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Invisible Lives of the Rural Idyll: *Midsomer Murders* and Cynan Jones' *The Long Dry*

Les vies invisibles de l'idylle rurale: Midsomer Murders et The Long Dry de Cynan Jones

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Résumés

English Français
This article explores how certain rural lives are rendered invisible by the enduring dominance of the genre of the rural idyll, which is particularly strong in British culture. Drawing on my previous work about 'living ghosts', on Jacques Derrida and on Akira Lippit, I contend that, when dealing with the invisibilