condition the extension of the right to hospitality.

In the context of Central-Eastern European migrant experiences within the Western countryside, the films showcase that the recognition of the migrant as a rural subject is contingent upon their integration into a traditional and normative imagination of Western European countryside life. In the two films, this imagination is enforced by subjects who are able to benefit from their considerable

levels of structural privilege and whose idea of an idyllic, authentic countryside is materially sustained by the labor of the Central-Eastern European characters. The migrant characters are granted agency to influence the rural environment because of their visual fit with the mostly white fabric of rural Italy and the UK that the two films portray. Nevertheless, this agency is limited by the characters' economic status and their temporary, unrooted presence in the rural.

In *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the right to hospitality is unequally distributed among the migrant characters; whilst Frances – the American protagonist – can move through and integrate into the rural smoothly, the Polish workers' potential to belong to this Italian rural is dependent on the quality of their labor, their skill at Italian flag-throwing contests, and, ideally, marriage to a local woman. This suggests that the conditions for the extension of the right to hospitality of this imagined Italian countryside are dependent on how well its outsiders fit within the racial dynamics of this space, what kind of capital they possess, and whether they are willing to perform a nationalized notion of idyllic authenticity. In *God's Own Country*, the queer romance adds another layer to the sustaining of an idyllic rural imagination, that of *rural homonationalism*. Instead of signaling a queer critical revision of the countryside, Gheorghe restores a normative rural idyll through the film's imagination of him as a feminized character who stands in for Johnny's missing mother. Paired with Johnny's configuration as a more masculine subject, this facilitates the farm's restoration as a space that sustains white, heteropatriarchal sociality.

What is integrated into the contemporary representation of the Western European countryside in the two films is not the migrant as such, but a disciplined version of them that secures the re-romanticized cultural fabric of the rural idyll, which, in the end, is only marginally challenged by its reconfiguration within the context of globalization. This representation of the migrant cannot be treated as a challenge to the conceptualization of a rural rooted in idyllic authenticity. Rather, it works to preserve this conceptualization in a new form that acknowledges the globalizing present while maintaining a politics of assimilation that is conditional upon the migrants' ability to mask their cultural identity and labor to preserve the more normative and populist rural good-life fantasies of authenticity.

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PART 4

Reframing Farming

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CHAPTER 20

A Garden in the Cotton Fields: Fannie Lou Hamer and Cooperative Economics on the Freedom Farm

Maarten Zwiers

Abstract

Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) exemplifies placemaking in a hostile environment: the Mississippi Delta, a rural area located in the Deep South of the United States characterized by intensive agriculture. The Freedom Farm, established in 1969, served as an interracial agent of social change in a region dominated by a white supremacist agrochemical regime of plantation production. The Freedom Farm was not just an attempt to alleviate poverty and empower local working-class people, but also offered a more sustainable alternative to the large-scale agribusiness model that was harmful to humans and other-than-humans inhabiting the Mississippi Delta ecosystem.

1 Farming as Oppression and Liberation

In February 1969, civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer started a revolutionary initiative in the Mississippi Delta, a rural region in the southern United States dominated by the large-scale plantation production of staple crops such as cotton. Hamer's project – the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) – was revolutionary because it did not follow the Delta's hegemonic business model, which was based on a hyper-capitalist ethos of maximizing farm outputs for the market. The objective of the Freedom Farm was quite the opposite; in a 1970 fundraising letter, Hamer explained how the co-op was supposed to "advance the development of the disadvantaged blacks and whites in the Sunflower County area" (Hamer and Harris). Besides this interracial humanitarianism, the Freedom Farm was also different from the plantation because of the crops it grew. The farm still planted cotton and soybeans to pay off the mortgage on the land, but its most important function was the production of foodstuffs: meat through the so-called Pig Bank and edible plants such as okra, peas, butterbeans, snap beans, cucumber, and squash (Hamer 1971). In the agro-industrial

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ecology of the Mississippi Delta, the Freedom Farm thus constituted a remarkable enterprise: a garden in the cotton fields.

The racialized agricultural system of the Delta has deep historical roots. In the 1930s, sociologist Rupert Vance described the area as a "cotton obsessed, Negro obsessed" white supremacist monocrop economy that was "the deepest South, the heart of Dixie, America's super-plantation belt" (266). This economy had been in place since the early nineteenth century and went through different farm/labor regimes. When Vance made his observations, the Delta was on the threshold of yet another major transformation in farming. Cotton was a labor-intensive crop, from hoeing weeds in the spring and summer to the picking of the fluffy bolls in the fall. But the Great Depression began to change all that. In order to combat the crisis in American farming, the federal government under President Franklin Roosevelt intervened forcefully through New Deal laws like the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). This legislation, meant to stop overproduction and encourage crop diversification, primarily benefited the big landowners in the Delta, who used government subsidies to mechanize their plantations.

In contrast, the Black laborers who worked the land were disadvantaged in at least two ways by New Deal agricultural programs: they had very limited access to the federal dollars flowing to the Delta and farm mechanization diminished the demand for manual labor. This process continued after World War II, when an intensifying chemical regime of pesticide and especially herbicide application further reduced the need for farmhands on the plantations (Williams 256). Within this toxic environment of racist attitudes, agricultural poisons, heavy machinery, and large-scale crop production, Fannie Lou Hamer offered an alternative that helped the working-class people of the Delta based on the philosophy of cooperative economics, or shared work and wealth (Penniman 4). Her model continues to resonate until this day, not just in rural areas, but also in big cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans (McCutcheon 208; White 2018: 87).

In the literature about Hamer, she stands out as a formidable champion of racial justice. Scholarship often concentrates on her work for the civil rights movement during the early 1960s: how she got involved in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), her role in Freedom Summer, including the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), and her powerful testimony at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City on 22 August 1964. Her activities in the late 1960s and 1970s have received less attention, although in the last couple of years a few studies that specifically focus on the Freedom Farm have appeared (see, for example, McCutcheon 2019; Freshour and Williams 2023; White 2017, 2018). In this chapter, I add

to the existing research on the Freedom Farm through an analysis of agriculture in the Mississippi Delta, examining particularly how it fulfilled contrasting functions there during the Jim Crow era and its immediate aftermath: as a system of oppression on the one hand, and a liberatory praxis on the other.[1] This clarifies how farming methods intersected with conflicting views on civil rights and environmental justice.

I first discuss the development of a specific racial ecology in the Delta, starting in the 1930s, which was characterized by intensive, high-investment farming, increased mechanization, and a growing dependence on pesticides and herbicides. Romanticized stories of plantation life figure prominently in a rural idyll that is distinctly US southern, but the industrial and highly poisonous nature of neoplantation agriculture abruptly dispels such myths. The second part of the chapter considers the Freedom Farm as Hamer's response to the toxic ecosystem of the neoplantation, a counter-plantation project and maroon geography based on the blues epistemology. My aim is to elucidate how farming as a form and strategy of resistance materialized on the FFC and how transnational and historical connections informed its creation and operation. The FFC was the physical manifestation of the way Hamer imagined the rural, and in particular her own rural environment: as a healthy, egalitarian space that benefited the entire community, not just the elite.

2 Organic Intellectualism in the Mississippi Delta Agro-industrial Complex

As a child of sharecroppers, Hamer had a thorough knowledge of the plantation system in Mississippi. She was born in 1917 and grew up in Sunflower County in the Delta. By the age of six, she was in the fields picking cotton. Until the 1960s, her entire life was intimately connected with the plantation. Hamer came of age during a momentous period in southern agriculture: the Great Depression of the 1930s. In an interview with historian Neil McMillen, she described the labor-intensive nature of cotton production before machines and chemicals began to replace workers. Farmhand children would not be in school during spring or summer because of all the work that had to be done on the land. "There wasn't no such thing as a period where they had a lapse between there," Hamer said. Sharecropper families "just chopped cotton, chopped cotton, over and over" (Hamer 1972–73: 149). Like so many working-class African Americans

1 Jim Crow was the system of racial segregation in the US South that emerged in the 1890s and existed in institutional form until the 1960s.

in the Delta, Fannie Lou spent most of her youth in the fields and not in the classroom, which makes her later role as civil rights leader even more remarkable. Instead of learning the necessary leadership skills in educational institutions, Hamer acquired such know-how through her life experiences as a plantation worker. In that sense, she was an archetypal organic intellectual (White 2018: 69–72).

The Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) developed the concept of the organic intellectual during the last years of his life, when he was imprisoned by the fascist government of Italy. According to Gramsci, intellectuals are not limited to formally schooled individuals, but can also "organically" arise from both dominant and oppressed classes in society. These organic intellectuals give the social group to which they belong "homogeneity and an awareness of its function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (Gramsci 113). The organic intellectual feels a spirited connection to their class and a strong commitment to its cause, a rootedness that enables them to fulfill leadership roles (Cassidy 413). Their worldview and political agenda are shaped by lived experience rather than professional education. This insider status and the profound knowledge of the collective they belong to means that, under the guidance of the organic intellectual, an oppressed group can emancipate itself, without necessarily the help from outside activists (Sousa 2–4).

"Now, to give hundreds of landless poor people a chance at self-help, economic self-sufficiency and political power, Mrs. Hamer has organized a farm cooperative," Harry Belafonte described the FFC in a 1969 fundraising letter. Besides being a famous folk, blues, and calypso singer, Belafonte was a committed civil rights activist. "I earnestly believe this example of initiative, racial cooperation and political militancy is worthy of the support of all Americans," he implored (Belafonte). In its diametrical opposition to dominant ideas about farming and landownership in the Mississippi Delta, Hamer's organic intellectual vision underlying the Freedom Farm aligned with the blues epistemology, a knowledge system conceptualized by geographer Clyde Woods. According to Woods, the blues was not "simply" a music genre but an "intellectual, cultural, social, political, and economic movement" launched by Black Mississippians in the period between the US Civil War (1861–65) and the rise of Jim Crow segregation in the 1890s (2007: 55). Sustainable development informed by African intellectual traditions was central to the movement's reform agenda, which "stressed the elimination of hierarchical land-tenure patterns, the reorganization of urban and rural relations, and the placement of science and the state in the service of the dispossessed" (Woods 2007: 55).

The blues constituted a mechanism to confront the plantation and its manifold mutations. It was a "permanent countermobilization" (Woods 2007: 58)

to make sense of a racist universe: the world that emerged with the birth of Jim Crow, its legal discrimination, and its white supremacist violence. Woods views Hamer as a vocal representative of the blues development ethic, an organic intellectual who put the blues epistemology into practice with the Freedom Farm. Like the blues, the FFC "emerged from the daily lives and the collective history of the people of the Delta," Woods explains, adding: "In many respects, the Freedom Farm mirrored the historic African American rural reform agenda" (1998/2017: 218) mentioned in the previous paragraph.[2] In the FFC, this reform was not limited to attempts at transforming the Delta's agricultural system, but also aimed at changing the mindset of the area's poor and unemployed through the principle of self-help. "The need for an organization which allows people to work and reap the benefits of their labor is a paramount priority," the farm's leadership declared. "The only way for a family to break out of the bondage of the Welfare rolls is the SELF-HELP method" (FFC 1975: 6).

The Freedom Farm, then, was an effort to reform both the material and ideological conditions of the Delta's agricultural system, which rested on a dehumanizing view of field laborers. The regional plantation bloc considered them mere equipment. "In going over the records for the past year, I find that we have had the pleasure of seeing quite a few tenants from your Doddsville farm," a local doctor wrote Delta planter (and US senator) James Eastland in 1945, "we have perhaps not been able to be as thorough as we would like to be, but nevertheless, we have tried to keep some of the 'human farm machinery' going" (Russel). By that time, Hamer had married Perry "Pap" Hamer and started working on the plantation of W.D. Marlow in Ruleville, where her husband was a tractor driver. She eventually became timekeeper on the Marlow farm, a job with great responsibility because it involved the registration of working hours, the number of bales harvested, and how much money each laborer had earned (Asch 58). The work the Hamers performed demonstrates how efficient production through mechanization and time management had become an intrinsic element of plantation agriculture in the Mississippi Delta after World War II.

The Eastland plantation is illustrative of the ongoing science-based automation of agriculture in the Delta during the Cold War era. A 1956 profile of James Eastland in *Time* magazine not only discussed the senator's segregationist politics but also his farming operation, which dispelled the pastoral moonlight-and-magnolias image of plantation life. The article described the farm as

2 Woods sees this rural reform agenda as a radical transformative program based on a blues knowledge system "indigenous to the United States that is expressed through an ever-expanding variety of cultural, economic, political, and social traditions" (2007: 49).

"less of a plantation than an agricultural factory," where under "Eastland's close supervision, the land is cultivated according to the most scientific information available" ("The Authentic Voice" 28). During the spring, machines plowed the Delta loam and injected nitrogen fertilizer into the soil. The plantation had its own modern irrigation system, developed by a consultant from neighboring Arkansas. The farm with its equipment was worth more than a million dollars and netted about half a million dollars in sales per year ("The Authentic Voice" 28).

By the mid-1950s, conditions on the Eastland estate contrasted sharply with the situation at the end of World War II, when many field workers had left Mississippi for better jobs elsewhere in the booming war economy, creating a serious labor shortage in the Delta (Asch 101–103, 127). Eastland's plantation manager William Godbold desperately wrote his boss in 1945 that he had to do "everything in our power to bring order out of the chaos that exists on your plantation … You are entirely familiar with the backwardness of all farm work in this section … This situation is most serious." In 1956, this was no longer the case. The Eastland farm had become a quintessential neoplantation; a capital-intensive, mechanized agricultural venture that saw its genesis in the 1930s. The neoplantation developed through a number of stages, starting with New Deal subsidies for plantation owners and the resultant capitalization of the planter class; the large-scale eviction of sharecroppers; the increased use of tractors and wage labor during the 1940s; and the shift to mechanical harvesting by the 1950s. During this latter period, the application of herbicides doubled, further reducing the need for manual labor (Woods 1998/2017: 159–60).

The fifties were a transitional era with regard to plantation labor. Although mechanization continued and the spraying of agricultural toxins increased significantly, workers were still necessary to remove harmful plants. While they performed this task, they were exposed to various kinds of pesticides: organophosphates, DDT, and toxaphene (Williams 253). Geographer Brian Williams notes a significant distinction between pesticides and herbicides: while the former did not have a direct relationship to labor, the latter did. By the mid-1950s and in particular during the 1960s, herbicides became a replacement for the manual hoeing of weeds. The timing of the explosive growth in herbicide usage was no coincidence. It happened during a period when protests against the discrimination and exploitation of Black Mississippians picked up. "The temporality of pesticide intensification is important," Williams writes, "the rapid increase in herbicides occurred as planters increasingly viewed Black residents of the Delta as surplus to the demands of plantation agriculture, and as the Black freedom struggles challenged the economic and political power of the plantation bloc" (257). In 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer began to take an active

part in this freedom struggle, with serious repercussions for her life on the Marlow plantation.

The civil rights group SNCC specifically targeted Sunflower County because it was James Eastland's home. The planter-politician was one of the most well-known opponents of the civil rights movement and SNCC leadership wanted to expose the racism that existed in Eastland's locale. Efforts to register Black voters in the county would certainly elicit resistance from local whites, which would embarrass the senator and might even lead to a federal investigation of voting rights violations (Asch 174–175). The arrival of civil rights activists in Sunflower County had a revolutionizing effect on Hamer. For the first time in her life, she attended a voting rights rally, held at William Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Ruleville. "Until then I'd never heard of no mass meeting and I didn't know that a Negro could register and vote," Hamer said. "When they asked for those to raise their hands who'd go down to the courthouse the next day, I raised mine" (1986: 324).

The plantation regime obviously did not accept such forms of noncompliance with Jim Crow customs. Local police arrested Hamer and seventeen other volunteers when they returned from the courthouse in the county seat of Indianola, ostensibly because the bus that transported them had the wrong color. By the time she was bailed out, news about her registration attempt had reached the Marlow plantation. When Hamer came home, the infuriated planter threatened her with eviction. "We're not going to have this in Mississippi and you will have to withdraw," he told her. "I will give you until tomorrow morning. And if you don't withdraw you will have to leave. If you do go withdraw, it's only how I feel, you might still have to leave" (qtd. in Hamer 1986: 325). Hamer left the plantation where she had worked for eighteen years that same night.

3 Cooperative Farming as Counter-Plantation Resistance in a Maroon Geography

Because the profits of Delta planters depended on monocrop agriculture and the racialized division of labor, the plantation was by definition a heavily controlled environment. The focus on the mass production of a single crop like cotton made plantations very vulnerable to pest infestations, which explains the intensive use of insecticides and herbicides as a control mechanism. A similar attitude dictated the plantation labor system: threats to its race-based structure had to be brought under control or eradicated. "Local self-government is, of course, based on the postulate of white domination," sociologist

John Dollard summarized the political situation in Sunflower County, where he did research during the Great Depression of the 1930s. "It is part of the Negro's caste 'place' that he does not vote and does not complain about being unable to do so" (qtd. in Asch 46). Black people have always challenged this system, but the arrival of civil rights groups like SNCC gave a boost to fighting it more openly and making the rest of the nation acutely aware of Jim Crow injustice. For the planter class in post-World War II Mississippi, chemicals became a wide-ranging tool to keep control over their cotton fields – a multipurpose weapon to kill destructive insects and plants, decrease the dependence on Black labor, and create a toxic environment that made alternatives to the plantation model of farming, such as small-scale vegetable gardens, practically impossible (Williams 256–257).

Such gardens were not only important for plantation workers to grow healthy food to eat, but simultaneously operated as a form of agricultural dissent – a site of resistance. The garden plot already had this function during the days of slavery, cultural theorist and novelist Sylvia Wynter notes. Her observations resonate with the counter-plantation nature of the blues epistemology, which Woods considers as "informed by African philosophies of sustainable development and the lessons of the Americas: genocide, colonization, and slavery" (2007: 55). Within plantation ecologies, gardens formed spaces where the enslaved could plant vegetables and perpetuate African farming methods and foodways. As such, they were an important part of a counter-plantation structure, "the focus of resistance to the market system and market values" (Wynter 99). Because the plot enabled enslaved Africans to preserve their traditions related to agriculture and stewardship of the earth, it became the foundation for a folk culture in Plantation America, Wynter states. "This culture recreated traditional values – use values," she continues. "This folk culture became a source of cultural guerrilla resistance to the plantation system" (100).

Mississippi's plantation system during the days of Jim Crow was an extensive statewide network that did not just consist of explicitly white supremacist groups like the Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan. For example, the Mississippi Farm Bureau, a federation representing the state's agricultural interests, actively lobbied against the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In a fundraising letter, Farm Bureau President Boswell Stevens called the bill "an emergency" and the fight against it "a life and death struggle to preserve our Constitutional form of Government." The Farm Bureau coordinated its fundraising campaign with the Sovereignty Commission, a state agency founded in 1956 to protect segregation (Stevens). Stevens's letter makes clear that civil rights activists in Mississippi faced a wide array of individuals and organizations committed to Jim Crow, from outright racists to mainstream interest groups like the Farm

Bureau, which had a major role in the development of agriculture in the state. Hamer was well aware of this systemic nature of white supremacy. She thought it was absolutely necessary "to do all we can to destroy this system and bring this thing out to the light that has been under the cover all these years … We have to build our own power" (Hamer 1986: 326–327).

As an organic intellectual, Hamer conceived the FFC as a more sustainable and cooperative form of tilling the land that would benefit local people instead of the planter's pocketbook. As such, it stood in a long tradition of counter-plantation work that has its roots in slavery. Haitian sociologist Jean Casimir, who formulated the concept of the counter-plantation system in studies of his home country during and after French imperial rule, describes how enslavers not just owned the bodies of the workers on their farms, but also had "to conquer, to invade, to occupy *them*, and to inculcate in their minds colonial ideas and values" to make them useful for plantation labor (61–62; emphasis added). In response and resistance to this external and internal colonization of their bodies and minds, the enslaved first needed to understand the logic of the plantation, so they could subsequently deconstruct it and replace it with a new structure: the counter-plantation system. "They reorganized their universe by inventing an unprecedented one," Casimir writes, a universe "that both incorporated and outdistanced the African environment where they came from, as well as the mean-spirited landscape in which the master wished to enclose them." The counter-plantation system stood for internal freedom, autonomy, and self-sufficiency (Casimir 64–66).

With its focus on self-help, grassroots organizing, and healthy food production, the Freedom Farm embodied the spirit of the counter-plantation system. "We just thought if we had land to grow some stuff on, then it would be a help to us," Hamer explained, "people will be able to have [their] own vegetables, if you've got your vegetables, you got your – if we can get some cows, some cattle, so they can have their meat … the main purpose is to feed and build the economic standard up" (1972–73: 172–174). There was a direct relationship between the founding of the FFC and the ongoing mechanization of neoplantations in the Mississippi Delta, which led to a decreased demand for labor on these farms and a concomitant rise in unemployment and poverty among the local working-class population. "But they worked because there was much more work to do … than there is now because [planters] don't let people work in the fields now," Hamer summarized the impact of automation on farm work in the Delta during the early 1970s (1972–73: 149).

Agricultural chemicals had a similar dampening effect on the need for manual labor. Planters began to use "chemicals and all that," Hamer recalled. "But they didn't use chemicals [back] then; people used to clean that cotton out"

(1972–73: 149). Insecticides and herbicides additionally created a poisonous atmosphere that threatened the vegetable gardens of farm workers – food that was necessary for a nutritious diet and to avoid hunger (Williams 257). The Freedom Farm was supposed to empower and nourish these workers. It was "a dream of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer that grew out of the Civil Rights strife of the late 1960's," a 1975 funding proposal described the cooperative. "Mrs. Hamer wanted to develop a Black controlled institution that would have its strengths in land and people and would be able to support the indigent Blacks and Whites of the Sunflower County area that are rapidly being displaced by increased agricultural mechanization in farming methods" (FFC 1975: 2). Within the hostile environment of the Mississippi Delta, the Freedom Farm formed a safe haven or maroon geography, a site of resistance against the historical horrors and persistent afterlives of slavery and the plantation.

Geographer Celeste Winston defines marronage as "the practices of flight from enslavement and placemaking beyond slavery" (2185). She shows how maroon communities historically did not adhere to the rules of the dominant political economy and often operated outside of its laws, thus constituting a parallel social system. Even after the downfall of slavery, they carried on with their counter-plantation work, "an ongoing, expansive, and fundamentally spatial practice of building alternative worlds in service of liberation," operating as refuges "produced through continued Black struggle" from slavery and other forms of racial violence like environmental racism and unequal access to food and housing (Winston 2187). Maroon geographies generally develop in "forgotten places" where people engage in cooperative placemaking to build communities that adhere to a non-capitalist philosophy of land use: they are not guided by imperialist ideas of conquest and extraction, but see the land as basis for communal sustenance.

Although maroon geographies aim to exist beyond racial capitalism, complete disentanglement from market and government interference is often impossible. While various "spatial strategies of entanglement" help to navigate the systemic constraints imposed by capitalist and state institutions (Winston 2189–2191, 2194–2195), funding the FFC in a capitalist system remained a vexing issue. During most of its existence, the Freedom Farm as a non-profit charitable organization had trouble staying afloat financially, hindered by the local constraints of being situated in a plantation economy and by larger economic forces at the national and global level (McCutcheon 219). In 1975, a year before the farm had to close down, FFC management reflected on how macroeconomic developments affected the local people of the Delta: "with the present recession, the rampant inflation of prices and the impending depression the

outlook is indeed dim for low and moderate-income families living in Sunflower County" (FFC 1975: 6). This dire situation made initiatives like the FFC even more imperative, but because of the recession, the farm itself also increasingly had difficulty finding donors to keep its manifold programs running (Blain 126).

Although the FFC was primarily a farming operation, it developed a wide range of other activities. Most of the farmland it acquired was still used for cash crops: 300 acres for cotton and 209 acres for soybeans in 1971. These crops were necessary to make down payments on the land. The rest of the fields that year were planted with cucumbers (30 acres), corn (44 acres), butterbeans (10 acres), and squash (10 acres). The cooperative distributed these vegetables to needy people in the area. Another food-producing initiative was the Pig Bank, which was supported by the National Council of Negro Women. Families received a pig from the FFC and after it bore young, they had to return two of its offspring to the cooperative, thus increasing the availability of meat to the community. In addition to these agricultural pursuits, the FFC provided housing to low-income families, gave educational grants to poor students so they could attend high school in Sunflower County, offered welfare and relief (for instance after a tornado hit the nearby town of Inverness), and supported an African fashion shop in Drew, a few miles north of Ruleville (FFC n. d.: 1–4). Self-help was a guiding principle on the farm, because it offered "an incentive, a motivation, an achievement – in essence – a reason for being" (FFC 1975: 6). Both the self-help philosophy and the process of cooperative placemaking that happened on the Freedom Farm were strategies to counter the dominant mode of plantation production in the Mississippi Delta and the devalued position of the field worker in this system.

"Fannie Lou Hamer was an activist and a cultural leader who assumed major responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the environment within which those who struggle for freedom lived and worked," SNCC veteran and cultural historian Bernice Johnson Reagon defined Hamer's generative power as a civil rights worker and grassroots campaigner (204). A 1964 trip to Africa facilitated by SNCC was particularly important for the development of Hamer's vision as a community organizer. In Guinea, she saw how Black people had created their own country and were in charge of everything, from politics to economics. The visit dispelled the negative stereotypes of Africans (and Black people in general) Hamer had encountered on a daily basis, growing up and living in the Jim Crow society of Mississippi. She reconceptualized her African heritage and ancestry as a source of strength and pride (Wood 224). "Being from the South we never was taught much about our African heritage," Hamer

said. "The way everybody talked to us, everybody in Africa was savages and really stupid people. But I've seen more savage white folks here in America than I seen in Africa" (1986: 329).

Hamer recognized many similarities between customs in Africa and Black life in Mississippi. "I felt a closeness in Africa," she explained. "A lot of the things they do over there I've done as a child." She referred to specific foodways and music – the tunes she heard in Guinea reminded her of the songs her grandmother used to sing. Seeing African women, who "were so graceful and poised," similarly brought back memories of her grandmother and mother (Hamer 1986: 329–330). Even the African landscape looked (and felt) familiar: "when I would go out where we call the rural area here – we'd go out there and there was always something that we had in common," Hamer reminisced. "Africa to me, before I left, was like going on Greasy Street," the center of Black commercial and recreational activity in Ruleville (Hamer 1972–73: 159).

The Freedom Farm reflected the sense of empowerment and land sovereignty Hamer had witnessed in Africa and it operated as a geographic and historical node, connecting the Mississippi Delta with the Caribbean – "the classic plantation area," in the words of Wynter (95) – and the wider African diaspora by building on Black traditions of sustainable farming and agriculture as resistance and liberation. Spearheaded by the organic intellectual Fannie Lou Hamer, it was a cooperative placemaking project and a counter-plantation program guided by the blues epistemology. "The inspiration that Mrs. Hamer has given the downtrodden and poor people of Sunflower County and the surrounding Delta is almost impossible to measure," an FFC status report lauded Hamer's organic intellectual guidance. "Her personal example of fearless leadership and honesty in the face of personal injury and abuse has given strength to the people she serves best, the displaced and poor" (FFC 1973: 8).

4 Conclusion: an Oasis in a Forgotten Place

The Freedom Farm had to shut down its operations in 1976. Natural disasters and the economic downturn of the 1970s led to failed harvests on the one hand, and less money coming in from outside donors on the other. Hamer's health issues worsened as the FFC struggled to survive. She died in 1977 at Taborian Hospital in Mound Bayou, a center of Black activism and autonomy in the Mississippi Delta. As a maroon geography under organic intellectual leadership, the Freedom Farm could not escape problems that were oftentimes structural in nature and therefore difficult to solve. The FFC functioned as a non-profit service organization, an anomaly in the hostile plantation ecosystem of the

Delta, where financial gain was the overriding motive. In its charitable work for the poor and unemployed, the FFC simply did not generate enough capital and was permanently in debt. The cooperative received funding from private organizations, but Hamer was wary of agricultural subsidies coming from the state of Mississippi and the federal government. She strongly believed in the philosophy of self-help and also wanted to avoid possible control from state agencies. The farm lacked the business guidance to operate effectively in a complex capitalist economy, especially after its manager died in 1974. Hamer was not a trained administrator and fundraising efforts required her to travel extensively, hampering her involvement in the day-to-day running of the FFC (McCutcheon 218–19; Nembhard 184–86).

Yet despite these problems and setbacks, the Freedom Farm was not a failure. "FFC created an oasis of self-reliance and self-determination in a landscape of oppression maintained in part by deprivation," environmental studies scholar Monica White characterizes the pioneering nature of the cooperative (2018: 87). The farm should be seen in this light: as a place-based, bottom-up endeavor to help the working-class people of the Delta make a living in an inhospitable environment dominated by industrial agriculture (Freshour and Williams 1566; McKittrick 7). Fannie Lou Hamer's daughter Jacqueline, who grew up on the Freedom Farm, deemed her mother's work to alleviate poverty and secure economic rights through self-help as one of her greatest accomplishments. "Her approach to economic development, self-sufficiency and empowerment was ahead of the times and could no doubt provide insight into solving our current problems of the wealth gap, food insecurity and overall poverty," she wrote (39).

The legacy of Hamer lives on in the Mississippi Delta. Black farmers there continue to work the land in the spirit of sustainable and cooperative farming, despite a long history of institutional discrimination that led to a dramatic decline in African American landownership since the 1920s (Hinson 918–927).[3] Ernestine and Dorfus Young, for instance, bought cotton land near the Delta town of Clarksdale in 1983 and built a farm with vegetable gardens, an orchard, and chickens. "The Young family intentionally purchased land that was used to cultivate cotton and represented a dark legacy of forced labor, with the goal of transforming that land into a space that gives back to the community," the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) reported in the summer of 2023. "The Young family grows a variety of produce, grapes for their winery and gives large focus to educating a new generation of farmers

3 Between 1920 and 2012, the number of Black farm operators in the US decreased by 96 percent (Hinson 918).

in agricultural practices" (RAFI USA). In Holmes County, furthermore, farmer and community organizer Calvin Head helped reorganize the Mileston Cooperative Association (MCA), which has its roots in the New Deal. The MCA grows and distributes food to the local community and runs a farmers' market. These examples show that food production through community-oriented cooperative farming is alive in the Delta, albeit on a relatively small scale.

In her book *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick suggests "that the relationship between black women and geography opens up a conceptual arena through which more humanly workable geographies can be and are imagined" (XII). Fannie Lou Hamer's counter-plantation rural imagination, which manifested itself in the Freedom Farm, came from the aspiration to create such a humanly workable geography. Until this day, her philosophy of cooperative economics remains relevant as a template grounded in historical reality of the possibilities for socioeconomic change in a globalized and racialized capitalist agricultural ecosystem.

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CHAPTER 21

Twisting Ruralities: the Ecological Imagination around the Beijing Farmers' Market

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Abstract

As presented by the Beijing Farmers' Market, ecological farming based in the rural offers an escape from food-safety crises. The rural here is imagined as an "authentic" idyll where more-than-human living webs can be rebuilt through an ethics of care embedding classic Chinese philosophy. At the same time, an imagination of the rural as backwards is maintained, leading to conventional farmers being seen as submitting to the capitalist farming system. This twisting of ruralities, my analysis of the Beijing Farmers' Market will show, offers up the rural as a retreat from urban problems while ignoring how this (imagination of the) rural is inflected by the urban.

1 Ecological Farming as an Alternative

At the Beijing Farmers' Market, slogans praising farmers adorn the flags at the entrance, the welcome blackboard, and the booth shades: "ecological farmers come to the city for people's convenience," "come to know ecological farmers, your food producers," and "feel rooted from the bottom of your heart by knowing where your food comes from." Contrary to conventional conceptualizations of the Chinese rural as repressed or rendered invisible in relation to the urban processes globalization is primarily associated with (Rozelle and Hell), China is currently witnessing the rise of a more positive image of the rural in the urban (Griffiths et al.; Cody 2018). One illustration of this is the Beijing Farmers' Market. The farmers there are presented as ecologically producing food that can help urbanites feel rooted as well as safe. Through alternative agricultural practices based in the rural, they seek to reweave humans' attachments to nonhumans and the ecosystem as a whole, responding to capitalist as well as environmental crises that transcend geographical and species boundaries. This chapter investigates the ecologically focused imagination of rurality that is constructed and circulated around the Beijing Farmers' Market,

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and explores how this imagination engages with the push and pull factors characterizing contemporary China's rural-urban nexus.

In the past decades, a series of food-safety crises have prompted China's transformation into a "risk society" (Beck; Yan), organized around the fear of uncontrollable risks.[1] Some poisonous food additives and agrichemicals, like carmine dye for coloring unripe strawberries, are illegally applied because they improve food's appearance, enabling it to be sold at higher prices. In addition, the depletion of soil and water resources increasingly jeopardizes the quality and quantity of China's food supply (Wang et al.). As a result of these and other problems, food anxieties have arisen and various bottom-up forces, including civil society organizations, alternative food initiatives, farmers, and consumers, have started to promote and engage in more sustainable food production and ethical consumption (Si and Scott; Zhang and Qi; Leggett). In this context, the Beijing Farmers' Market, to which small-scale ecological farmers from nearby villages travel around twice a week to sell their produce directly to urbanites, was established in 2010 (Ren).

At the Market, different booths offer grains, vegetables, fruits, eggs, unprocessed meats, and semi-processed foods such as popcorn, dried fruits, jams, juice, rice wine, and tofu, all labeled by the Market and the farmers as ecologically produced. This means that no agrichemicals are used in the growing and processing of the food. To earn the ecological label, farmers need to demonstrate care not only for what they grow, but for everything involved in the cultivation process, including the soil, bugs, birds, and even the bacteria and fungi on their farm. In this sense, the notion of the ecological that circulates around the Market pertains to a complex ethics of care that resonates with environmentalist discourses in environmental studies, feminist ecocriticism, and cultural studies. By labeling their products as ecological, the farmers and the Market contribute to a new imagination of the rural designed to manage food-safety anxiety, while also promising a way out of the other crises caused by the profit-oriented capitalist logic, such as environmental degradation and (rural-to-urban migrant) labor exploitation.

In China, the *hukou* household registration system continues to affirm the historical construction of the rural and the urban as separate spaces and

1 Yan distinguishes three levels of food-safety problems in China: food hygiene, unsafe food, and poisonous food. Food hygiene refers to food processing under poor sanitary conditions that does not meet quality-control standards; unsafe food results mainly from the heavy use of agrichemicals, preservatives, flavor enhancers, colorants, and pollution and environmental degradation; poisonous food is a result of deliberate contamination, with food producers, processors, and traders adding an array of banned toxic chemicals to human food or animal feed in order to enhance profits.

identities, with the urban generally valued higher.[2] Although Mao emphasized the revolutionary potential of rural people as an exploited class, from 1978, the urban was re-established as a privileged space when China's class system was abolished (Kipnis) and economic development and urbanization became the main focus of State policies.[3] China's market reform fueled higher incomes for urbanites and led to an unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural areas (Otis). Enjoying more support from the State, the urban was for decades considered as the standard of development that the rural should aspire to reach (Lai). However, Griffiths et al. note that in contemporary urban China a "romantic reappraisal" of the rural is occurring as more and more urbanites believe it is in the rural rather than in the urban that the source of virtue can be found.

Interestingly, the ecologically focused imagination of the rural promoted by the Beijing Farmers' Market appears to contrast with the stereotypical image of rural China as poor, underdeveloped, and uncivilized (Cohen; Kipnis; Clarke-Sather), while also not being entirely consistent with the "romantic reappraisal" of the rural. In this chapter, I make clear what the ecologically focused rural imagination circulating around the Beijing Farmers' Market entails and ask how it might reconfigure the understanding of China's rural-urban nexus.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted between September 2020 and August 2021 at the Beijing Farmers' Market and on several ecological farms that supply the Market. During my fieldwork I volunteered at the Market 23 times, conducting participatory observations, chatting with ecological farmers, listening to their discussions, negotiations, worries, and complaints, interviewing them while helping to sell the ecological produce, and responding to the buyers' challenging questions about ecological farming. From November 2020, through a series of PGS (Participatory Guarantee Systems)[4] farm visits

2 The *hukou* system, a national population management system making a strict distinction between peasants (most village dwellers) and non-peasants (almost all town and city dwellers), was established in 1958 and limits permanent migration from rural to urban areas to this day.

3 China's class system was developed between 1949 and 1978 to distinguish revolutionaries from counterrevolutionaries, progressive citizens from backward ones, and friends from enemies (Billeter). Rural class labels like landlord, rich peasant, middle peasant, and so forth, were based on (lack of) land ownership, and urban class labels primarily on one's occupation. Between 1958 and 1978, the interaction of this class system with the household registration system created a context in which poor peasants, though deprived of material prosperity, were perceived as morally superior to urbanites.

4 PGS aim for a democratization of knowledge and for the co-creation by producers, experts, and consumers of the standards for the oversight compliance system for ecological agriculture (IFOAM). During the PGS visits to farms organized by the Beijing Farmers' Market, par-

organized by the Market, I visited nine ecological farms in villages surrounding Beijing. I also worked on an ecological farm for two days, feeding poultry, collecting eggs, weeding, and cutting tree branches. My on-site fieldwork was combined with digital ethnography (Pink et al.) on WeChat, a "super-sticky" (Chen et al.) digital platform widely used in China to exchange information. Besides subscribing to the Market's official WeChat account, I became online friends with some ecological farmers, staff members, and urban buyers, and joined the buyer WeChat group initiated by the Market. To protect the privacy of my informants, I have anonymized them and use pseudonyms for those I repeatedly quote in this chapter.

In what follows, I will first probe how the farmers involved in the Beijing Farmers' Market imagine and practice ecological farming, and elaborate on how this involves an ethics of care for an entangled, more-than-human ecosystem. I also demonstrate how the ecologically focused rural imagination of the farmers repurposes an "authentic" idyll with Chinese characteristics. Finally, I illustrate how the ecological farmers, many of whom come from the urban, oppose themselves to conventional rural farmers by imagining the latter through the historical stereotype of rural people as backward and uncivilized. In this way, I make clear that the rural imagination associated with the Beijing Farmers' Market is characterized by a tense, frictional dynamic that means it does not fully endorse either the rural-urban binary that considers the urban superior to the rural or the romanticizing rural idyll that appears to be making a comeback in Chinese society. Rather, in the context of the Market and the need to address food-safety and environmental crises, we see a twisting together of different rural imaginations, both positive and negative.

2 The "Authentic" Idyll and Its Ethics of Care

> I feed the poultry every day. This doesn't mean that I raise them, but that I cooperate with nature – cultivate the relationship with the poultry through feeding. When they see me passing by with a small bucket, they will come to me, even if there is no food in the bucket. This is because they have a lot of affection for me. Living on my farm, I watch the sunrise every day and feel the connection between the lives in nature. This is the authentic life. I used to live in the city and never felt such connections at all. When I am ploughing the land, the land is ploughing my heart.

ticipants are asked to examine the farmer's practices by looking at what kind of fertilizer, seeds, etc. they use, according to a checklist compiled by the Market.

The above quote from an article published by the official WeChat account of the Beijing Farmers' Market introduces Teacher Huang, the most experienced ecological farmer involved in the Beijing Farmers' Market. Teacher Huang narrates how she structures her farming life in a rural village around intimate relations with other living beings and sensuous perceptions of nature. Urban life is seen to stand in sharp contrast to this and is perceived as cutting humans off from other beings. What Teacher Huang presents is an idyllic rurality that pits a peaceful and pleasant rural ethos conceived as enabling genuine relationships with other life forms and nature against a frantic, rational, and industrial urbanity (Qian et al.). Notably, the entangled more-than-human relations central to ecological farming, and the establishment of a caring relationship between the farmer, the farm animals, and the land, are integrated into this idyllic imagination, which moves away from envisioning the farmer as the controlling center of the farm.

Refusing the instant convenience brought by agrichemicals, ecological farmers participating in the Market rely on the ongoing interaction and mutual transformation of human and living nature to farm sustainably. Through a production mode of "co-production" between humans and living nature (van der Ploeg 24), agricultural resources are converted not only into a range of products, but also into resources to be fed back into the farm ecosystem. The human-nature interaction involved fosters an ethics of care that recognizes the agency of all "others," be it other beings or other nature (Jackson and Palmer). For the ecological farmers, healthy food is the logical consequence of healthy relations between human and non-human agents. On Teacher Huang's farm, plants feed animals and plants and animals feed farmers, while the farmer's food waste becomes animal food and animal excrement acts as a fertilizer for plants. Such foodweb-like relations, where species not only feed on each other but one species' waste becomes another's food (Ingham), constructs a nutrition circulation that makes future production sustainable and develops a web of obligations and asymmetrical reciprocities among humans and living nature: the thing "you depend on depends on those who depend on you" (Puig de la Bellacasa 199).

Importantly, besides relations of affection, the entangled and more-than-human ethics of care also acknowledges rivalries and the sacrifice of lives on the farm. This, I argue, distinguishes the ecological rural imagination from the rural idyll, and repurposes the notion of the "authentic" idyll. As shown in Teacher Huang's narration, the discourse of "authentic life" is utilized by the ecological farmers to describe their sense of ecological relatedness to nature and non-humans. This relatedness includes predation, which threatens the production yield. I observed how, on Teacher Huang's farm, poultry, sheep, and cattle are free to walk around, and the vegetables stored outside the fences are often

pecked by poultry. In addition, a yellow weasel living near to her farm attacks the free-range chickens and eggs time and again. Though Teacher Huang is aware of these risks, she does not strive to eliminate them. She habitually picks out and throws the pecked vegetables into the poultry yard, transforming vegetables for sale to humans into poultry feed. As for not eliminating the weasel, Teacher Huang explained that poultry are endowed with survival instincts and should know how to avoid attacks and protect their eggs. If they are protected by farmers, they become lifeless commodities, not beings living an "authentic life."

This clarifies why Teacher Huang identifies herself as a "life manager." Compared with conventional farm produce grown in well-protected contexts, with agrichemicals killing "harmful" species and urging the produce to absorb maximum "nutrition," the life forms on her farm are part of "open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life" (Tsing 4). This is what the ecological farmers believe is the "authentic" world that should be sustained. Tsing explains the "assemblage" as an open-ended gathering or ecological community where varied species influence each other: "some thwart (or eat) each other; others work together to make life possible; still others just happen to find themselves in the same place" (22). In an assemblage, living things make the world together through seasonal pulses of growth in multiple directions and through mutual disturbances, instead of steadily moving forward in a singular direction under the control of humans. On Teacher Huang's farm, all interactions among humans and nonhumans are carefully cultivated on the basis of knowing each species' living habits and making room for their disturbances. Such knowing, as indicated by Puig de la Bellacasa, is an essentially relational process that requires care. With Teacher Huang prioritizing coming to know other species, the multidirectional ecological relations of care on her farm are built on an understanding of onto-epistemological heterogeneity, and on endowing each species with agency of its own.

In most cases, the "authentic" rural idyll that embraces the disturbances of living nature espoused by those associated with the Beijing Farmers' Market finds its source in Chinese classic philosophy,[5] specifically in the concept of *tianren heyi* (the unity between the natural and the human), one of the main tenets of almost all Chinese philosophical schools. Having asked himself "why do human beings try by every means to kill insects just because they take a bite from the vegetables?" and concluded that "human beings eat vegetables for a living; the insects, too, eat vegetables to live," Brother Zhou, another

5 It should be noted that, while the Beijing Farmers' Market and its ecological farmers privilege Chinese traditions, other practices also serve as models, with some farmers referencing Permaculture from Australia, Biodynamic Agriculture from Europe, or Natural Farming from Japan.

farmer involved in the Market, named his farm *Sanhe Yushun*, inspired by the Confucian philosopher Xunzi. *Sanhe* refers to three elements – heaven, earth, and humankind – being reconciled and bringing about *Yushun* – good crop weather. Specifically, Brother Zhou quoted Xunzi's belief that "Heaven has its proper seasons; earth has its proper resources; and humankind has its proper order. This is called being able to form a triad" (Xunzi 176).

Represented as a cosmic triad of heaven, earth and humankind, the unity between humans and nature here is grounded in *tianren zhifen* (the distinction between the natural and the human (Li 115)). Li comments that Xunzi emphasized the struggle between human existence and nature; he sought to "understand how nature as it pertained to people could be controlled and remade by those people" (119). At the same time, this transformative process requires *zhitian* (knowing nature) and attuning to natural laws (Li 119). In this sense, humans are complementarily integrated in heaven and earth, while also remaining distinct from these natural realms; humans should negotiate with living nature rather than solely control it or imitate it unreflectively. Believing in the triad model, Brother Zhou respects the lifeforms on his farm and consistently adjusts his farming methods according to the changing climate, insect activities, land conditions, consumer feedback, and government policies in order to achieve the reconciliation between the elements of the triad. In correspondence with the "authentic" way of being discussed above, the triad model avoids both human-centrism and naturalism, illustrating instead a symbiotic community of life in which all beings are interdependent, in both supportive and disruptive ways.

Since most traditional Chinese customs and social relation patterns were developed based on agriculture (Fei), rural villages where there is land available for farming offer a way for ecological farmers to revive Chinese traditional culture, which is believed to harbor a wisdom lost in contemporary society. Ancient Chinese books such as *Huangdi Neijing* (*Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*, 2022), *Qimin Yaoshu* (*Essentials of People's Livelihood*, 2022) and *Nongzheng Quanshu* (*Complete Treatise on Agriculture*, 2020) are frequently found on the bookshelves of the ecological farmers' village homes as providing useful guidance for how to farm without agrichemicals. Some of the ecological farmers produce seasonal food according to the Chinese traditional *24 jieqi* (24 solar terms) and believe that the wisdom of the ancestors inhabits the seasonal diet of Chinese traditional culture.[6] For example, with regard to making

6 The Ancient Chinese divided the sun's annual circular motion into 24 equal segments or "solar terms" that guided agricultural affairs, reflecting changes of climate, natural phenomena, agricultural production, and everyday life, including food, housing, and clothing.

and selling *qingtuan* (sticky rice balls dyed green with mugwort juice) around Qingming Festival (in early April), Hou, a traditional food maker involved in the Market, argues that eating green food in spring is good for people's health because this color belongs to the element of "wood" in the Chinese philosophical theory of *wuxing* (the five elements) and "wood" represents sprouting.[7] As argued by Tilley in *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, particular landmarks are often identified as places of ancestral influence and reminders of the past. In these places, simply by using their body, people can generate an understanding in the present that stands as an analogy for understandings of the past. The ecological farmers involved in the Beijing Farmers' Market do not merely share positive feelings towards traditional Chinese culture, but strive to employ their body and senses in the rural landscape in similar ways as their ancestors did in order to build more caring connections with nature and to use food as a communitive mediator.

The farmers associated with the Beijing Farmers' Market thus imagine the rural environment they work in as a space where they can stay close to nature, cultivate relations of care with nonhuman agencies, and live similarly to their ancestors, so that they can be enlightened by traditional wisdom. Echoing classic Chinese philosophy, the "authentic" idyll here is not only about pleasant harmony, but also about recognizing how rivaling life forms can threaten each other. By respecting and preserving the entanglement of all lifeforms as involving support and disturbance, an "authentic life" can be achieved in the rural. Here, the "authentic" does not refer to a romanticized notion of the village, but to a praxis of "authentic life" based in "authentic traditional Chinese culture." This praxis does not propose a reconstruction of the past but takes into account the situated aspects of the contemporary rural (Halfacree), such as the land provided for farming, the opportunities for gaining production autonomy, and the presence of low-rent living spaces. At the same time, as I will show in the following section, this "authentic" idyll, besides opposing itself to urban lifestyles, also opposes itself to certain present-day rural realities.

3 Ecological versus Conventional Farmers: the Othered Rural

When the Beijing Farmers' Market staff organize PGS visits to ecological farms, they are particularly concerned with checking whether the farmers have built

7 This theory holds that everything in the universe can be divided into five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, and is used to describe the relationship of interdependence between all things.

isolation belts around their farms to prevent the entry of run-off water and agrichemical drift from neighboring non-ecological farms. These isolation belts take the form of trees, fences, and vacant lots on the outer periphery of their farms, and anything grown on them cannot be sold as ecological produce. The relationship between ecological farmers and their neighboring conventional farmers, therefore, is one of "fencing out the other" (Brandt and Spierenburg 223). Accordingly, in what the ecological farmers say about their practice and the Market's promotion materials, a strict line is drawn between ecological and conventional agriculture, and each is associated with a distinct rural imagination. While I have already shown how ecological farmers imagine themselves as part of a positive turn to the rural through an entangled and more-than-human ethics of care based in Chinese traditions, their narrations about conventional farmers exhibit their perception of the rural outside their own farms as backward and uncivilized.

Of the twenty farmers who participate in the Beijing Farmers' Market frequently, only one or two have always lived in the rural; the others have urban backgrounds. Some of the farmers were born in rural villages and returned to rural life after being educated and working in the city; others, with urban origins, went to agricultural universities or held professional jobs before becoming farmers, including as an auditor in the US and as a senior foreign trader involved in facilitating China's joining of the WTO. Their reasons for working on self-owned or rented farms include a realization that conventionally produced food harms human health, a yearning for how food tasted in the old days, and a sense of having been exhausted by the fast-paced urban economy. Like their backgrounds and motivations, the extent of the ecological farmers' farming experience varies. Most practical farming expertise is acquired as they set up their ecological farms. What is essential to note, however, is that land and capital are needed to start an ecological farm: some farmers own rural land and houses, and most came to the rural with the money they accumulated as urban professionals. Since it requires a three-year conversion period to transform a farm from a conventional one with agrichemical residues into an ecological one, ecological farmers need to have enough money to afford land rents (if they do not own land), production costs, and living expenses to survive this period when they cannot yet sell at the higher prices fetched by ecological produce.

When the Beijing Farmers' Market celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2020, it held a special market in Beijing Kerry Centre, a shopping mall situated in Beijing's Central Business District. Several of the straw hats that Chinese farmers usually wear when laboring in the field were hung up as decorations. On one of the hats, the phrase "high-level intellectual new farmers build the Beijing

Farmers' Market together" was written, highlighting how the Market's ecological farmers distinguish themselves from conventional farmers. The designation "high-level intellectual" refers to someone with an urban education and a professional career, and is associated with a high level of culture and civilization. As Lai points out, "this understanding of *wenhua* [culture] fits with a larger economic discourse that denigrates the rural while valorizing urban cultural industries and urban consumerism" (169). Given the stereotypically low-culture and low-quality marking of rural farmers in Chinese culture, the notion of "high-level intellectual new farmers" underlines the Market's desire to distance its farmers from the imagination of the rural conjured by the straw hat.

Significantly, the notion of conventional farmers as backward and uncivilized is constantly evoked in the context of the Beijing Farmers' Market to emphasize the high value of the ecological food sold there, and to place this food into the development narrative of Chinese society. In the articles published by the Market's official WeChat account, ecological farmers are portrayed as knowledgeable, friendly, and optimistic individuals who bring a sense of social and environmental responsibility to food production, while conventional farmers are portrayed as unenlightened individuals who question ecological farmers and passively submit to the urban production logic. Thus, in a WeChat article introducing the story of Hou, his conventional neighbors are described as ignorant villagers who cannot understand why he chose to put in more effort for a lower yield and who do not realize that the increase in local cancer rates is related to their use of agrichemicals. At the same time, this article obfuscates the structural reasons behind the adoption of different farming practices; Hou's conventional neighbors might not have the material, educational, or financial capital that makes ecological farming feasible.

The valuated hierarchy the Market establishes between ecological and conventional farmers is also apparent in the employment relationships on the ecological farms. Two to three conventional farmers from the village are usually hired to do technical or manual farm work, like sowing seeds and turning over the soil, under the instruction of the ecological farmers. Though the conventional farmers are highly skilled, they are treated not as experts but as having to be educated and supervised. Cody notices a similar division of labor on organic farms in Shanghai and points out that "rather than follow earlier intellectuals' goal of transforming rural residents, intellectuals today engage with urban attendees and encourage them to move to the countryside and take up sustainable farming; intellectuals harbour the belief that cultural and economic capital imported from the city is needed to remake the countryside" (2019: 103).

Considering the mostly urban backgrounds of the ecological farmers, the money required to set up an ecological farm, and the "high-level intellectual" notion associated with ecological production, the rural brought into the urban in the form of ecological farmers and ecological produce is one that is in fact already deeply inflected by the urban. The ecological farming practice of those who participate in the Beijing Farmers' Market, and with it the imagination of the "authentic" idyll, is mostly accessible only to those who have gained economic and cultural capital through participation in globalized urban-centric industries.

To understand the deeper aim of the ecologically focused rural imagination generated in the context of the Market, it is important to examine the different attitudes to the urban-dominated market of ecological and conventional farmers. Shengpu, a beekeeper who produces premium-quality honey and only scoops out the hives once a year, explained how conventional honey is produced under the dominance of "food factories":

> Nowadays, many foods can be made artificially, which makes people feel farther and farther away from nature. Take honey as an example. 50% of honey sold in supermarkets is not honey, but a compound of high fructose syrup with food dyes and additives, pretending to be honey. As distributors buy honey at a very low price, beekeepers have to increase the frequency of scooping out honey to make a living. This kind of honey contains a lot of water, unlike mature honey. However, food factories don't care about this, because they will use machines to heat and dehydrate the immature honey, which causes nutritional damage and harmful substances. Then they will further use the industrialized way of the food industry to remove harmful substances and add the artificial nutrition good honey should contain to produce "good honey."

Shengpu opposes his ecological product to the conventional honey that pretends to be good but is actually a "lookalike" (van der Ploeg 107). In the world created and patterned by the industrialized food industry, as Van der Ploeg indicates, "lookalikes" are increasingly produced by food empires; they are actually non-foodstuffs that are produced artificially and appear as food in order to be distributed under the latter label. In essence, the "lookalikes" are a device to make more profit by extending the selling time and transportation distance while cutting the production costs. However, because of asymmetric information in the food supply chain, consumers know little about how the food they consume is produced.

In analyzing Shengpu's complaint as part of the larger ecological farming discourse, it should be noted that in this discourse blame is placed on urban-based supermarkets, distributors, and food factories. Conventional farmers are described as victims of the urban-dominated market system; they are not seen as not caring, but as not knowing any better. This aligns them not so much with a romantic imagination of the rural as uncontaminated, but rather with the trope of "backwardness"; they are homogenized and assigned very little agency in the globalized capitalist marketplace. It also allows the Market's urban-oriented ecological farmers to be positioned as enlightened figures and thus maintains a hierarchical relationship between urban(ized) and rural subjects.

While the ecological farmers in many ways continue to privilege urban subjects and forms of knowledge, their critique of the industrialized food system also resists urban-dominated extractive capitalism. Tsing clarifies that the making of capitalist assets is achieved through a process of alienation, a form of disentanglement that removes things from their life-worlds to become commensurable counters for further investments, which results in infinite needs as there is no limit on how many assets investors want. By obviating living-space entanglements, alienation reduces time and space constraints, thus enabling capitalist production to cater to these infinite desires. "Lookalikes" are born out of this extractive system. The ecological farmers associated with the Beijing Farmers' Market define their produce as signifying "authentic lives" that are deeply entangled in more-than-human living webs, meaning non-alienated ones, not just to label it as safe food but also to counter the extractive system, its infinite desire for expansion, and its moral decay with an ethics of care emphatically linked to living in a rural environment.

4 Conclusion

In the ecologically focused rural imagination constructed around the Beijing Farmers' Market, both positive and negative sentiments about rurality play a role. On the one hand, this imagination partially falls back on idyllic ideas of farming that construct the rural as the space where people like the ecological farmers can cultivate an ethics of care towards other beings, re-enact the ways of life of China's remote past, and escape the alienation fostered and the risks produced by the urban-centered food system supported by conventional farming. On the other hand, the Market's ecological farmers also engage in the reiteration of a rural-urban binary in which they position themselves as part of a more urbanized, educated elite and the conventional farmers as ignorant and uncivilized. Thus, this imagination offers up the rural as a retreat from

what people do not like about the urban, a place where a more "caring" and "authentic" life is still possible even though the actual rural is by no means a pure land uncontaminated by capitalist ruins – in fact, ecological farming is itself often directly facilitated by capitalist pursuits. In the context of the Beijing Farmers' Market, then, the rural is not revalued as a whole, but only in part, a small part shaped by urban-focused and often urban-originating farmers. In the rural, this "authentic" idyllic countryside is carefully set apart from its "inauthentic" surroundings – materially, through the isolation belts, and socially, through the lack of interaction between the ecological farmers and their rural communities.

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CHAPTER 22

Cultivating Utopias: Dwelling and Fugitive Animal Husbandry in Ursula K. Le Guin

David Slot

Abstract

This chapter explores an imagined mode of agriculture and animal husbandry outside of the system-for-system's-sake logic of agrilogistics through close readings of three short stories from Ursula Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle*. The chapter argues that in "Solitude," where Eleven-Soro's post-apocalyptic society practices radical non-imposition, rejection of ownership reproduces an agricultural ethos reminiscent of Sarah Lincoln's "fugitive ecology." In "Mountain Ways" and "Unchosen Love," that practice of non-imposition is expanded to include animals not through isolation from them, but rather through the building of enduring, uncertain relationships between humans and non-humans that constitute a "fugitive animal husbandry."

1 Imagining Alternative Agrilogistics

In "She Stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn: Thinking through Agrilogistics," literary ecologist Timothy Morton coins the term agrilogistics to describe the conspiracy of logistics and agriculture, giving a name to the collection of "programs" humans have been enacting on their environment since our ancestors' transition to sedentary life. Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* explores the concept further, outlining agrilogistics as an attitude to the environment that is also prevalent beyond agriculture as such, and that operates under the belief that "humans [exist for the purpose of] creating their own environment" (34). This belief dominates agricultural production on a global level. It is through agrilogistics that a field, for instance, is regarded as an empty slate to be inscribed with production, and not as an already active network of plants, creatures, and atmospheres. This attitude is based on the anthropocentric misunderstanding "that homogeneous empty 'space' has conquered localised, particular 'place'" (Morton 2016: 9), even when evidence suggests otherwise. No matter what damage, accidents, or changes occur in the environment, agrilogistics assures us that "the slate can always be wiped

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clean" (Morton 2016: 50), and, as such, moves from being a mere "means to sustain life [to become] a lively system in itself" (Cowen 3). To geographer Deborah Cowen, this movement can appear inevitable, a distinctly human tendency where, over time, many societies prioritize systems over the people for whom they were once created (14). Morton similarly sees the agents of agrilogistics stepping back "without [ever] rethinking the logic," even as this system brought on the current climate catastrophe (2016: 42, 160).

As far as Morton is concerned, agrilogistics might well be irredeemable. Other chapters in this volume have certainly outlined its complicity in creating our current climate catastrophe. Here, however, I want to draw attention to the ways agriculture and animal husbandry can be more than "subroutines" in the agrilogistics system acting only for that system's sake (Morton 2016: 43). In fact, these two practices – many-faceted as they are – can and often do exist outside of the large-scale food production Frederick H. Buttel sees as sustaining the unsustainable (214). I explore an imaginary of one such alternative mode of agrilogistics through a close reading of the crop-growing and animal husbandry practices depicted in several short stories from Ursula K. Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle*. Their agricultural imaginary exemplifies how the gestures of rearing, growing, and cultivating might become more than mere ways to maintain livelihoods within agrilogistics, moving instead towards a coexistence that sustains human and non-human life alike.

Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* has been subject to widespread academic interest since the publication of its first title, *Rocannon's World*, in 1966. Criticism thus far has moved in different directions, engaging with feminist theory,[1] utopian studies,[2] and ecocriticism.[3] One of the most studied *Hainish Cycle* texts is the novel *The Dispossessed*, which relates the life of Shevek, a physicist born on the barren moon Anarres seven generations after an anarcho-syndicalist society was founded there by political exiles from its lush but socially stratified planet Urras. The novel contrasts the Urrasti capitalist state of A-Io with the ideals of Anarres's anarcho-syndicalism, exploring also their respective environmental conditions; where Urras is brimming with life of all shapes and sizes, its soil fertile, and resources plentiful, Anarres is a barren moon host only to

1 See Hayles; Barrow and Barrow, which explore *The Left Hand of Darkness'* alien race of hermaphrodites through a feminist lens; and Lacey, who explores the post-human possibilities offered by space travel and technology across the *Hainish Cycle* texts.

2 See Habib, who untangles Taoist concepts in *The Dispossessed*; Kit-Sze, for an analysis of Daoist practice in, among others, *The Left Hand of Darkness*; and Jaeckle's study of how Le Guin grapples with anarchy's material obstacles in *The Dispossessed*.

3 See Pak, on the socio-political contexts terraforming as a narrative theme comments on; and Changizi, for an exploration of *The Dispossessed's* depiction of ecological utopia.

"[f]ish. Worms. And holum trees" (Le Guin 2002: 124). Arid, prone to draughts and earthquakes, it is an environment hostile to human inhabitation, and yet also the site of the anarcho-syndicalists' utopian project. This entangling of political philosophy and environmental politics has not gone unexamined. In Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman's *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, detailed analyses of the contrast between individualism and collectivism (Sabia 111) and the depiction of revolution (Davis and Stillman 3; Ferns 249) are executed, and of particular interest to my discussion is Stillman's claim that environmental issues are in fact "central to [*The Dispossessed*'s] presentation of anarchy as a realistic possible construction of human social life" (55). To Stillman, the respective responses to their environmental network are key in shaping both Urras and Anarresti society: Urras, land of plenty, restricts its ample resources to a small upper class, whereas Anarresti must cooperate extensively to survive at all, and share in labor as much as they do in produce. Ultimately, Stillman wonders if "anarchy [can] exist in a land of relative plenty" (70), or if abundance must inevitably lead to inequality. Douglas Spencer disagrees with this moralization of scarcity, however, writing that "[scarcity] inhibits the ability of the Anarresti to achieve total self-realization. [Where] one is enslaved by scarcity, the other [is] by luxury" (105). Ursula K. Heise further cements this argument, stating:

> Anarres's limited biodiversity seems to become a constraint on what humans themselves might become, far beyond questions of resource scarcity. … [T]he abundance of species on Urras in and of itself does not guarantee such expanded human unfolding, since Urrasti – apart from children – show little ability to relate to them as anything other than material resources. (103)

Based on Spencer's and Heise's readings, environmental scarcity – or the lack thereof – is not the determining factor in shifting attitudes of ecological awareness in the novel. Instead, Heise finds that *The Dispossessed* suggests another factor fostering ecological awareness, writing that "what is missing, most centrally, are species that convey to human beings the sense that they form part of an ecosystem" (102).

This chapter follows in Heise's line of thought, positing Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* short stories "Solitude" (1994), "Unchosen Love" (1994), and "Mountain Ways" (1996) as imaginations of how the presence of agriculture and animal husbandry might – under the right conditions – expand ecological awareness rather than, as Morton's agrilogistics proposes, diminishing it, and arguing that they do so by connecting human beings to their environmental network. My

argument has two parts: first, I turn to "Solitude" to explore what agriculture might look like when humans honor the ecological awareness Morton calls for (2016: 9), and how such a practice might resist agrilogistical thinking. "Solitude" explores the post-apocalyptic planet Eleven-Soro, where humans have disavowed any impositions on land, places, and even each other. They adhere to a radical self-isolation, allowing only indirect relationships, and practice a philosophy of dwelling, where people "co-respond with the land" (Strong 35). I argue that, together, these practices take the shape of a fugitive ecology, because they "stake a claim to belonging without possession, home without property and ecological care without an investment in the future" (Lincoln 128). Second, I read "Unchosen Love" and "Mountain Ways," both set on the planet O, with the theoretical frameworks of Tim Ingold's taskscape, Donna Haraway's companion species, and Tina M. Campt's fugitivity. I explore how the construction of a model of animal husbandry characterized by uncertainty, which I name "fugitive animal husbandry," connects and reproduces the broader logic of environmental awareness on this planet, one suited not merely for a utopian future where agrilogistics has been entirely eliminated, but for a complex present much like our own. Fugitive ecology and fugitive animal husbandry will so be shown to provide a framework through which dwelling, uncertainty, and awareness can become tools for fostering coexistence between species.

2 Fugitive Ecology and Dwelling on Eleven-Soro

Morton's and Heise's readings of *The Dispossessed* both conclude that sustainable practices of human and non-human entanglement rest on a renewed awareness of the need to radically reject ownership. "Solitude" takes this stance to its extreme. Recently rediscovered by the intergalactic community after millennia of isolation, Hainish scientists are attempting to make contact with Eleven-Soro's people. The story takes the narrative form of a scientific report dictated by Serenity, the adult daughter of one of the Hainish scientists. It is a valuable report, Serenity being the first – and perhaps last – Hainish person to decide to remain on Eleven-Soro. As a child, Serenity is sent alongside her mother and brother to study the Sorovians because adults had been unable to engage with them without being attacked. Male scientists are expelled from the small villages housing most of the planet's sparse population, and while one woman is indeed allowed to inhabit an empty house inside one of the "auntrings" – a loose gathering of constructed houses, each hosting a woman, or "aunt" – custom dictates that the women living there do not speak to each other, so she too is unable to compile data on Sorovian society. On Eleven-Soro,

"[t]here's no way … for an adult to learn anything. They don't ask questions, they don't answer questions" (Le Guin 2009: 121). Children are the exception, so as Serenity's family settles in their auntring, learning about Eleven-Soro's strange culture and sending back information to the orbiting Hainish science vessel, Serenity grows up more Sorovian than Hainish. When the mission is complete and her family returns to Hain, she decides to stay.

Eleven-Soro is a productive case study for what shape imaginaries of agriculture might take when paired with ecological awareness. Several thousand years before the story's present, the planet housed 120 billion people, their demands driving its limited biosphere into complete collapse. Humanity barely survived the catastrophe, and those few who did now vehemently oppose human relationships of any kind, fearful of what they call "tekell," a term that translates as "'magic,' an art or power that violates natural law" (124). To contemporary Sorovians, tekell manifests when one person lays claim to another's autonomy, and its dangerous power is central to most of the planet's myths and morality. It is also a concept which the Hainish scientists, Serenity's mother included, find difficult to grasp. Seeing a planet littered with ruins and deserts, areas where nothing grows and where the "ground [is] all lumps and hollows and caves, … the soil … tiny bits of glass and hard grains and fragments" (136), they assume that the Sorovians' rejection of "magic" is a superstition born from the traumatic event of biospheric collapse. They thus argue, from their Hainish perspective, that "there's a perfectly rational reason for the irrational taboo" (134). Serenity, in contrast, engages with Sorovian culture on its own terms: she sees it not as the shadow of a previous societal stage, but as its continuation, interpreting fear of tekell not as a refusal to acknowledge the apocalyptic history of Eleven-Soro, but as its natural consequence.

Fear of tekell acts as a self-replicating program against the ownership-impulse of agrilogistics, and its three tenets are captured succinctly in one of Eleven-Soro's foundational mantras: "Listen! Avoid magic! Be aware!" (151). To Serenity, their importance is quickly revealed as she settles into life in one of Eleven-Soro's auntrings, where day-to-day living is repetitive, and the risk of feelings of ownership or of boredom looms large. Living off fruits and vegetables either grown or foraged, traveling around or settling down as they see fit, the aunts live in settlements at once enduring and uncertain. The very terminology of the aunts and the auntrings implies this: this is no circle of mothers, of direct relationships and immediate filial connections, but neither is it a gathering of strangers. It is a slant kinship, a web of indirect relations that may well be felt as companionable. Most daily work is manual: the women spin plant fiber into fabric and weave baskets; their houses are built and maintained by

hand with mud and reed, and "[w]hat time is not spent on chores and maintenance, the aunts spend singing lessons from their lives in the ring or scouting, either to themselves or to children who might come and listen" (149).

Through these practices, I contend, Sorovians engage in an agricultural form reminiscent of literary scholar Sarah L. Lincoln's "fugitive ecology." In her exploration of resistance against colonial land relations in J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, Lincoln argues that gardening can become "a definitively transitory practice," which assists in "articulating new forms of belonging, environmental stewardship, and relationality that are not dependent on ownership" (140, 135). On Eleven-Soro, this articulation certainly seems successful. Just as the self-isolation of each Sorovian woman is "based firmly on the presence of others at a little distance. It is a contingent, and therefore human, solitude," so does this refusal to impose on another extend to ecology, shaping a "contact with the earth – a touch that is nonviolent, non-possessive, and full of care" (Le Guin 2009: 145, 142). Fugitivity, a concept developed in Black Studies, is a key agent in understanding the possibility of this practice. Tina M. Campt describes fugitivity as born from "a desire to live a future that is now, because of the precarity of black quotidian life wherein tomorrow is fleeting and often too risky to wait for or imagine," and as allowing "the creation of new possibilities for living lives that [refuse] a regulatory regime from which they [can] not be removed" (42, 33). Lincoln relies on fugitivity to theorize a practice of gardening that "stakes a claim to belonging without possession, home without property and ecological care without an investment in the future" (128).

In "Solitude," that fugitivity is present in each auntring home and garden: built from local, organic materials that decompose unless maintained by an inhabitant, the space of the auntring is not an agrilogistical one assuming a "substance underlying its accidents" that is "constantly present, rigidly bounded" (Morton 2016: 50, 48). Instead, the terrain and aunt respond to one another: each auntring's home will collapse if the woman inside decides to scout or settle somewhere else, and is reconstructed only if a new woman moves in (Le Guin 2009: 143). Its existence thus depends on the interplay of bodies both human and non-human, and work on the house is performed as this interplay demands it. The auntring garden functions similarly, growing free if the house is abandoned and cultivated when it is inhabited again:

> The mattresses were moldy, and I put them and the bedding out in the sun, and started going over the garden to see what had kept growing by itself. The pigi had got small and seedy, but there were some good roots. … I went on blissfully digging. (143)

This collection of activities – airing, digging, weaving, building, mending – shape the taskscape that is an auntring home. Serenity admits that this work is dull and repetitive, but it does not lead to automatization or a lack of "stepping back and rethinking the logic" (Morton 2016: 42). Through the mantra of "Listen! Avoid magic! Be aware!" Serenity has become aware that "[t]he body … learn[s]to be still. To be aware" (Le Guin 2009: 151, 148).

The importance of this embodied awareness bears closer examination, and a useful concept for this is Tim Ingold's dwelling, as referring to a practice which

> approaches life as a process of being-in-the-world which is open to the world. Human and nonhuman life is read as an immediate, yet also enduring, relational process of bodies-in-environment (space and place) which are (with variation) mobile, sensing, engaging, responding, exchanging, making, using, remembering, and knowing. (Jones 266)

Dwelling positions itself against agrilogistics by rejecting the latter's assumption of agricultural life as fundamentally neglectful. Agriculture, it argues, is an enduring relationship shaped by presence and consciousness, not numbness. There is no blank space to act on, only embodied, specific place to engage with (Ingold 2000: 87). Building on Martin Heidegger's work on dwelling, which thinks of dwelling as a mode of being in the world that is "an activity that man performs alongside many other activities" (145), and not as a passive state of existence, Ingold defines dwelling as comprising "any practical operation carried out by a skilled agent in an environment, as part of his or her normal business in life" (2000: 195). Dwelling activities are those which shape our homes, prepare our nourishments, and secure our safety. Through them we transform our environment. But these activities in turn also shape us, guiding a mutual process of becoming that Ingold terms a taskscape, where "through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it" (1993: 154). In this, dwelling activities are reminiscent of James C. Scott's domus complex, with its description of the mutual domestication processes shaping both humans and the species they cultivate (72). However, where the domus complex takes logistics as a given – intent on securing reliable resource production in the future – dwelling makes no such claim.

Eleven-Soro society demonstrates a clear adherence to dwelling: every woman living in the ring hones her skills at weaving, building, and cultivating. She practices these activities daily within the specific space that composes and surrounds the house, which are seen to be shaped by her and to shape her in turn. Her rhythm is marked by that of the pigi roots' growth, the

maintenance of the house, the harvest cycles of foraged fruits and vegetables, and the seasonal shifts, which either permit scouting or demand shelter. David Strong argues dwelling so becomes antithetical to the mindless procedures of agrilogistics, for "[dwellers] co-respond with the land. It called them and they responded. It is shaped by their response, and the new shape in turn guides further responses to it" (35). Dwelling is built on a continuous act of reciprocity with the local networks of a place and environment.

Importantly, however, Eleven-Soro's dwelling practices do not slip into the stability of the domus complex. This is because Sorovian life prioritizes the present over securing future enterprise, with women learning not only to avoid magic at all costs, but also to be embodied in the present. The mantra of "Listen! Avoid magic! Be aware!" begins and ends with the emphasis on this key practice of dwelling: being embodied and emplaced, responding to the world rather than mindlessly enacting will upon it. For Serenity, "[b]y solitude the soul escapes from doing or suffering magic; it escapes from dullness, from boredom, by being aware" (Le Guin 2009: 149). In a world of repetitive physical labor, awareness draws consciousness out of abstraction, countering the mind's tendency to retreat from the body and the present:

> To be aware of the grain of dust beneath the sole of the foot, and the skin of the sole of the foot, and the touch and scent of the air on the cheek, and the fall and motion of the light across the air, and the color of the grass on the high hill across the river, and the thoughts of the body, of the soul, the shimmer and ripple of colors and sounds in the clear darkness of the depths, endlessly moving, endlessly changing, endlessly new. (148)

Awareness, by Serenity's description, is a profoundly sensorial experience. It opens the body to the environment to perceive its features and processes, and it rejects fixedness and permanence in favor of movement, transformation, and multiplicity. If Morton writes that "logistics … proceeds without stepping back and rethinking the logic" (2016: 44), then in the imaginary of Sorovian awareness that logistical thoughtlessness meets its match in dwelling.

While agriculture is a core aspect of life on Eleven-Soro, there is no mention of animal husbandry. In fact, there is no mention of terrestrial animals in "Solitude" at all. Whether or not these were lost during the great extinction event is unclear, but their absence on Eleven-Soro parallels that on the moon Anarres in *The Dispossessed*, where "for seven generations [no one has] touched an animal's warm fur or seen the flash of wings in the shade of trees" (127). Heise laments this absence, considering it detrimental to the appreciation of nonhuman life forms as anything other than resources to be spent or

extracted. But the novel does note that the absence is felt by the Anneresti when Shevek's partner Takver says:

> We Anarresti are unnaturally isolated. Think of it: [on Urras,] everywhere you looked animals, other creatures, sharing the earth and air with you. You'd feel so much more a *part*. (155)

In "Solitude," the only nonhuman animal that is mentioned is a giant marine cephalopod that "had mutated towards high intelligence, or maybe it already was highly intelligent" (140). It is being studied by the Hain scientists, who – while able to decipher its language – are unable to communicate with it, as it appears uninterested in responding to their queries. Serenity does not see this as a problem, suggesting that perhaps "it's not speaking at all. Maybe it's thinking" (140). This remark demonstrates how the inherent otherness of non-human animals might be integrated into Eleven-Soro's ecological awareness: the freedom of solitude that Sorovians grant one another is not reserved for humans alone.

3 Fugitive Animal Husbandry on O

From looking at Eleven-Soro, it has become clear that agriculture, paired with the right conditions and goals, can exist separate from agrilogistical influences. The Sorovians' way of life, which feels the absence of non-human animals keenly, also hints at how enduring entanglement with animals might draw humans into the awareness that they exist as part of a network. This brings me to a third *Hainish Cycle* planet, O, where terrestrial animals are present in abundance. The short stories "Unchosen Love" and "Mountain Ways" take place in this world, and together unveil an imaginary of what I call "fugitive animal husbandry."

O hosts a mostly rural, agrarian society that has endured with minimal conflict for at least "some hundred centuries" (Le Guin 2009, 71). Its most characteristic feature is its characterization of people not only by gender, but also by moiety. A moiety is "half a population," and the Ki'O call their two halves "the Morning and the Evening" (70). On O, moiety and gender collaborate to form the most foundational of its social structures: the four-person marriage unit, called sedoretu. In the introduction to "Unchosen Love," a Ki'O man explains the sedoretu as follows:

> I marry three people. I am a Morning man: I marry an Evening woman and an Evening man, with both of whom I have a sexual relationship, and

> a Morning woman, with whom I have no sexual relationship. … The whole marriage is called a sedoretu. Within it there are four submarriages; the two heterosexual pairs are called Morning and Evening, according to the woman's moiety; the male homosexual pair is called the Night marriage, and the female homosexual pair is called the Day. (70)

While somewhat complex, the sedoretu is crucial to understanding how animals and people on O coexist with one another. It is the primary focus of "Mountain Ways," a short story relating the formation of one such Ki'O marriage unit, although a more unconventional one. On the mountain farmstead Danro, Shahes is the previous sedoretu's only child. Although she is reluctant to share management of the farmhold, she realizes she must form a sedoretu to ensure its survival, for she herself is uninterested in having children. Unfortunately, there are few available spouses in the sparsely populated mountains, and Shahes is also rather uninterested in men, so she convinces her Evening woman lover, Enno, to pretend to be a man. With meticulous planning and subterfuge, the sedoretu is formed a year later. It is unstable, however, as Shahes is unwilling to see her spouses as equals in managing the stead with her. Her control over the farmhold collapses entirely when Enno's true gender is discovered and Shahes forced to listen to her other spouses.

With its agrarian owner and laborer class divide, O is a world which – to us Earthlings – feels perhaps more familiar than Anarres and Eleven-Soro. The presence of the sedoretu, however, impacts its social and environmental relationships in profound ways. After all, while the members of the four-person marriage are all human, the sedoretu also reaches beyond them, implicating non-human bodies and places. On Danro, for instance, it is not the farmers but the herds of hardy ariu who delineate divisions of land:

> Tolerant and aloof, [the ariu] allow the farmers to comb out their thick fleeces, to assist them in difficult births, and to skin them when they die. The farmers are dependent on the ariu; the ariu are not dependent on the farmers. The question of ownership is moot. (92)

To say that the ariu are not owned is no exaggeration: they "run wild, without shelter, and are not fenced in, since they never cross the invisible, immemorial boundaries of the herd territory" (92). Rather than imposing pastures for the ariu, as we might on Earth, "[e]ach farmhold is in fact a herd territory" (92). The farmers have a delicate agreement with the Ariu, their relationships echoing that between the persons in the Auntrings of "Solitude"; they form "a wide, thin, fine network of delicate and certain intention and restraint" (133), one made and maintained by skilled activities of wool fleecing, childbirth assistance, and

the skinning of the dead ariu (92). In this instance, however, these dwelling activities implicate another animal species instead of plants or other humans, constituting a specific type of relationship: one of fugitive animal husbandry.

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway discusses animal domestication, writing: "dogs are not about oneself. Indeed, that is the beauty of dogs. They are not a projection, nor the realization of an intention, nor the telos of anything. They are dogs; i.e., a species in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship with human beings" (11–12). This distinct status defines fugitive animal husbandry. Unlike the other women living in a Sorovian auntring, an animal like a dog – or ariu – is significantly other. Neither is a person, and to treat them as such is – in Haraway's eyes – a danger.[4] But exactly in this otherness also lies the potential for anti-agrilogistical animal husbandry, as well as the fulfilment of Serenity's previous suggestion that perhaps "[the cephalopod] not speaking at all. Maybe it's thinking" (140). Haraway argues that, despite significant difference, human and dog can still matter to one another. She describes relationships of profound misrecognition that also contain "fleeting moments of getting things right" and give shape to the "fleshly, meaning-making details of worldly, face-to-face love" (Haraway 34, 35).

O's practice of fugitive animal husbandry follows Eleven-Soro's dictum of non-imposition. The ariu are as autonomous as the women of the auntring, free to live without humans entirely should they wish so. But on O solitude is not seen as the only way to prevent imposition. The ariu experience pleasure in being combed, benefit from assisted births, and so, while they are free to leave, they do not. Between the ariu and the farmers springs forth a mutual relationship, one as enduring as it is uncertain. Both parties are aware this is not "a regulatory regime from which they [can] not be removed" (Campt 32–33), and that retreat always remains an option. Echoing Lincoln's discussion of fugitive gardening in more than name alone, fugitive animal husbandry is therefore a relationship between humans and animals that rejects any imposition of possession, certainty, or fixed category. Like the sedoretu, it moves from individual interests coming at the expense of others to a state of coexistence that leaves space for solitude, without mandating it.

The sedoretu resists one person's claim to another, its very structure resisting domination by any single individual and instead renegotiating each spouse's individual ambitions in the shared event-ness of the network. This is the lesson learned in "Mountain Ways" by Shahes: that she cannot control her partners. When applied to humans' relationships with animals, that lesson

4 "To regard a dog as a furry child, even metaphorically, demeans dogs and children-and setsup children to be bitten and dogs to be killed" (Haraway 37).

produces encounters like the Danro midsummer fleecing season, when the farmers leave their steadings and travel alongside the ariu to comb them:

> The old ariu knew and liked the combing. They lay with their legs folded under them or stood still for it, leaning into the comb-strokes a little, … The yearlings … were ticklish and frisky; they sidled, bit, and bolted. Fleecing yearlings called for a profound and resolute patience. To this the young ariu would at last respond, growing quiet and even drowsing …. (94)

Two mutual processes are taking place here: firstly, that of establishing and maintaining a connection between two bodies, a connection which requires patience in both parties, as well as the cultivated skill of combing on the farmer's part. True to any relationship, the entanglement of ariu and farmer is never finalized in any sense of the word, and this draws us to the second and most fundamental process of their encounters: routine.

Routine is a quality Ingold underlines as essential to dwelling. Similarly, in relation to the mutual domestication processes in Earth's history, James C. Scott writes that "[the] meticulous, demanding, interlocked, and mandatory annual and daily routines … strap agriculturalists to a minutely choreographed routine of dance steps. … [T]hey are the background musical beat of the domus" (91). Both Scott and Ingold, then, mention routine's "interlocking" of different life cycles as a fundamental condition of domus and dwelling. Certainly, in "Mountain Ways," human and ariu are strapped to an interlocking routine: maturing ariu must learn to grow familiar with the yearly routine of fleecing, as must farmers. Yet this relationship is not mandatory. Instead, the rituals of fleecing are to O society what the auntring houses are to Eleven-Soro society, each marking the beat of day-to-day life while retaining within themselves the continuous possibility of retreat or renegotiation.

While the sedoretu carries the potential for coexistence between its human partners and the ecological network they are enmeshed in, O is by no means an achieved utopia. An example of a Ki'O community completely oblivious to its environment is described in Le Guin's second short story set on this planet. Taking place not in a mountain steading but a coastal fishing hold, "Unchosen Love" relates Hadri's falling in love with one of the hold's inhabitants, Suord, who convinces him to form a sedoretu with Suord's own kinswomen, Sasni and her partner Duun. The Meruo fishing hold is isolated, its people stubborn and out of touch with their social and ecological environments, and Hadri feels unwelcome. He almost leaves Suord, but when he unexpectedly befriends Duun and realizes that she feels as pressured by Sasni to marry as he does by

Suord, they both regain a sense of agency and agree to the marriage on equal footing.

If "Mountain Ways" explored a relationship between mountain farmers and ariu integrating both dwelling and a precarious reciprocity, "Unchosen Love" depicts a heedless community. Once a wealthy seahold living off fishing, the sea has withdrawn from the rock upon which Meruo is built, turning the surrounding marsh into a prairie of saltgrass. Instead of adapting to this change in their environment, now better suited to herding animal flocks, "the people dug a channel from the foot of the rock to the tideline" (72), maintaining their fishing activities as if nothing had changed. The sealine has not stopped retreating, however, and "as the sea withdrew farther, the channel grew longer and longer, till it was a broad canal three miles long" (73). Digging this channel is expensive, and so the seahold no longer has much wealth to speak of, all its resources dedicated to maintaining an industry no longer supported by the ecology.

This ecological tension mirrors the short story's interpersonal conflict; Hadri, a stranger to the hold, is juxtaposed with Suord, a member of a community so reclusive they have been intermarrying for generations and have grown terribly "afraid Suord would bring [an interloper] in among them for good" (74). And just as Shahes's lesson in "Mountain Ways" drew her once more to the participating network of her marriage, so "Unchosen Love" employs the structure of the sedoretu to counteract Suord's individualist ambitions. When Hadri meets Duun, she says, "[Sasni] thinks she *owns* me" (88), and in this moment the imposition of power is acknowledged and rejected, both at once. Duun and Hadri become friends and allies, and "Unchosen Love" ends with the formation of a balanced marriage unit and the description of "a soft, earth-scented land-wind [blowing] in the windows" (89) of Hadri's new room, suggesting a renewed awareness of the ecological reality of the seahold-turned-prairie.

The sedoretu's refraining from owning and imposing comes from a sharp awareness of the mutual processes of coexistence – processes directly opposed to what Strong, in his discussion of agrilogistics, calls a "heedless [human] individuality," where humanity has become "freed to exert heedless power without regard to others, without reference to time of day and seasons or other things or the landscape" (30). In "Mountain Ways," as Enno and Shahes search for a missing ariu in the mountains and find it fatally injured, this awareness of what mutual coexistence demands is put into practice. Enno observes how Shahes "st[ood] up and t[ook] the yama's beautiful head against her breast and slash[ed] its throat, all one long movement, in which the woman and the animal were utterly one" (115). Enno, raised in a world of sedoretu, understands this moment not as an expression of the dominion of human over non-human, or as an owner handling her property, but as the culmination of a relationship.

There is no agrilogistical numbness in this moment, no stepping back of the conscious mind. As the animal dies, Shahes speaks the "words of the ceremony for the dead" (116), just as she would for a person.

4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that three short stories from Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* imagine a series of agricultural and animal husbandry practices that resist the system-for-system's-sake logic of agrilogistics, which has produced and continues to perpetuate detrimental relations between humans and nonhumans. First, "Solitude" suggests how fugitivity and dwelling might serve to construct a model of agriculture which counters the drives to own and to numbness that agrilogistics thrives on. The humans of Eleven-Soro enact solitude to prevent the imposition of one being over another, and practice awareness to draw consciousness out of dullness and boredom. Dwelling and fugitivity emerge as two-way processes of becoming that shape places as much as people, interlocking different bodies and lifecycles in a precarious reciprocity. The short stories "Mountain Ways" and "Unchosen Love," set on the planet O, add another layer by drawing human and nonhuman animals alike into a network of enduring – yet precarious – encounters. O's sedoretu extends beyond rebalancing human relationships to constitute a mode of human-animal relations I have termed fugitive animal husbandry. In moments where ecological awareness falters, the stories suggest, participation in its networks reconnects people to their environment. Agriculture and animal husbandry can thus become practices that resist agrilogistics rather than sustaining it. Even on Anarres, in *The Dispossessed*, where non-human life is scarce, it is precisely those brief instances of contact – the beautiful strangeness of "touch[ing] an animal's warm fur or [the sight of a] flash of wings in the shade of trees" (127) – that make it possible to imagine a world where different species coexist.

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CHAPTER 23

Bless This Mess: Complex Rural Realities in an American Sitcom

David Karle and Charles Weak

Abstract

Rural places have often been described as an escape from the big city, offering the prospects of bigger spaces and better access to nature. This alluring narrative describes the American sitcom *Bless This Mess*, which reimagines rural life, contrasting with 1960s TV shows that stereotyped rural dwellers as unsophisticated. The series follows a couple moving from New York to Nebraska, offering a more authentic depiction of rural struggles, such as farming difficulties, population decline, and mental health access. *Bless This Mess* highlights the complexities of rural life, including generational divides, the economic challenges of farming, and the blending of urban and rural cultures in contemporary small-town America.

1 Rural Imaginations in American Television

Rural places have often been described as an escape from the big city, offering the prospects of bigger spaces and better access to nature. This alluring narrative pervades the storylines of the 2019 American sitcom *Bless This Mess*, which follows a newlywed couple as they leave New York City for rural Nebraska to grow alfalfa, raise chickens, and live a simpler life. Throughout its run, the series challenges common misconceptions around life in rural places by directly and indirectly reframing farming practices. The attention given to the realities of rural life – such as struggling to start a profitable farm, misunderstanding small-town politics, dealing with dilapidated buildings and equipment, the brain drain phenomenon of younger people leaving rural areas, challenges faced by aging rural populations, and the capitalist globalization of bull sperm economies – provide a much-needed update to decades-old television narratives. Traditional TV narratives such as those portrayed in the sitcom *Green Acres* (1965–1971) often portrayed rural life as primitive, and rural inhabitants as naive and unintelligent punchlines. *Bless This Mess* reinvigorates the rural comedy craze of the 1950s and 1960s era of US television by flipping the

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historical storyline: instead of urban dwellers making fun of rural translates seeking a better life in the big city, urban transplants are poked fun at for being unaware of contemporary rural realities. This is an apt depiction and a fresh take, considering that about half of US urban dwellers say they never or rarely seek information about where their food was grown (Kirshenbaum and Buhler) and many limit their engagement with the rural to paying top dollar for farm-to-table products.

Though they are shown far less often than their urban counterparts, rural spaces have not been without representation on screen in the decades between the 1960s and the 2020s. Alexander Payne's 2013 film *Nebraska*, for example, paints a bleak picture of rural spaces in and around Nebraska, while *Children of the Corn* (1984), although a campy romp, presents pertinent concerns about religious extremism in rural areas. While *Children of the Corn* and *Nebraska* are very different films that came out nearly three decades apart, both use rural landscapes and lives as an integral element of their storytelling, and, in the process, make claims about the struggles rural people face. On television, shows featuring rural places centering on rural experiences are even rarer, with the notable exception of the rural comedy craze of the mid-twentieth century, when shows such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–1968) and *Petticoat Junction* (1963–1970) depicting rural spaces dominated television line-ups. In *Rube Tube: CBS and Rural Comedy in the 1960s*, Sara Eskridge examines the slate of popular comedies on the CBS network (rerun on the Nickelodeon/Nick at Nite network in the late '80s and '90s) set in rural landscapes or featuring people from rural spaces and their impact. While the focus on rural landscapes was relatively novel for the time, the narratives created portrayed rural dwellers as uncultured, backward people unaware of the complexities of urban life (Eskridge 10).

Examining American media narratives about rural landscapes is difficult for two reasons. The first is that, thanks in large part to the television programming of the rural comedy craze era, some problematic rural tropes have become deeply ingrained. One of the most common pits small-town or rural people against city dwellers, as happens most famously in *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971). Eskridge discusses the writers' desire to explore the dynamic between "Rubes" and "City Slickers" by placing the "Rube" characters in urban circumstances to find humor in their reactions to "modern" life and in how they are perceived by city dwellers (71–77). Conversely, *Green Acres* depicts an urban married couple, the Douglases, moving to a small town in hopes of living a simpler life, with the idiosyncrasies of rural living quickly driving them crazy. The show's premise revolves around the frustration the Douglases feel about the seemingly incomprehensible and backward lives of their neighbors in Hooterville, who are portrayed as incompetent or dishonest.

The second difficulty with examining media narratives about rural landscapes is that in the decades following the rural comedy craze there were comparatively few television shows or films centering on rural spaces. This has changed somewhat in recent years with evolving consumer appetites for more diverse media and shows loosely framed as "Redneck Reality," including *Duck Dynasty* (2012–2017), *Moonshiners* (2011–), *Swamp People* (2010–), and the much-derided *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012–2017) (Van Doviak). However, these reality shows celebrate atypical rural situations that perpetuate negative stereotypes, often neglecting the complex social, environmental, and economic realities of rural people across a wider spectrum, and leaving out the ongoing problems facing rural areas such as population decline, brain drain, lack of jobs, and culture threats (Wuthnow). As such, mainstream media in recent decades have struggled to present clear or accurate narratives about the issues people in rural areas face, or what an optimistic future for rural landscapes might look like.

In this chapter, we argue that rather than propagating superficial anecdotes about the rural-urban divide like many of the abovementioned media portrayals, *Bless This Mess*'s narratives subtly reference issues related to farming, ranching, and infrastructure, creating a more accurate depiction of rural life, but one that could still more directly address the complex problems facing rural areas discussed, among others, by Robert Wuthnow in his book *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America*. We will focus on how the show portrays four main groups of characters that span roughly seventy years and four generations, along with the architecture and infrastructure they inhabit, to explore larger themes.

2 Generational Struggles in the Rural: from Aging Populations to Brain Drain

Mike and Rio are *Bless This Mess*'s main characters, transplanted New Yorkers who serve as the foils to its rural setting. When Mike's great-aunt passes away, she leaves him her land and farmhouse in the town of Bucksnort, Nebraska, where he spent several summers visiting her as a boy. Over the course of the show, Mike, a former music journalist, makes deliberate efforts to adapt to small-town life, including learning to farm (albeit slowly and painfully) and selling his compact car to buy a truck. Mike's wife Rio, meanwhile, is a born-and-raised Manhattanite from the Upper West Side. While in some ways Rio adapts to her new rural lifestyle, she also brings parts of liberal, urban culture to Bucksnort by introducing the town to cognitive behavioral therapy and

challenging the town's conventions, often misguidedly. For example, at one point in the series, Rio confronts the town gossip after the latter has invaded her privacy, not realizing she uses the information she learns to support townsfolk too stubborn to ask for help, thus fulfilling a crucial social function.

Within the bounds of the show, Mike and Rio also serve as stand-ins for urbanites' viewing and interpreting the lives of Bucksnort residents through an urban lens. Unlike predecessor shows such as *Green Acres* that portrayed rural inhabitants as strange or backward, *Bless This Mess* makes the New York urban transplants out to be the foolish ones assuming they can figure out how to become farmers on the fly. Mike and Rio's expectation that life in Bucksnort will be simpler than life in New York is almost immediately proven false as they struggle to make a living as farmers and integrate socially into the town.

Much of the narrative of *Bless This Mess* centers on the couple's struggle and eventual success in finding their place amongst the residents of Bucksnort, challenging established narratives of the rural as a realm for blissful escapism. The show, however, does not examine other reasons for urban people to move to rural spaces, or hint at declining rural populations. Between 2010 and 2020, the US Census Bureau estimates that rural landscapes lost over two hundred thousand residents, the first decade-long rural population loss in the nation's history (Kenneth Johnson). A majority of this population loss was due to people moving away from rural spaces, and reversing net negative migration is essential for sustaining rural communities. Urban transplants such as Mike and Rio offer a promising prospect for small towns struggling with population decline. One of these benefits is population growth, but there is also a cost as small towns in desperate need of growth must either accept a changing culture or risk dying out (Henderson). As presented in the show, new residents bringing urban culture to rural landscapes is not necessarily a problem: just as Mike and Rio benefit from rural wisdom, so too do the Bucksnort residents benefit from learning about aspects of culture more common in urban spaces, such as mental health services. This depiction of mutual integration is perhaps rosier than the realities of counterurbanization, where urbanites do not always acclimate to rural spaces and their culture continues to be regarded with suspicion.

Population growth in desirable rural communities increased in 2020, partly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as a wave of young professionals migrated away from large coastal cities, in part due to rising housing costs and stagnant wages. Some states saw this migration as an opportunity to pull in groups of young professionals and were labeled "Zoom towns," in reference to the boomtowns of the nineteenth century (Rosalsky). The flexibility afforded by remote work – to which the term "Zoom" alludes – allows young professionals to move to rural spaces without having to engage in traditional

rural economic models to sustain themselves. A program called "Ascend West Virginia" began offering individuals who agree to move to participating small towns $12,000 to relocate, and is the most generous of the similar incentive programs currently offered in Alabama, Oklahoma, Indiana, Iowa, Vermont, and Kansas (Fazzare). Again, however, there is a downside: many small towns saw so much migration during the pandemic that they have struggled to provide affordable housing (Hyken).

Mike and Rio's narrative in *Bless This Mess* represents an optimistic look at the possibilities for connecting urban and rural people. While *Bless This Mess*'s depiction of Bucksnort is certainly more flattering than television depictions of rural spaces in the 1960s, it neglects to fully explore the more complex effects of integrating urban culture into rural spaces, such as economic disparities, pace of life, cultural and political differences, and resource scarcity. As such, *Bless this Mess* takes a step in the right direction of more accurate and nonoffensive portrayals, but a further step forward would require a more in-depth exploration of the tensions inherent in blending cultures and renewed rural placemaking.

Among the second group of characters portrayed in *Bless This Mess*, the rural dwellers Beau and Kay Bowman are a stereotypical middle-class farming family. Viewers are first introduced to them when Beau forcefully offers to buy Mike and Rio's property so he can expand his farm. While Beau and Kay are initially shown to be gruff, emotionally repressed, and concerned with conserving Bucksnort cultural traditions, their relationship and views on family are challenged by Mike and Rio's arrival. By talking with Rio about her desires and goals, Kay discovers that she is unhappy with the dynamic in her marriage, which makes her feel as though Beau does not value her. The show's first season concludes with Kay confronting her husband and the two separating; over the course of the second season, Beau examines his relationship to his masculinity and repressed emotions through therapy in an attempt to win Kay back.

For Beau and Kay, this story arc marks a palpable transition in their ability to express their feelings. Their access to mental healthcare, however, places them in the minority among rural inhabitants: while rates of mental illness are similar among urban and rural communities, rural people suffer higher suicide rates and abuse alcohol at higher levels than people in urban communities. Rural communities also make up two-thirds of the areas with shortages of mental health professionals: for example, 96.4% of the population of Wyoming lives in a mental health professional shortage area, while this number is only 0.4% in New Jersey. Beau and Kay's experience suggests that life for rural people could be markedly improved through having access to an adequate

mental health provider (Mack et al.) and being encouraged to make use of such providers.[1] While Beau and other Bucksnort residents initially treat therapy as suspect, they eventually warm up to the concept as they begin to understand the value of talking about their issues. Rio's therapy practice offers a new space in Bucksnort for reflection and examination, which residents such as the Bowmans benefit from.

While *Bless This Mess* emphasizes the importance of mental health, the show only hints at the difficult economics of maintaining a family farm in contemporary markets. Beau makes several throwaway comments about the economic realities of farming, such as when he bemoans how farming has become more about selling bull semen overseas than growing crops, and the Bowmans later struggle to keep their farm going when Beau is absent during several weeks of the growing season because of his and Kay's marital issues. Through this scenario, the show posits that one poor growing season is enough to radically affect a middle-class farming family. A small family farm such as the Bowmans' would certainly struggle within the contemporary economic farming landscape, which has seen operating costs for farms rise and the growth of large agricultural entities through consolidation and government subsidies driving small farms out of business (Kaufman). In addition, farming is not subject to the same anti-trust legislation that governs other market sectors: for example, the four largest beef-packing companies went from controlling 40% of the market in 1982 to controlling 80% in 2021, and the four largest seed manufacturers in the country increased their market share from 21% in 1994 to 66% in 2018 (Kaufman). The economics of farming have made it increasingly difficult for individual farmers to buy the supplies they need to tend their farms and sell their yields, and the US government has played an unfortunate role in this by assisting wealthy farming corporations through subsidy programs and pricing structures that incentivize producing crops at volume (Kaufman).

In addition to mental health and the economic struggles of family farmers, another pressure facing rural communities that *Bless This Mess* alludes to is the brain drain of the younger population (Carr and Kafalas). Jacob Bowman is Beau and Kay's son, and a prospective college student. While his character is the least developed among the main cast, he represents a third group explored by the show: rural youth. In episode 14 of season 2, "Volsung and the Beef Boy," Jacob faces the choice between performing in a rock band outside Bucksnort

1 Stigmas around mental health are prevalent in both rural and urban areas, but studies on the challenges for mental health professionals in rural areas cite lack of anonymity, lack of adequate training, isolation, and lack of resources as reasons why mental health providers are less common in rural spaces (Hastings and Cohn).

or attending a local meat-judging competition. Though the circumstances of this dilemma are played out for comedic effect, the social commentary lies in its relation to the choice between leaving and staying many rural youths must make. To his father's delight, Jacob decides to attend the meat-judging competition, choosing rural traditions over personal expression. While the show portrays Jacob as happy with his decision, many rural youth do leave. A 2017 *New Yorker* series of interviews with recent rural high school graduates found that the most common reason for rural youths to leave home was so they could remake themselves somewhere new. The article also references stories of young people leaving rural spaces, finding success in cities, but ultimately returning to rural places when they discover that the pace of urban culture is not what they desire. This suggests that the choice to leave is not always the right one, although it might be framed as correct by older members of the community (MacFarquhar). Uncritically pushing promising younger people to leave small towns not only affects those who leave and stay, but also the towns themselves: fewer young people means a rise in the average age of residents, the loss of the younger educated workforce, and fewer helping hands (Kirk Johnson).

Jacob's leaving home is only discussed in one other episode, in which he is accepted to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Beau and Kay discuss their excitement and trepidation. As with the backdrop of farming economics, *Bless This Mess* misses an opportunity here by glossing over the college experience as one of the biggest factors leading young people to move away from rural places and not move back, resulting in the rural brain drain (Wuthnow 56). *Bless This Mess* implies that Jacob will eventually attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and then return home to Bucksnort to tend the family farm, a choice that he is happy to make, but one that involves deciding not to pursue his desire to reinvent himself as a musician. In the end, *Bless This Mess* spends little time elucidating the structural choices that rural youth such as Jacob have to make, or the role of cultures that incentivize ambitious young people to move away. The choice between staying or leaving rural youth face is a complicated one that would be better explored by providing a wider array of reasons why some might choose to stay, thus balancing prevalent narratives depicting urban landscapes as the natural destination for gifted rural youths (MacFarquhar).

Meanwhile, the final group of characters *Bless This Mess* focuses on falls on the opposite end of the age spectrum: Constance and Rudy are the oldest members of the main cast, but they are portrayed as living very different experiences. Constance is a Black female fixture in Bucksnort as both the owner of the town general store and the town sheriff, while Rudy first appears as a

squatter in the barn on Mike and Rio's property. Constance and Rudy experience a budding romance throughout the show's two seasons, as Rudy is a divorcee and Constance a widow. The two are portrayed as possessing the awkward energy of a teenage couple, creating a touching, lighthearted, and ultimately optimistic storyline about what growing old in the place where they have both lived their entire lives could mean. It is both a sweet story arc that helps normalize relationships between elderly individuals and a pertinent rural story to tell, as 18% of rural people are over age 65, compared to 13% of urban residents and 15% of suburban residents (Parker et al.).

Rudy and Constance's portrayal hints at the realities faced by rural America's growing elderly population and refuses to homogenize this group. The two come from very different socioeconomic classes: Constance's home is portrayed as a large, clean living space filled with contemporary furnishings and appliances, whereas Rudy lives in relative squalor inside Mike and Rio's uninsulated barn, having made a deal with Mike's great-aunt (who the show implies also struggled to maintain even her simple standard of living) to live in the barn in exchange for maintaining the farmhouse and the grounds. While the show underlines that disparate socioeconomic conditions exist in rural places among the elderly, it chooses not to delve too deep into Constance and Rudy's economic realities or to allow their socioeconomic differences to affect their relationship. At best, *Bless This Mess* glosses over the realities of Rudy's homelessness and Mike's great aunt's economic struggles near the end of her life; at worst, it plays these circumstances for laughs, creating a depiction of rural poverty that is untethered from the harsh realities some elderly rural people face.

Rudy's lack of resources speaks to the infrastructural challenges of aging in a place without the resources for social care, where budget cuts to programs meant to assist poor elderly rural citizens have made growing old more difficult, with almost no public transportation, medical care accessible only in some places, and internet and cell service unreliable. As accessing these resources becomes more difficult, working-class rural residents – more so than middle- and upper-class ones – are likely to have to make hard choices about what they need and what they can live without. Economic downturns such the 2009 recession have taken their toll on retirement savings programs for the elderly, in addition to the already pressing issues of care and infrastructure (Kenneth Johnson). In many respects, Rudy is lucky that Mike and Rio move into the farmhouse, as he now has people to look after him as he ages, a responsibility usually reserved for family members. While Constance is shown to be active and self-sufficient as she works two jobs into her golden years, it is unclear where Rudy draws from financially; he does not appear to have a job,

and episode 10 of season 2 reveals that he lost his life savings when he burned down his family farm to cover gambling debts.

Overall, in its portrayal of the situations these four groups of characters face, *Bless This Mess* does more than simply satirize the differences between urban and rural dwellers; it presents a version of contemporary rural life that touches on some of the real-life issues faced by rural inhabitants, albeit in a way that skews optimistic – perhaps not surprising for a comedy. In the second part of this chapter, we explore the role rural architecture and infrastructure play in *Bless This Mess*'s depiction of rural complexities.

3 Rural Architecture and Infrastructure

Bless This Mess subtly presents issues confronting rural communities linked to places and infrastructure that include Mike and Rio's farmhouse, the Bucksnort general store and Main Street, the barn, and the agricultural field, all of which reveal rural realities embedded in their architectural space, form, and materiality. They also show Bucksnort to be supporting urban density, as discussed by Neil Brenner's position on planetary urbanism and in Pierre Belanger's essay "Landscape as Infrastructure," which posits that the current economy and environment are mutually codependent and inseparable (90). Belanger goes onto to suggest that "urban systems are region" (90), reinforcing Gary Strang's point that the "resources necessary for life – food water and power" are transported "hundreds or thousands of miles to urban centers" (9).

Mike and Rio's farmhouse is a main set piece in the show, first introduced to viewers through a photograph that Rio shares with a friend while still living in New York (Figure 23.1). The quick glimpse of the photograph reveals the farmhouse from an idealistic oblique axonometric view, with the sun shining on the front wraparound porch. It is this idealized view that convinces Mike and Rio to relocate halfway across the country. The farmhouse seems well kept, with flowers on the porch, contemporarily painted white siding, and a dark-colored roof, while the exterior landscape shows green grass in front, several bales of hay, and a large tractor in the backyard field, suggesting the classic westward migration resettlement story as it has been portrayed in American history books for over a century (Ahrendt).

However, upon Mike and Rio's arrival to the actual farmhouse, the building is presented in front elevation – flattening the depth and character of the photograph – and accompanied by a sign that reads "BLESS THIS MESS" (Figure 23.2). The exterior and interior are in total disrepair, with damage to the roof and interior floors allowing Mike and Rio to see from the basement to the sky.



FIGURE 23.1 Screenshot from *Bless This Mess*



FIGURE 23.2 Screenshot from *Bless This Mess*

The multiple levels of damage are reminiscent of Gordon Matta-Clark's Bronx Floors: Threshole 1972 project, where a series of holes have been strategically cut from several multi-level abandoned residential properties in the South Bronx, allowing the viewer to see between the levels. After Mike and Rio fall through one of the holes in the floor, Mike, likely remembering Matta-Clark's exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, makes the apt observation that "[the] afternoon light might be nice in the foyer if we just embrace it, put in a little plexiglass or something to keep the moisture out." This humorous moment demonstrates his ability to embrace the architectural possibilities of the dilapidated farmhouse. The condition of the farmhouse breaks the couple's preconceived notions and is one of the first rural realities they face. Notably, throughout the series, the farmhouse is never shown fully fixed up, only in a constant state of repair.

The reality of Mike and Rio's new home exemplifies several aspects of farmhouses in the Plains region. The dry, open environment of farming and ranching homesteads in the area significantly impacts and degrades exterior building materials (De Belie), speeding up the process of deterioration. Mike and Rio's farmhouse also embodies the reality that many rural buildings are abandoned and in need of repair (Center for Community Progress). These aspects are multilayered and coincide with an aging population (as suggested by Rudy's inhabiting the property), harsh weather conditions, and difficulties in accessing materials and contractors to make repairs. At the same time, in episode one, the neighbors help Mike and Rio fix the hole in their roof, a testament to "Nebraska Nice" that speaks to the sharing of skills, knowledge, and labor to help a neighbor in need.

Aside from Mike and Rio's farmhouse, the town general store "Conny's" is the show's most important set piece. Constance owns the general store, which has numerous rows of shelving with one of every product, including farm tools, food, and licorice at the front counter. It is emphasized that Conny's is not just a store but a community center and gathering place for impromptu encounters as well as euchre tournaments and tailgating parties. The viewer is initially presented with only the general store's interior, which is slightly dirty and run-down but well-occupied with customers. The spatial layout is slightly confusing due to its number of different zones, with its variety of internal building materials representing a collage of local or found materials (Figure 23.3). Often, this architectural complexity is the result of buildings having been constructed through a series of additions over time and of building owners being unable to afford new materials, which leads them to upcycle material. Adaptive reuse is becoming more common in small towns when storefronts go out of business and larger companies need to expand; Ellen Dunham-Jones



FIGURE 23.3 Screenshot from *Bless This Mess*

and June Williamson discuss this in *Retrofitting Suburbia*, where they argue that "adaptive reuse is a great strategy for accommodating new actives while recycling old buildings" (67).[2]

The general store exterior is modest and slightly run-down, with the elevation proudly displaying a large sign and a canopy. Joan's Family Dining and the US post office, which together form the backbone of a small-town Main Street, are on either side. The stability of such cultural and economic infrastructure is often an indicator of whether rural towns are losing or gaining population, and the size and proximity of these adjacent businesses are reassuring for the town of Bucksnort. The post office in particular is and has historically been an important lifeline to the nation for rural communities in America, and small communities losing their post offices signals a decline in population and infrastructure.[3]

2 While fluctuations in the economy impact suburban businesses more regularly due to their overabundance, rural businesses are becoming more susceptible to fluctuating economies and aging populations, and therefore also more likely to consider adaptive reuse.

3 In 2011, the US government planned to consolidate 3,700 rural US post office branches, 90 of which were in Nebraska. Roughly one year later in 2012, the US Postal Service announced plans to reduce operating hours to keep open rural post offices previously slated for closure

Bucksnort's Main Street itself, with a variety of shops, restaurants, and other businesses lining the road (Figure 23.4), forms another set piece that is featured more frequently in the show's second season, where viewers see characters having coffee at tables on Main Street and walking between storefronts. While for many rural communities, Main Street consists of dilapidated architectural storefronts that are closed or going out of business, this Main Street is very clean and portrayed as a thriving example of "The Main Street Movement" (Main Street America), the leading voice for preservation-based economic development and community revitalization across the United States. However, before transforming future Main Streets, communities must first answer the question asked by Larry Swanson in 2007 regarding whether rural communities and their buildings are worth saving. Swanson adds that size and proximity to other communities might hold the key to the answer. The town of Bucksnort, viewers learn, has a population of 457 and is roughly 2 miles long. While there is no mention of any immediately adjacent towns, considering that Bucksnort



FIGURE 23.4 Screenshot from *Bless This Mess*

(Morris). In 2021, the US Postal Service announced plans to consolidate 18 of the country's major mail sorting facilities (Pflum).

has a thriving general store, diner, and post office, it is likely benefiting from a self-sustaining micro-regional network of small towns within 30–60 miles, a relationship similar to the large-scale mega-regional networks described in contemporary planning and design (Hagler). Such networks rely on the reciprocal relationship between rural crop production and cattle ranching that supports the urban (Strang) and urban amenities.

The largest change in general farming practice during the early twentieth century was mechanization, which had a direct impact on the scale and proportions of barns (Humstone). The arrival of machinery is intertwined with the architecture of the barn and the form of the agricultural field (Strang 10). The prototypical barn is an expected architectural element on Mike and Rio's farm; its exterior is painted classic red with white trim and in reasonably good condition compared to the farmhouse (Figure 23.5). The barn is asymmetrical with a large center gambrel roof with an addition on one side – a clue to the hidden realities of mechanized farming resulting in the need to expand the original barn footprint to accommodate larger tractors. Over the years, many barns have had numerous additions based on both functional needs and site conditions, suggesting that the culture of vernacular agricultural architecture establishes itself on an as-needed basis (Endersby et al.). Throughout the series, Mike and Rio's barn is not actually used for farming or ranching, but



FIGURE 23.5 Screenshot from *Bless This Mess*

for many other things, including weddings, presentations, and raves. The barn, like the general store, presents the sense of a rural nostalgic past and affirms how the barn aesthetic continues to be a celebrated quality for rural or farm-based committees hosting larger gatherings (Greenwood).

The barn, as noted, is also home to Rudy. This use of the barn as a living space is atypical and speaks comically to the lack of a need for a barn on a farm that is no longer functioning as such, paralleling a contemporary desire for homes to resemble barn aesthetics, especially in the Midwest and Mountain West. The large open spaces of the barn that were required to handle cattle, equipment, and grain now have the potential for domestic functionality, although Rudy's occupation of the barn lies somewhere between ranch hand and squatter. The barn's appearance further contrasts with Beau and Kate's functioning barn, which serves as a form of infrastructure and is surrounded by green grass and grazing cattle. The Bowmans' barn is also asymmetrical in appearance, with a stone foundation wall that stabilizes the barn and helps it last longer. Its interior is generally well organized, with special pens for cows and a larger pen for the celebrity stud bull whose semen the Bowmans are selling to China, pointing to agriculture as a transnational business.

Mike and Rio's barn is a key location in the series for Mike's attempt to understand farming practices by printing climate maps, obtaining a soil report after submitting a soil sample, and asking Beau whether he tillages the soil to break it up prior to planting. The debate on tillage versus no-tillage has been ongoing, with many citing that no tillage helps with soil erosion (Elliot), though when asked, Beau unhesitatingly tells Mike he should tillage as if he was insulted by the question. These experiences become learning moments for Mike as he begins to understand the complexities of farming, and serve as microcosms of larger local, national, and international environmental considerations that the series only touches on briefly in interactions between Beau and Rudy: Beau is portrayed as having been educated to maximize farming and ranching practices to make money, while Rudy works more in balance with the environment. After talking with Rudy, Mike realizes that the weather has more impact on growing crops than science does, and that, consequently, he needs to work more synergistically with the environment. Mike's initial misconceptions echo the similar oversights of 1800s westward-migrating homesteaders, who tried to apply East Coast or even European farming practices after settling in Nebraska and the Great Plains (Wishart). As a result, many farms failed, with these settlers eventually moving elsewhere or returning to the East Coast.

In the rural context portrayed in *Bless This Mess*, agricultural fields form the lifeblood of the community, contributing to the local and regional food supply. This is captured in several ways throughout the series, from cinematic views showing vast horizons of farming land to characters bantering about farming approaches and lessons learned. The importance of the agricultural field is made especially apparent when Mike and Rio attempt to grow alfalfa in a field in front of their house and fail to understand the complexities of producing food (Figure 23.6). Their failure references the role of the front yard in providing a space for relaxation in typical residential developments and suggests several rural realities, including that judging environmental conditions is crucial to a farm's success. Other agricultural fields shown in the sitcom are portrayed as lush and prospering: when Beau sneaks out of Mike and Rio's farmhouse to prevent people from knowing that he has been staying with them while Kate receives marriage counseling, the neighbor's cornfield, with its seven-to-eight-foot-tall stalks, forms a perfect hiding place. The cornfield shows that with the right skills it is possible to grow prosperous crops in the local soil. Nebraska is situated along the 100th meridian and historically on the border of ideal farming land, with higher annual precipitation and dry, desert-like ranching



FIGURE 23.6 Screenshot from *Bless This Mess*

conditions that make farming very difficult (Krajick). Although Mike and Rio are urbanites without generational knowledge or academic training, as the show progresses, they learn, through trial, error, and neighborly advice, to implement small-scale effective farming practices.

When Mike and Rio finally realize they must start small and first prepare their land, they set about this by having a rummage sale where the neighbors "Pay Us in Chickens," which will revitalize the soil through their dung droppings. Their preparation also implies that small, incremental steps help them to work smarter, rather than harder, in preparing their farm, a nod to slower, more deliberate farmer practices necessitated by not having large machines or capital to invest. The rummage sale scene is accompanied by Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Have You Ever Seen the Rain?" as a not-so-subtle reference to the impact of weather and climate. Mike and Rio's incremental strategy, while comical, embodies the idea that farming involves the negotiation of a multilayered, complex set of conditions, including issues related to soil moisture, rain, seed, fertilizer, and tilling. Throughout the sitcom, Beau, Kay, and even Rudy are portrayed as able to successfully manage this complex set of conditions as a result of generational knowledge being passed down, knowledge that is eventually shared with Mike, allowing him to master a farming practice of working in conjunction with the environment.

4 Final Scene

Overall, *Bless This Mess* moves beyond the gross caricatures of the 1960s rural comedy craze and much contemporary discourse about rural environments by offering a multilayered reading of rural people and spaces. At face value, the sitcom can be read as part of a rural comedy revitalization, while on a deeper level, it provides a complex reframing of rural realities as differing across generations, classes, and types of agriculture. The dynamics that play out in each episode interweave these relationships to provide a diverse yet modern interpretation of these rural realities. While the show's humorous perspective draws the attention of general viewers, it also provides thoughtful commentary about contemporary rural life and the possibility of urbanites integrating into this life. The places, infrastructure, and architecture presented provide a visual narrative conveying some of the realities facing small towns and small-scale farms throughout the US. Even if *Bless This Mess* fails to engage the full complexity of contemporary globalized rural life, the comedic sitcom provides a welcome addition to and critical reading of the more superficial and stereotypical rural imaginations that dominate the media landscape.

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CHAPTER 24

Exploring the Transformative Powers of Art and Soil: the Farm/Art DTour's Rural-Urban Flow

María Patricia Tinajero

Abstract

This chapter examines the Wormfarm Institute, an artist-farmer collective that blends art and agriculture in the American Midwest, and their signature biennial art event, the Farm/Art DTour. The DTour serves as a platform for artists, farmers, and the public to engage in conversations about integrating sustainable agriculture with artistic expression to transform our relationship with soil, food, and land. Art installations from the DTour foster connections between rural and urban communities, and contribute to healthier soil, improved food systems, and a better quality of life for humans and non-humans.

• • •

> Through the vision of artists, we explore the timeless connections between land and people.
>
> WORMFARM INSTITUTE

• •
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1 The Wormfarm Institute

The Wormfarm Institute (W.I.) is a remarkable artistic initiative that every year invites resident artists from across the country to a farm in Sauk County, Wisconsin to grow food, connect with the soil, and make art. The W.I. forms bridges between the rural communities of Wisconsin and the neighboring urban centers of Madison, Milwaukee, and Chicago. My inaugural visit to the Wormfarm during the summer of 2014 as a resident artist left an indelible impression; it allowed me to recognize how art can effectively engage with soil, food, and agriculture. This chapter discusses the Farm/Art DTour, a unique outdoor art exhibition organized by the Wormfarm Institute that stretches

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over 50 miles of rolling hills in Sauk County. The exhibition integrates art, food, agriculture, and the sprawling rural landscape of the American Midwest. It offers visitors an opportunity to appreciate the beauty of soil through artistic expressions, to explore different agricultural practices, and to understand the connections between agriculture and soil depletion.

The W.I.'s Farm/Art DTour, subtitled "Where artists explore timeless connections between land and people," began in the autumn of 2011.[1] Artist and curator Dan S. Wang notes that, over nine iterations, it has evolved "from regional novelty to a model for the emerging world of curbside culture" (Wormfarm Institute 2020: 13). It is a place for commingling art and soil. The DTour underscores the cultural and economic significance of art in this agricultural region, which, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, "encompasses over 127 million acres of agricultural land in the Midwest, an immense expanse."[2]

For the 2022 DTour, twelve artists from around the country were commissioned to create on-site art installations in collaboration with farmers and landowners. In addition, there were three types of art installations: Roadside Culture Stands are mobile farm stands crafted by local artists; Farm Forms are spontaneous artworks created primarily by landowners – an increasingly prominent feature of the DTour; and Pasture Performances are live performances brought to the countryside. Figure 24.1 shows a Pasture Performance in which a group of dancers extends their arms in a symbolic gesture, inviting viewers to explore the bountiful landscape. Rooted to the earth, their bodies mirror the stately cornfields, moving with the breeze beneath the fall sky. The DTour also incorporates Field Notes, which are signpost sculptures that serve as educational guides along the DTour's route, printed as a part of the guidebook. This guidebook contains a map for locating the artworks, a list of the participants, and the stories that make each DTour a unique event. The W.I.'s director Donna Neuwirth writes that the Field Notes mark a "meandering drive in the country" that asks visitors to undertake an exploration that "has the potential to be at once a sensual awakening, findingway workout, digital detox (intermittently), [and] an immersion in a small section of the actual messy, fragrant, pulsating, living and dying earth" (Wormfarm Institute 2022: 4).[3] The artworks of the DTour employ artistic, pedagogical, and scientific methods to explore soil as a living entity from diverse perspectives.

1 The Farm/Art DTour, initially an annual event, transitioned to a biennial format in 2016. Throughout its nine cycles, the core format has remained consistent.

2 https://www.climatehubs.usda.gov/.

3 See the complete guide at https://issuu.com/wormfarm/docs/2022_wormfarm_event_guide_forweb.



FIGURE 24.1 Kanopy Dance, Farm/Art DTour 2015: Pasture Performance
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORMFARM INSTITUTE

This chapter is organized into five sections: the first introduces the concepts of "Becoming Soil" and "Rural-Urban Flow" in order to specify the role of art in the W.I.'s bridging of rural and urban communities; the second highlights how art navigates the complex decisions surrounding alternative approaches to art and agriculture; the third emphasizes the process of decomposition to address the challenge and importance of maintaining diverse land-use ecosystems; the fourth describes how the DTour facilitates education about soil; and the fifth focuses on the shared responsibility of cultivating food under community-supported agriculture models.

2 Becoming Soil, Nurturing Creative Connections

Soil is "a complex mixture of minerals, water, air, organic matter, and countless organisms that are the decaying remains of once-living things. It forms at the surface of land – it is 'the skin of the earth'" (Soil Science Society of America). Soil is distinguished from inorganic dirt by the living, diverse microcosm that inhabits its structure. It is an invisible sensuous-relational web that relentlessly



FIGURE 24.2 Posters and other printed materials for W.I.'s Farm/Art DTour and Fermentation Fest
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

composes and decomposes animals, bacteria, fungi, plants, humans, pollution, the atmosphere, and water.

"Becoming Soil," in one sense, refers to the fact that all living matter eventually decomposes and returns to soil. In another, philosophical sense, Becoming Soil entails an ethical-aesthetic inquiry into the transformation of our way of thinking about our relationship to the soil and the life it enables. Becoming Soil condenses the politics of reclamation with the activism of remediation to find soil's vitality and beauty. It encourages a deep appreciation of and engagement with the mysteries of the ongoing processes that breathe life into soil and emphasizes the inexorable links between soil's materiality and its network of interconnectedness, comprising physical existence, vital disposition, and death. As a concept and praxis with soil, Becoming Soil "exalts soil's transformative capacities, viewing it as a living, ever-evolving presence" (Tinajero 2). For the Wormfarm Institute, Becoming Soil entails the continuous living convergence of art, agriculture, and food.

Becoming Soil is an outgrowth of new materialism, influenced by Manual DeLanda, Jane Bennett, Linda Weintraub, and Dejan Lukic, and by material feminism as explained by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. DeLanda defines the origin of the urban in terms of a one-way flow of exchanges from rural areas to urban centers, arguing that "the need for bioenergy led to agricultural

intensification, which has transformed urban sites and increased population, resulting in the birth of cities" (34). The Rural-Urban Flow, a network of cultural and agricultural producers across Wisconsin's rural-urban centers, focuses on the continuum of aesthetic relationships flowing in both directions between rural and urban areas.[4] It operates as a dynamic hub where art and agriculture feed each other, cultivating social and cultural exchanges. Jay Salinas, one of its founding members, sees these exchanges as one of the engines driving the Farm/Art DTour. The Rural-Urban Flow is also a model for exchanging ideas, akin to the open networks continually expanding through intricate socio-cultural, political, and ecological strata described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (8). The network broadens creative relationships among artists, farmers, landowners, and the community at large in Sauk County and its neighboring urban centers.

Donna Neuwirth, the W.I.'s director, pointed out the hidden layers of the Farm/Art DTour during a conversation in the summer of 2022: "The letter 'D' of the DTour stands for decomposition, which for us always means renewal." Decomposition is a fundamental ecological process that involves separating organic matter into simpler substances to become soil. It transforms complex organic matter like dead plants and animals into nutrients. These nutrients are then available to living organisms, contributing to the "soil food web" (Ingham n. pag.). Decomposition, as a creative approach, is a meandering rather than straightforward process; it prioritizes the in-situ rhythmic and cyclical changes – cultivation, harvest, and rest – marking the stages of life and death.

The misspelling of "detour" with two capital letters also serves as a deliberate design element. It is a call to become part of the 50-mile landscape through what is referred to as a "self-guided tour" by Salinas and Neuwirth on the Wormfarm.org website. Neuwirth further writes:

> This year marks the ninth iteration of the Farm/Art DTour, "DTour" for short (no apostrophe), pronounced "'deetour.'" Why the goofy spelling? The thinking back in 2011 was to underscore the another-way-ness of what we hope to offer. Another way to go, another way of seeing, an unlikely alliance, another spelling. Since the first year, the DTour has grown beyond our wildest dreams, from a few thousand to thousands of visitors. (Wormfarm Institute 2022: 4)

The "self-guided tour" recalls the Situationists' *dérive*, conceived as a purposeful wandering through diverse environments. In Guy Debord's words, "the *dérive*

4 https://ruralurbanflow.org/.

involves playful and constructive actions, accompanied by a keen awareness of psychogeographical effects, setting it apart from conventional journeys or leisurely strolls" (n. pag.). Originally an urban experiment, *dérive* has the potential to unfold similar relationalities in rural geographies, reimagining rural spaces as fluid landscapes punctuated by temporary artworks, always open to unexpected outcomes, and implying a carefree and playful flow between art and agriculture and rural and urban landscapes.

In what follows, I will examine how the Farm/Art DTour intertwines art, food, agriculture, and the rural landscape by exploring select instances from the 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2022 editions. Additionally, I will consider the ongoing Field Notes project to understand how these elements are integrated and how their interplay has evolved over time.

Nowhereradio by sound artist David Sanchez Burr, commissioned for the Farm/Art DTour 2018, is a participatory temporal soundscape that encourages public engagement in the free-spirited manner of a *dérive* by inviting visitors to record ideas or stories about their rural experiences (Figure 24.3). The installation comprises several elements: a central sound booth (installed in the field), solar panels as the energy source, weather balloons (the black circles in the image) acting as functional radio receiver modules, and the agricultural field itself. The contributors' recordings are mixed with pre-recorded art sounds



FIGURE 24.3 David Sanchez Burr, Farm/Art DTour 2018: Nowhereradio. Outdoor multimedia sound installation
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORMFARM INSTITUTE

(Blaser). In-situ sounds are broadcast through speakers located throughout the field to add to the sound mix: comprising the sounds of the wind, the humming of machinery, and the mooing of cattle, they create a rich rural soundscape. *Nowhereradio* extends beyond the acoustic to create a haptic experience by making visitors encounter the soil as they cross the field to get to the booth. This engages the senses and encourages them to pay attention to the complexity of soil, turning them into active contributors and co-creators of new rural narratives. The artwork, playful and interactive, binds art and agriculture together through a sonic meandering involving the landscape, the sun, stories, and soil, crystallizing the concepts of Becoming Soil and Rural-Urban Flow.

3 Soil Regeneration and Transformative Collaborations

Sauk County ARK by artist Tory Tepp is an amalgamation of artistic and agricultural elements that stands as a "landlocked shipwreck" (Tepp 2022: n. pag.). The body of the earthwork is composed of 50 cubic yards of soil and old farming equipment such as dairy headgates and harvest store silo panels. The body of the sculpture serves as a performance stage and surveying post to watch



FIGURE 24.4 Tory Tepp, Farm/Art DTour 2020: Sauk County ARK. Earthwork sited in a 4-acre field of Kernza planted with William and Alma Gasser, commissioned for the 2020 Farm/Art DTour, evolved through the 2022 DTour, and continued through the 2024 DTour. Photo by Katrin Talbot
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORMFARM INSTITUTE

over the surrounding Kernza grain crop. The earthwork invokes the ghostly presence of the heavy industrial machinery responsible for creating the uniform rows of monocrops surrounding the installation.

The name *Sauk County ARK* metaphorically turns Noah's Ark, the biblical vessel, into soil to emphasize site and place as essential for soil examination and innovation. The "ark" in the artwork, like the ancient ark, is intended to preserve the diversity of species, in this case within the ground itself. Tepp's artwork questions how past and future farming practices are directly related to soil health and climate crisis. As he notes, "the first two years the [the grain was] harvested with machinery. This year … we harvested by hand as part of an intimate agricultural ritual" (Tepp 2023: n. pag.). The manual harvesting sought to address, in part, the issue of job availability in rural communities.[5] In reflecting on the relationship between labor and soil, the artwork also enquires about the use of energy in agriculture: caloric energy on the one side, and fossil fuel on the other (Shiva 5). While industrial machines undoubtedly enhance the efficiency of tasks like planting, harvesting, and irrigation, they consume fossil fuels and create a distance between farmers and the tactile experience of working directly with the soil.[6] Tepp's reimagined ark prompts us to imagine an alternative form of agriculture co-evolving between the soil's health and innovative collaborations that blur the conventional boundaries separating art, agriculture, and technology.

Tepp's creative process began through conversations sponsored by the W.I.'s staff, who helped establish a collaboration between Alison Duff at the University of Wisconsin's Dairy Forage Program, agronomist Valentino Picasso from the University's Madison campus, and the Gasser family, who have owned local farmland since 1872–73. The family agreed to the artist's vision for four acres of Kernza grain planted on an active working field: "William Gasser was highly involved in the development and planning of the Kernza crop" (Tepp 2023: n. pag.). Another member of the Gasser family offered to mill the grain's harvest in their family-owned milling facility and bake it at Tower Rock Farmstead Bakery. In the end, this did not come to pass: "Alma Gasser had originally agreed to mill the harvest, but she later declined it [due in part to an overbooked schedule at the mill]. I ended up milling small amounts of Kernza and baking with the Kernza from the project myself" (Tepp 2023: n. pag.). Transformative collaboration hinges on the willingness to address challenges and adapt to changes, fostering resilience and understanding in the process.

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5 The Pew Research Center's data collection shows that 42% of residents in rural America consider job availability to be a significant problem in their rural communities (Parker et al.).

6 Another problem caused by heavy machinery is soil compaction, which destroys the structure of soil (Duiker).

Tepp's collaboration with Valentino Picasso involved making more visible the effects of innovative biotechnology by using art and agriculture as the means to deliver information. Picasso suggested Kernza as "an alternative to annual mono-crop grains that dominate modern agriculture in the U.S. Midwest" (Tepp 2020: n. pag.). Introducing variety to crops adds to the biodiversity and health of soil. It is also a way to resist "mono-crop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike" (Haraway 206).

The Kernza grain represents an opportunity to rethink agriculture and technology by focusing on fostering soil health. Kernza (*Thinopyrum Intermedium*) is a robust, perennial wheatgrass that offers potential benefits over traditional crops. Refined from prairie grasses using biotechnology techniques, it does not require annual cultivation, reducing the labor required from the farmer. This is an added benefit for the farmer, while also providing an opportunity for the soil to rest and regenerate (The Land Institute). Kernza has a deep root system, facilitating Nitrogen (N) fixation more efficiently than annual grasses such as wheat (Zimberoff; Soto-Gómez and Pérez-Rodríguez). Considering soil and biodiversity enables going beyond what meets the eye, extending the perspective on agriculture underground to the dense and matted root system of the Kernza, ideal for soil revitalization and nutrient cycling. While the yields associated with Kernza are inferior to those of traditional commercial crops, its enhanced nitrogen-fixing capacity challenges the conventional view of farming as a unidirectional process where humans control the land and consider it as only a for-profit resource.

Liz Carlisle argues that "decolonizing agriculture will require big changes in our economic system" (30), but small changes also matter, and bottom-up participatory art initiatives can encourage more people to see agriculture as a dynamic, co-creative, and mutually beneficial endeavor among humans, soil, plants, and animals. *Sauk County ARK*, in its use of Kernza, recovers the rhythmic rituals of manual planting, nurturing, and harvesting. In this way, the artwork prompts a consideration of the impact of monocropping (monocultures) versus polycropping (polycultures) and of the possibility of a different future by choosing diversity as a creative leap of faith to rekindle the connection between *ager* (field) and *cultura* (culture).

Philosopher Alexandra Toland and hydrologist Gerd Wessolek emphasize the importance of this connection, warning that the absence of a relationship with soil diminishes the aesthetic value and cultural context of soil and widens the emotional gap between humans and soil (8). Steve Gotcher, a producer with Wisconsin Public Radio, tells of experiencing Tepp's artwork through the unexpected discoveries that come with the meandering through the landscape inherent in the DTour, allowing him to tap into emotional connections with the soil and encouraging a departure from blindly supporting

large-scale industrial food production to supporting smaller-scale regenerative models (Carlisle 23–24). This departure extends beyond quantity; it also embodies qualitative differences prioritizing health and nutrition for all soil communities.

4 Standing-Up, Caring-For Diverse Ecosystems

Naturalist Aldo Leopold, whose work is referenced in one of the Field Notes (Figure 24.6), writes that "all ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts … The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soil, water, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land" (203–204). This gesture towards a land ethic acknowledges the interdependence of all elements making up agricultural fields as offering a way to resist the detrimental impact of monoculture. The Rural-Urban Flow invites participants to consider such an ethic by connecting in meaningful ways to the field and its soil.

Farm/Art DTour 2018's *Garden of Water and Wind* by artist Sarah Kavage is an ephemeral outdoor installation consisting of a gracefully flowing giant braid made from long, dry, tall grasses (Figure 24.5). Kavage's childhood memories of growing up in the rural Midwest motivate her to confront the environmental



FIGURE 24.5 Sarah Kavage, Farm/Art DTour 2018: Garden of Water & Wind
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORMFARM INSTITUTE

challenges of land use for agriculture where the wild and the tame are no longer separated, challenging entrenched economic, political, and philosophical binaries that polarize opposites and deny other possibilities for thinking and doing. *Garden of Water and Wind* embraces the unpredictable and dynamic nature of its materials; the long blades of grass that the artist refers to as "tame" and "wild" create tension, as noted in the title of the artwork, by combining cultural references from diverse gardens. Drawing inspiration from Japanese contemplative gardens, the artwork features an asymmetrical, fence-like sculpture that challenges the Western idea of symmetry and control. The artwork also invites us to contemplate the rapid encroachment of agricultural spaces upon other ecosystems such as forests and wetlands. Shall we protect ecological diversity, or opt to further use the land solely for agricultural or industrial purposes?

Garden of Water and Wind asks whether we can stand up for and care about diverse ecosystems and suggests that it is possible to find alternative ways to address the issue of land in a way that serves more than just human interests. The artwork is located at the edge of a hayfield, where cultivated fields run into prairie grasses. Kavage's creation explores the artistic potential of decaying organic matter to reclaim the decomposition of biomass as essential for bringing nutrients to the soil. The braid draws attention to the vital ecological process of decomposition within soil ecosystems, pointing to the possibility of maintaining a healthy soil food web, a diverse network of microbial food, decay, and renewal. This aligns with María Puig de la Bellacasa's "matter of care" (692), which champions the soil's living essence and urges a kinder, more enduring rapport with it by underscoring the importance of tending to the connections between its materiality and its inherited transformations.

Kavage's artwork offers more than just an aesthetic experience; it provides a space to reflect on the different uses of land: ecological, economic, and political. Can we step away from the model imposed by capitalist industrial progress? Can we stop putting the health of both soil and people at risk? Land use is a powerful reminder that the rural has always been a contested space (Woods 2; Hiner 1). *Garden of Water and Wind* does not claim a space for wilderness but, rather, by blending cultivated grasses with those that grow without human intervention, highlights their interdependence. The artwork focuses on decomposition and invites viewers to consider the cyclical journey of materials and nutrients as they return to the soil. It encourages contemplation of the "polycultural" potential of the land to promote both biodiversity and cultural diversity. Here, it is relevant to note that the tall prairie grasses hold deep connections to Indigenous populations in the Americas (Kimmerer 196). *Garden of Water and Wind* emphasizes the importance of recognizing the soil as a dynamic, biological, and cultural living entity in a continuous cycle of growth, decay, and renewal.

5 Art, Education, and Agriculture

The Farm/Art DTour offers opportunities to educate visitors about the contributions made by art and agriculture, and the potential of bringing them together.[7] The goals of the DTour include enhancing awareness of the Rural-Urban Flow and the soil food web as platforms for an aesthetic education that would challenge the perpetuation of the extractive colonial models inherent in agro-industrial capitalism. The DTour employs several creative educative approaches, including:

1. Field Notes (Figure 24.6) providing information about soil, agriculture, and ecological ethics, creating a self-guided educational experience for visitors.
2. Temporary On-Site Art Installations encouraging ecological awareness through artistic expression that explicitly relate to the local concerns and practices of Sauk County.
3. Roadside Culture Stands engaging with roadside shoppers to promote conversations about agriculture and food production.



FIGURE 24.6 Field Notes, 2011–ongoing. Wood, text, and Plexiglas
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORMFARM INSTITUTE

7 In 2015, the arts and cultural sectors made a direct economic contribution exceeding $763 billion, equating to 4.2% of GDP (National Endowment for the Arts 5). This statistic underscores the substantial contribution of creative endeavors to the US economy.

4. Farm Forms encouraging spontaneous artistic participation by landowners, showcasing the innate artistic potential of working with the land.
5. Pasture Performances bringing performative arts into the agricultural landscape, creating open and free *plein-air* theaters.

Philosopher and artist Pablo Helguera explains that collaborative contributions to socially engaged art practices can create dynamic and multifaceted educational models, as "socially engaged art attaches itself to subjects and problems outside the traditional realm of art, moving them into a space of ambiguity" (5). Through the nine iterations of the DTour, art has attached itself to agriculture to blur its boundaries and open spaces within it for soil education. Helguera identifies four descriptive categories for collaboration: nominal participation, directed participation, creative participation, and collaborative participation (14–15). These categories are useful to identify the different kinds of participation offered by the DTour. For example, in nominal participation, "the visitor or viewer contemplates the work reflectively" (Helguera 14); this is the case in the Kanopy Dance Pasture Performance shown in Figure 24.1. In contrast, *Sauk County* ARK features direct participation, *Garden of Water and Wind* creative participation, and *Nowhereradio* collaborative participation. Combining these participatory forms enhances the artistic and educational experiences offered by the 50-mile Farm/Art DTour. Although the experience of the DTour varies from year to year, running through all iterations is the Rural-Urban Flow as an education model designed to foster soil reclamation and community engagement by including reciprocity, community building, soil health promotion, and biodiversity nurturing.

6 Art, Food, and Community Engagement

The Farm/Art DTour highlights alternative agricultural approaches that embrace the soil food web. These approaches are practical and philosophical, viewing soil, food, and the rural as a continuum that requires attention and care. It acknowledges the value in the exchanges and connections between rural communities and the often-neglected more-than-human inhabitants of the soil. Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is integral to the W.I.'s mission. CSA is both a way of thinking and a way of growing food that involves recognizing the challenges and unpredictability of each growing season in small-scale farming. These include drastic changes in temperature, droughts, or excessive rain, as well as price changes determined by market fluctuations (US Department of Agriculture). CSA is a shared-risk model in which the responsibility for the complete growing cycle is distributed among producers, consumers, and other stakeholders.



FIGURE 24.7 Field Notes, 2011–ongoing. Wood, text, and Plexiglas[8]
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORMFARM INSTITUTE

The difference between industrial agribusiness (conventional farming) and regenerative and organic agriculture "is that conventional farming relies on chemical intervention to fight pest[s] and weeds and [to] provide plant nutrition. That means synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Organic farming relies on natural principles like biodiversity and composting instead to produce healthy, abundant food" (Rodale Institute). This distinction is essential for alternative agricultural models like organic farming, agroforestry, and regenerative agriculture. The use of agrochemical technologies is characterized by over-use, i.e. quantity-becomes-a-quality problem, for example, synthetic nitrogen becomes a toxic chemical that washes out, polluting water and soil (Montgomery 33). While the term "conventional agriculture" directs us to consider capitalist industrial agriculture practices as the most accepted and acceptable model for engaging with soil and food production, the Farm/Art DTour contests this, showing that a shift to a more regenerative agriculture is both desirable and possible, adding to Carlisle and Montgomery's positions (Carlisle 30; Montgomery 27).

8 The Ethics sign reads as follows: "In 1935 conservationist Aldo Leopold purchased 80 acres of farmland, 'first worn out then abandoned by our bigger-and-better society,' along the Wisconsin River in northeastern Sauk County. As he and his family worked to restore the property, Leopold explored the idea that our relationship with the land was not economic but ethical. Leopold's words continue to inspire conservation efforts here in Sauk County, and [in] the communities and landscapes around the world."

ArtPlace America defines creative placemaking in terms of participation and contribution; it involves "contribut[ing] to community-defined social, physical, and economic outcomes and honoring a sense of place" (Tamari and Cuffie n. pag.). This allows for the cultivation of new approaches to old ways of living with the land. The Farm/Art DTour, which allows people to share food, tell stories, and come together in resilience, is a way of engaging in "creative placemaking" as "the intentional integration of arts, culture, and community-engaged design strategies into the process of equitable community planning and development" (Tamari and Cuffie n. pag.). Tepp's collaboration, discussed earlier in this chapter, shows how an artist can connect with farmers and scientists to creatively address challenges and opportunities. In the artist's words, "bridging agricultural and artistic worlds shows the potential for synergy and mutual learning" (Tepp 2022: n. pag.).

The seemingly simple approach of the WI inspires artists, farmers, environmentalists, and others who seek healing in proximity to the soil, blurring the boundaries between art, agriculture, and community through the implementation of healing agricultural practices. Art's capacity to inspire and build connections between communities is activated by "an introduction to a new hiking path, cheese factory, artisanal beer, Ho-Chunk artist, or farmstead bakery" (Wormfarm Institute 2020: 4).[9] "The DTour invites travelers to be alert, eyes peeled, ears attuned, [and] senses heightened" (Wormfarm Institute 2020: 4) and works to attune visitors to the possibility of engaging in new creative and regenerative agriculture.

The Farm/Art DTour recognizes that, in Sauk County, community involvement is essential to the creative process and to fostering soil health. Figure 24.8 shows artist Tory Tepp baking Kernza bread during a community gathering at Witwen Park. This performance encouraged members of the community to move beyond seeing soil as producing food to instead see it as a way of communing jointly with the land, and to consider the underlying environmental aspects of soil's capacity to sequester carbon, support resilient ecosystems, mitigate climate change, and adapt to its consequences.

Art holds the transformative power to turn abstract concepts such as becoming soil and Rural-Urban Flow into concrete practices and emotions, engaging people to both think and feel deeply. Art provides a unique lens that reveals hidden connections between complex issues like systemic racism (Carlisle),

9 The W.I. has been working closely with the Ho-Chunk Nation for more than 10 years, with the W.I. and Ho-Chunk Nation giving mutual support in the growing and consuming of summer vegetables, seed exchanges, food preparation of traditional dishes, and other creative endeavors that are part of the Rural-Urban Flow. For more information, see: https://ruralurbanflow.org/.



FIGURE 24.8 Tory Tepp. Farm/Art DTour 2022 Performance (baking Kernza crackers in a cob oven after harvesting and milling the grain)
IMAGE COURTESY OF WORMFARM INSTITUTE

wealth inequality, and the entrenched colonial practices and power dynamics prevalent in American agricultural production (Iuliano). The Farm/Art DTour exemplifies how these artistic potentialities can be harnessed to create a bridge between art, soil, and pressing societal concerns, including climate

change and the future of agriculture and rural communities. By doing so, it not only educates but can also inspire people to feel a sense of shared responsibility and action towards sustainable practices and community-supported agriculture models.

7 Postscript

During a recent cross-country flight from Boston to San Francisco, I was struck by the vast agricultural fields stretching endlessly beneath me. Hour after hour, I witnessed agriculture's pervasive influence and unprecedented power to reshape our planet. This observation remains in the background of this chapter. Its shadow lingers, urging us to preserve and protect the rural in all its breadth as a means also to protect other ecosystems. Protecting the rural is part of safeguarding the remaining diversity in ecosystems and preserving the rich tapestry of life that depends upon these more-than-human environments.

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CHAPTER 25

"Does Your Soil Have a Smell?": Experiences of Regenerative Farming across the Great Plains

Janna Bystrykh and Clemens Driessen

Abstract

The Great Plains in the US mostly appears as the heartland of large-scale industrial agriculture. This chapter explores how the region is also a groundbreaking site for efforts to transition to regenerative farming and associated social regeneration. Through three interviews we reflect on the lived experiences and visions of influential actors who, each in their own way, are driving the movement of regenerative agriculture across the Great Plains. Their accounts offer layered narratives of the close connections between soil and communities, biodiversity and society, economic regeneration and regeneration of the land – with a deep sense of historical injustices and possible futures.

1 Regenerating the Great Plains: on Multiple Ways of Changing Food Systems and Staying in Curiosity with Nature

The Great Plains as a geographic region in the United States has numerous definitions. A study comparing 50 maps indicating the Great Plains over the last century found a large variety of boundaries, based on a range of physical and cultural characteristics, which can be taken as an indication of the complexity of the area.[1] There is an astonishing and even poetic diversity to this prairie and agricultural landscape that is often viewed from a distance and seen as following a singular logic of an anonymized, gridded, or nearly empty space – flyover country.

Today, across the Great Plains, a growing number of farmers, ranchers, community leaders, policy makers, and researchers are finding inspiration in practices that have emerged, or coalesced, under the label of regenerative agriculture. Many have found this approach to offer new ways to (re)connect to their land and the food it produces. Central to regenerative agriculture is a

1 For a comparative study of 50 published boundaries of the Great Plains since 1930, based on physical or cultural characteristics, see Rossum and Lavin.

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reorientation in agricultural practices towards caring for and rebuilding the soil. Often, it is juxtaposed to industrial farming, which requires large amounts of capital, and vast labor, mechanical (ploughing), and chemical inputs to maximize crop yields. Besides a shift in agricultural practices towards relying on soil as a living complex ecology, regenerative agriculture entails a wider shift in the role of farmers and in their relation to the land, to soil science, and to the future of agricultural policies. Beyond the farm, "regenerative" has become a go-to word and promise announcing the possible transformation of local and global food systems, and renewed possibilities for rural communities.

The common ground and shared ethos by farmers in regenerative or soil health practice is found in five principles, articulated on multiple farmer peer-to-peer online platforms and organization websites.[2] They are: limited disturbance of the soil (referring to tillage), keeping the soil covered (with cover crops or plant residue), living root (in the soil), diversity (of plants and species), and livestock integration.

As a social movement, regenerative agriculture combines practice with research, activism, and community building, and seeks to change policies to support and promote a transformation in the rural context in relation to food production, the role of community, landscape, and ecology. In recent years, this movement has been made accessible and popularized by Gabe Brown, farmer and author of the book *Dirt to Soil: One Family's Journey into Regenerative Agriculture* (2018); Jimmy Emmons, Gene Goven, and other farmers and public speakers on soil health; Kelsey Ducheneaux, rancher and public speaker on indigenous legacies in regenerative practices; scientists including Ray Archuleta and Jonathan Lundgren; and connecting to a wider audience through the 2020 documentary *Kiss the Ground*[3] and the 2023 film *Common Ground*,[4] both directed by Josh and Rebecca Tickell. At the same time, regenerative agriculture is being eagerly pursued by commercial interests seeking to financialize the carbon capturing potential of living soil.

With growing public awareness and a range of interested parties, there are now probably as many definitions of regenerative as there are of the Great Plains. The variety of approaches and contexts, and the attending plurality of motives and experiences, may be problematic, for example when seeking to

2 See, for example: https://kssoilhealth.org/soil-health-principles/; https://www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/technical-resources/the-five-principles-of-soil-health/; https://www.noble.org/regenerative-agriculture/soil/the-fundamental-principles-of-regenerative-agriculture-and-soil-health/.

3 http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?MARC;5109624.

4 https://commongroundfilm.org.

do certain kinds of research, obtain funding, or develop policies. At the same time, the openness and possibility of nuance and dynamism in its definition is reflective of the ecosystem nature of regenerative practices and allows for the building of alliances and coalitions, as it promotes ways of being able to associate with each other fitting to specific contexts. Thus, the movement can be seen as a socially and spatially diverse gathering that itself follows the logic of regenerative farming: as a process that changes and adapts over time, without a clear end-goal in terms of object and volume, and that aims to be non-destructive, geared towards fostering new, positive relations with nature, soil, and all species. As summarized by photographer and filmmaker Nicol Ragland, "it's important that we begin to create messaging and defining regenerative agriculture as simply mimicking nature's operating system, which the indigenous communities had been doing for hundreds of years. … What's so very important about regenerative is really this element of observation and staying in curiosity with nature."[5]

With the popularization of regenerative (agriculture) as a term, however, some unifying set of definitions is needed to be able to resist a takeover of the term as a branding and marketing tool by commercially driven organizations. This would entail a version of regeneration that would not necessarily include the potential of regenerating soil, local food systems, and community, and that could sideline the political potential of empowering marginalized groups as well as the needed transformation of food systems based on soil health. Incentives to financialize and trade the carbon-capturing potential of soil are liable to exacerbate these pressures.

This chapter, which focuses on lived experiences of regenerative practitioners across the Great Plains, emerges from our making of a short experimental film documentary, *Great Pla/ns* (2023, 39 minutes). Combining drone footage of rural landscapes stretching from North Dakota to the Texas Panhandle, *Great Pla/ns* offers a visual experience of landscapes that are, on the one hand, in transition from loss of topsoil and environmental degradation, while, on the other hand, comprising thriving ecosystems, communities, and wildlife. This visual experience is complemented by audio segments from 57 interviews[6] with regenerative farmers striving for newly rooted agricultural futures. This chapter is part of a series of essays, each highlighting different themes emerging from the conversations and bringing together the different voices encountered in the project

5 Interview 15 February 2021, as part of the Great Pla/ns documentary project.

6 The interviews were conducted by Janna Bystrykh, in collaboration with Clemens Driessen, Forbes Lipschitz, and Lisa Swanson Faleide.

around these themes, all relating to a form of regenerative agricultural or rural community practice.

Over the years, multiple studies in different contexts have explored the definition of regenerative agriculture, as pertaining to soil (Schreefel et al.), differentiation in practice (Giller et al.) and a process of transformation (Seymour and Connelly). In this chapter, we focus on outlining the porosity of the term based on the way it is used in the Great Plains region by regenerative practitioners today, and on how this openness of definition is also a strength in a process of transformation of agricultural practice, offering more possibilities for people to connect, and a chance to focus on the quality of the process of transformation across different areas of practice (in farming, food production and systems, policy, etc.).

Another important aspect of the regenerative process that emerges in our conversations with regenerative farmers is the exchange of and shifts in the established forms of knowledge inherent to this movement, which underline the farmer's central and primary role in building awareness about what is required for the envisioned transformation of agricultural practice. As Mary Podoll, NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) state conservationist for North Dakota, also interviewed as part of the *Great Pla/ns* project, summarizes: "it's really the producers that took on the soil health message. They really pushed the research agencies and the NRCS to do a better job of understanding how this is all interrelated. It's like an ecosystem that fits together like a puzzle. The biology is what connected us." Our working project definition of regenerative agriculture sees it as an approach to farming that focuses on conserving and restoring soil health, drawing on ecological principles and indigenous farming practices. When we approached people in preparation for the interviews, moreover, we spoke about *regenerative practices* rather than *regenerative agriculture* as a way to include both agricultural and community building practices.

This chapter contains extended segments of conversation from three interviews, a format that was chosen with the aim to share more comprehensively the depth of work and wealth of knowledge of our interlocutors. Through the segments, we highlight the importance of understanding the movement and practices as carried by people situated in the specific settings and drawing on their unique experiences (see Anderson) rather than as instances of a new discourse or agricultural form. This fits with the ethos of regenerative, which emphasizes practice as rooted in social-ecological thinking specific to a geographic location, away from anonymized standards and production volumes, and as part of a wider open network of exchange of knowledge across different fields, forms, and geographies. Nevertheless, we also acknowledge, as highlighted by Dr. Jonathan Lundgren below, that there are instances where clear

standards and definitions are needed, established through scientific work, to support the development of policy, to adjust funding possibilities, to stop and reverse soil loss, and to make the adoption of regenerative practices more immediately accessible for all types of farming operations.

In this chapter, we are in conversation with Nicol Ragland (photographer, filmmaker, based in Jones, Oklahoma), Dr. Jonathan Lundgren (Executive Director at Ecdysis Foundation and farmer, rancher, and beekeeper at Blue Dasher Farm in Estelline, South Dakota),[7] and Michael Thompson (co-owner of the Thompson Farm and Ranch LLC and founder and Chair of the Kansas Soil Health Alliance based in Almena, Kansas). For Ragland, regenerative is first and foremost an indigenous practice, and an approach to agriculture as farming with nature. In the conversation with Lundgren, regenerative designates the change that is needed in farming, food systems, policy, and research to stop and reverse the loss of topsoil through agriculture.[8] Notably, the term "change" occurs 24 times in the conversation. Lundgren positions regenerative as a connecting term between farmers and consumers, and investors and policy makers that can work to empower farmers and food systems. Michael Thompson, finally, talks about regenerative in terms of the flexibility it offers in farming – working in tune with nature – and in terms of it being an educational experience created by farmers for farmers, providing a new open structure and culture for the exchange of knowledge. The different entry points to the regenerative practice inherent to their professional backgrounds, as filmmaker, researcher-farmer, and educator-farmer, and being part of different social and ecological contexts, has been the reason to relate these three interviewees here. Each in their own way, they offer a sense of the potential for connection and necessary transformation of food production and agricultural practices that can be generated through the porosity of the term "regenerative."

2 "There Is Nothing Else to Talk About": Regenerative as Connecting Many Entry Points

Nicol Ragland

In my last 20-year trajectory of doing films in rural Minnesota and rural Texas, and then recently shooting in rural Oklahoma, I think in pretty much every

7 See https://nicolragland.com/; https://www.ecdysis.bio/; https://www.bluedasher.farm/.

8 Over 70% of land globally has been negatively affected by human use, according to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (Montanarella et al.).

rural community we're seeing boarded up businesses and people moving out of the area and a loss of the usual rural contingent. One of the things that we're focused on in Regenerate Oklahoma[9] is to try and empower these economies, through different regenerative models, to try and keep people within these communities and help build out basically economic reclamation and potentially food sovereignty.

Janna Bystrykh

Your background is in environmental science and photography; how do the two fields reinforce each other for you?

NR

By virtue of working on the film *Trans Pecos* (2020),[10] I was introduced to Dr. Zack Bush, from Farmers Footprint.[11] He had recognized the fact that I was taking a complex issue like the industrialization of the Big Bend area [southern Texas] and Texas oil and showing it in a more poetic way, more digestible for an audience. Consequently, he brought me in to create a documentary which initially focused on water samples from the top to the bottom of the Mississippi River. We quickly came to learn the details of what was happening to farmers, and that the story really had to focus on conventional farmers that were waking up to their concern about chemicals, and what they were doing to their land, wildlife, their own health. And that wakeup call was a really potent story to tell. That was the unfolding of the film *Farmers Footprint, Regeneration: The Beginning* (2020).[12]

JB

Was this also the first project where you were so intensely engaged with the idea and the process of regenerative farming?

NR

Absolutely, that was really my first introduction. We started doing research and realized, especially in the environmental space, that this is everything. There's nothing else to talk about. This is replenishing watershed. It's revitalizing land, it's creating economic viability. It's building relationships to consumers and

9 https://www.regenerateoklahoma.us.
10 https://nicolragland.com/stories/trans-pecos/ (full film).
11 https://farmersfootprint.us.
12 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_qx-JzcKWM (full film).

farmers. It's completely changing our food system. It's carbon sequestration. It's all the things that all of us should truly care about.

JB

What do you think are some of the common lenses that are being used in the media to talk about agriculture and where are the blind spots in relationship to regenerative farming?

NR

I think one of the biggest blind spots is that regenerative agriculture is indigenous agriculture. This is nothing new at all, and it's one of the things that I get excited about here in Oklahoma; this is Indian country, we have 39 tribes here. It's important that we begin to create messaging and defining regenerative agriculture as simply mimicking nature's operating system, which the indigenous communities had been doing for hundreds of years.

We have a lot of work to do in terms of branding and creating a legitimate way of defining what regenerative agriculture is, a movement that's moving really fast. What's so very important about regenerative is this element of observation and staying in curiosity with nature. Each farming operation changes ecologically; from east to west, within the state of Oklahoma, it changes deeply from east to west, and north to south across this country. Having farmers in a place of continuous change, weaning away from chemicals and tillage is difficult to define.

JB

You already mentioned the recently launched organization Regenerate Oklahoma[13] [Health Soils for Healthy Humans]. Could you tell us about the project? What is the focus, and what has been your inspiration?

NR

Regenerate Oklahoma has been in the works for the last year and a half. I'm a documentarian, and Farmers Footprint really preempted my care in this space and my being in the environmental space and telling stories. I got to a point where I was tired of talking and wanted to create direct action here in my home state. Luckily, I was connected to several of the soil health ambassadors across the state – Jimmy Emmons, Amy Seeger, Clay Pope, Greg Scott, and Sarah Bullis – talking to different directors within the main organizations in

13 https://www.regenerateoklahoma.us.

Oklahoma, the Noble Research Institute, the Conservation Commission to the Grazing Land Coalition, all of which are really focused on soil health education. It's important to me that we create our own lane, which is focused on the story and branding of regenerative agribusiness, reaching consumers so that we can create economic incentives for our farmers.

JB

Regenerative practices in a way can connect specialty crop producers and organic producers, but also inexpensive cash crop producers, is that something that you're also focusing on and trying to convey to the consumers?

NR

Absolutely, going back to empowering, our goal and part of our vision is to create food hubs within a 60–75 mile radius, within every rural community, so that producers have an actual market to sell their products, and so that we can eradicate these food deserts. It's going to take some work to localize these markets, and to build demand from the farmers. Oklahoma is land heavy; there's no shortage of land. It's a matter of changing the agricultural models.

JB

In the process of working on this documentary project, being in conversation with many people, we have been incredibly energized by how positive and engaged everyone is, from small- to large-scale farmers, and from community leaders and scientists to policy makers.

NR

There are so many elements and entry points within the regenerative movement, from a small hobby farmer, to growing food in the backyard, to being part of a business that helps to empower farmers, to a government entity building soil health. All of these entry points, they're inspiring, and you feel like you're in direct action making a difference. And that's incredibly exciting; it's our common ground, and it truly is the solution.

3 Regenerative Is Change: "The Science That Helps … the World Move towards Regenerative Food Production"

Jonathan Lundgren

We are located right along the eastern edge of South Dakota. We kind of think of this area as sort of the battlefront of where change needs to happen and is

happening in our food system. It's a transition landscape between the more moist areas of the US that easily grow corn and soybeans, some cash grain systems, and more arid areas, rangeland systems.[14] And it also happens to be where we keep most of the nation's beehives during the summer times. That's kind of this inflection point for agriculture.

The Blue Dasher Farm itself is located on 53 acres, and 25 of that is native unbroken prairie and wetlands. It's one of the nicest rolling prairies that I've ever seen. It's spectacular. The birds out here, the life on this farm is really staggering. We see things every day that I've never seen before, and that's inspiring.

Janna Bystrykh

You work with a group of research students and scientists. Could you talk about the research space that you've had to build and integrated on the farm?

JL

The Ecdysis Foundation's headquarters is on Blue Dasher Farm, and there's a good reason for that. We're trying to make this the science that helps this grassroots movement around the US and world move towards regenerative food production. That requires a little bit of a different approach to science; the way science has been practiced is what's produced the current monoculture system. We really needed to rethink how we apply science. There's a total disconnect between the science that's being done, the scientists, and the people that they're trying to help.

Out here, to be a successful scientist, you have to be integrated into the food community. You have to conduct the science and disseminate it to the people who need it. Peer reviewed publications are important, but they're not high on the list. It's kind of a part of doing business. And so all of our scientific staff here are integrated into Blue Dasher Farm. The scientists have to be farmers. How else can we give advice if we haven't practiced it ourselves? All of our research is done on farms. It's very observational. Rather than defining what a regenerative system is, we look to the farmers. And we take what they've already defined and put metrics to describe it.

14 "Most rangelands in the Great Plains are grasslands, although other range types, such as savannas, shrub lands, woodlands, and wetlands, are important regionally or locally. Great Plains grasslands include tallgrass prairie, mixed prairie, shortgrass prairie, and fescue prairie" (Wishart n. pag.).

Clemens Driessen

The *1000 Farm Initiative* is a large-scale agroecological initiative you are currently leading; what is the setup of this project?

JL

We have two general goals, the first is to validate whether or not regenerative food systems are doing what they're supposed to do relative to conventional systems, on 1000 farms more or less to get the necessary data. The other goal is to generate roadmaps for the successful transition of food systems for dominant food systems across different eco regions.

The reason is the sense of urgency; I'm going to retire in 10 to 15 years, and either I'm going to be successful and we will have helped to change our food system. If we don't change this trajectory in the next 10 to 15 years, I don't know that we're going to be able to anymore. We're losing topsoil at a such a rate that it will be gone in the next 50 to 60 years.

JB

When you are mentioning roadmaps, what are some of the next steps that you are envisioning?

JL

You don't have to change the whole system yourself. Usually, social movements start to take off after a certain point. That's what we're after, hitting that tipping point, and working directly with farmers, through field days, and a wide range of different dissemination methods, because everybody learns a little bit differently. In order to change new minds, you're going to need to have multiple exposures.

JB

You recently published a paper on defining regenerative systems (Fenster et al.) – could you talk about why you felt that this was a necessary project to undertake?

JL

We're not into the whole idea of labeling. But, as scientists, we needed to know whether the farm that we just walked onto was regenerative or not, we have to define these treatments in order to compare regenerative versus conventional systems. There are probably 5 or 10 different, time-consuming scoring rubrics out there today to determine if you are regenerative. But nobody is saying if you are attaining the regenerative outcomes.

Looking back over the last five years, we realized we've got that data. We distilled it down to 8 or 9 simple questions for the cropland systems and orchard systems, and about 4 questions for rangeland systems. We think that this could help guide some of the discussions.

JB

Do you see this and the *1000 Farm Initiative* as the beginning of a conversation on a policy level?

JL

From a practical level, we can almost instantaneously go out onto any field across North America and say where they fall within the regenerative continual … The government doesn't lead; it follows. Universities don't lead; they follow. I think that this concept of regenerative is being led by the farmers and by the grassroots. That is not to say that some of these large institutions aren't going to be very helpful and influential, because they are I just don't think that they're the first ones in the pool. What we need, before decisions are made on the policy level, where we start incentivizing regenerative, is to be very clear and sure about what a regenerative system is and to be able to define this within our own community.

CD

What are the key protagonists in terms of insects in regenerative in your view?

JL

Pollinators, and the bees are a big one … lady beetles and predators are a big one. We're trying to elevate ants. Ants are really important. Ants are like ecosystem engineers; you think about beavers and how much they can change the landscape. Ants also do that. They determine which insect pests are out there, what the plant community looks like. They increase water infiltration into the soil within a crop field. The healthiest places in that crop field, the greenest, are always around the ant mound. Ants aggregate the nutrients. Dung beetles, in rangelands systems, that's a huge character that people like to tell stories with.

Most people, when they think of life, but insect life especially, they focus on the species they have to kill. We have a very pest-centric philosophy towards life. And the rest of the life out there doesn't really matter much. But with insects, they respond very well to regenerative farming systems, and they're just a great character for telling stories about regenerative. And that's what we do.

JB

In a slightly earlier article together with Claire LaCanne (LaCanne and Lundgren), you wrote that the population density of insects correlates directly to profit. Could you say a few words about that?

JL

We just did the work in the almond system, where we looked at species diversity of inverts, and we looked at the profitability of almond orchards, and the two are directly correlated with one another. More life means more money. And that's an important observation and philosophical mind shift that needs to happen; we need to start valuing life on our farms.

JB

The almond system seems to be one of the regenerative focus systems for you at the moment; how did that come about?

JL

When we first got started, we were crowdfunded with an Indiegogo campaign, where beekeepers were influential. Bees are also a good cast of characters for telling stories, and a good indicator of the environment. I became a beekeeper, and I followed the bees out to California. Most of the nation's bees are transported out there to pollinate the almond crops. I arrived and I realized that anything I'm doing in the upper Midwest is completely negated when the nation's hives go out to almonds in California. It was a wasteland. They had desertified a huge wetland called the Central Valley of California through tillage and agrochemicals. Most of the nation's bees go out there and only half of them come out. This is a battlefront. If we can turn almonds, we can turn California agriculture. And we've watched that start to happen through our science. This year, there are four other institutions doing regenerative almond work. We can't do everything as a little grassroots science operation out of South Dakota, but we can be the pebble that starts the avalanche.

Everybody down there was saying cover crops aren't going to work, it's just too dry. And then we found one guy, and he devoted his water use to feeding the cover crops. And he changed the climate of his area. We're going to be able to reverse the desert and the heat that emanates, the loss of water through evaporation. This will totally change the climate.

JB

Conventional farming is often linked to an affordable food system – what is your response to that?

JL

Grow food, most farmers in the US don't grow food, they grow soybeans, corn, and alfalfa, and then that gets fed into animals that would rather be eating grass. If you want to be a farmer, grow food. There's no food crisis; we're devoting 180 million acres to things we don't eat, and that's just in the US. If we were to actually devote that to food production ….

CD

Do all farmers in a way need this patch of beautiful prairie land that you described at the beginning?

JL

One of my scientists and I were driving near his hometown in Minnesota. He pulled the car over and he pointed out this field, it was a soybean field – that field was tilled twice, sprayed with herbicide, it was planted, sprayed with herbicide, fungicide, insecticide, and then they drove out and they harvested it, and then they tilled it again, and human feet have never touched that ground. That's a problem.

People have asked me, if I had a magic wand, what would I do in order to change our food system? And I tell them I would make everybody take their shoes and socks off and go for a walk in the field and feel that connection. That connection with our food system, the land and life, is something that's been sorely missing from our culture for a long time. Farmers need that more than anybody.

4 Regenerative Education: "[Getting to Know Your Soil] Is a Continuous Process"

Michael Thompson

We are considered the first county in Northwest Kansas. I live in Kansas, and we farm on both the Kansas and Nebraska sides of the state line. We're kind of a rolling terrain, and I guess that's kind of what got us into the whole no till and cover crops and trying to keep as much residue as possible. A lot of the hillsides had a lot of erosion in the past. Most of our good O horizon [organic matter in the soil], or our topsoil, had washed away. I'm not going to say that today we farm black soil, but it is becoming darker. We started out with a lot of highly weathered soils that were almost in the scale of light tanned, almost a yellow color, and now we're starting to see them get into the browns and even deeper and darker browns. We're seeing that carbon being restored, more

water-holding capacity on these soils. We're not quite there yet, but we're getting better every year.

We are in an area where moisture is becoming one of our more limiting factors; we are in between an 18- and 22-inch rainfall zone. Water especially dictates what we can and can't do on our farm with both cropping systems and our grazing. That's another thing that kind of brought us into the soil health. We were overgrazing our pastures, and we only had so much pastureland to run our animals on. We kind of got into the cover crops by way of our animals needing something to eat as a forage source and trying to generate some revenue instead of just spending money on fallow land.

Janna Bystrykh

What is the variety of crops that you grow, and how do you define that composition each year?

MT

We try to keep a variety of things growing because we never know what's going to catch the rains. In the spring, for forage or a grazing cover crop, we could plant an oat pee, barley, some clovers, turnips, rape seeds, and other things to help open the soil up. This creates ground cover, but it also creates a forage source for the animals. When we're grazing, we try to take the top half or three quarters, where most of the nutrition is in those plants, and leave the stem and maybe some of the bottom leaves to keep the ground covered.

We are completely dryland, so we're totally at nature's will to provide us with moisture. Our summers get monstrously hot, between 100 and 110 degrees, and we lose a lot of moisture to evaporation. If we don't keep that soil covered, we're behind with the moisture. The plant residue negates the moisture that we use for the cover crop by keeping more moisture in the ground rather than letting it evaporate.

On the cash cropping side of things, we will almost always plant corn in the spring. That's currently what we're doing. We'll try to plant it into a stubble or a residue of something we've grazed from last fall or over the winter, a cereal rye or maybe a winter wheat. In our environment, residue does two things – protecting the soil from big rainfalls, but mostly from dry weather and drought. Additionally, that extra residue also in-between the cash crops keeps the weeds back. The more residue that you have out covering the ground, the less of a weed problem you have.

We don't really have a full rotation; we kind of know how many acres of a certain crop we need to plant financially, but kind of let Mother Nature dictate what pieces of ground get what, depending on our rainfall patterns and how

much cover we have on the soil. Sometimes you've got to forego some planning and wait for those rains.

JB

Both you and your brother left the family farm to pursue careers in different areas. Could you talk a bit about how you left and how you came back?

MT

When my brother and I both graduated high school, we kind of got to talking that farming was not in our future, that dad was the last farmer to farm our ground. A lot of it came from our mother, who saw how hard dad had worked. They were still doing conventional tillage. It was a lot of hours away from family. We were above breakeven, but it wasn't super profitable. She was worried that if they did have to expand the farm, try to buy more land and equipment, that it wouldn't be economically feasible.

I went to mechanic school for a while and through life's twists and turns I ended up working at the school. And I found out that I really enjoy the education process and teaching. I got my bachelor's and my master's and went back to my home district to work. My first job was teaching preschool. The very next year I became a full-time kindergarten teacher for 12 years. I enjoyed every single bit of it, in the spring especially. In the spring, kids tune out and they want to be outside, and I was allowed the latitude to take the kids outside. We did science units almost constantly, we talked about soil and seeds, we would read about plants, grow our own plants and measure them. We planted several windbreaks around the school.

Through that, I started farming nights and weekends and it got to the point where our farm had grown just enough, and I decided that one passion had to lead to another, so I hung up my teaching hat. I guess my education has shifted gears from children to adults. We educate farmers now – I am on *No-till on the Plains*' board, I'm also on *CCTA, Colorado Conservation Tillage Association*, which hosts the *High Plains No-till*, which is kind of a dry land conference, and we just started the *Kansas Soil Health Alliance*. We're not trying to push farmers to do anything different. We're just trying to get them to think about their soils in a little bit different way. I think that everybody's doing a good job; it's just that we can take stewardship to another level, maybe even a little higher level.

JB

The organizations you mentioned are well-established soil health organizations. What prompted you to launch the *Kansas Soil Health Alliance*, and does it complement these other organizations?

MT

The *Kansas Soil Health Alliance* came about around 2014. There just wasn't a cohesive place to find education for the farmers that are just getting started on soil health, without having to travel long distances. We're not here to take the place of all these other soil health organizations. We're trying to catch the people that are still doing conventional tillage that want to make that bridge to a minimum or strip till, and those that want to totally give up the conventional tillage and go completely no till or do better grazing.

Most people I know doing soil health practices they're very willing to share, there are no proprietary trade secrets – creating a forum for farmers and ranchers helping farmers and ranchers.

JB

How many years did it take you to get to know your soil?

MT

It's a continuous process. Getting to the initial level of confidence, I think it was two, three years, once I was out there more, not spending all my extra time tilling the ground and running a tractor. The more that you can look at your soil, the better. Does your soil have a smell? Does your soil have porosity? As you start getting a little bit more soil health, your soil starts gluing together; you start seeing aggregates, little tiny soil clods that stay together, that hold the soil open so that you can get those rains. Root systems tell a huge story as well; if they are covered with soil, they are interacting with the microbes in the soil.

By year three, you should see quite a bit of difference, by year five a marked difference in the soil. Over time, the soil gets more of the feeling of a mattress and porosity; before, it was like walking across a paved road.

JB

Thank you so much for sharing your insight and your enthusiasm.

MT

This way of farming solved a lot of our own financial problems and not being able to farm, and there's a lot of people out there that it will help financially and the environment. The only reason that I don't like the term regenerative is that it sets us apart. I'd like to say that I'm a farmer, and I like farming with nature. That's what's beautiful about regenerative; it takes regular farming practices and a lot of the organic or gardening practices, and it marries them together into a way of farming that is more in tune with nature. And we still can feed a growing world population.

5 Farmer-Led Regeneration

The regenerative movement is a model of spatial relational practice, offering a comprehensive approach that connects communities, the soils, food production and food systems, the landscapes, and other species as an ecosystem. As a practice, regenerative agriculture is not constrained by an exclusive output focus, but rather enriched by the lens of the process of production as part of wider ecologies. Soil health and regenerative practices need to become a priority and a new normal for farming and food production, understood and valued by the consumer, supported by science, and stimulated by policies and farming programs.

The porosity of the term regenerative – as shown by the conversations above – can be seen as a strength, in being able to relate and stimulate change across different communities, professional fields, and forms of knowledge (in farming and ranching, science, policy, food production, with consumers) to achieve regenerative farming and rural practices, as well as the rebuilding of soils as common ground and shared ethos on potentially even a global scale. The regenerative farmers and practitioners across the Great Plains as a collective are leading the process of scaling this form of farming from prototyping to an established form of food production.

The Great Plains is an agricultural landscape that has been perceived as, and in many ways still is, a center of large-scale industrial production of monocultural crops and commodities; what is emerging within this landscape, however, is a spreading alternative movement and model of farmer-led regenerative agricultural and rural transformation.

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This volume explores what aspects of contemporary rural life as deeply globalized – and thus implicated in the ongoing, destructive unfolding of colonialism and capitalism – are highlighted and obscured in social, political, economic, and cultural imaginations. It asks how this shapes the ways in which rurality is politically mobilized, affectively encountered, and artistically mediated. Coming from the humanities, the social sciences, and the art world, the contributors bring into focus the persistence of romanticizing imaginations of the rural (such as, for example, the idyll) that position it as a wholesome escape from globalization and its excesses, including looming environmental collapse. In addition, they detail attempts at deromanticization designed to disassociate the rural from whiteness, rugged masculinity, heteronormativity, anthropocentrism, and agrilogistics.

Esther Peeren is Professor of Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. Her publications include the monograph *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and the edited volume *Planetary Hinterlands: Extraction, Abandonment and Care* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

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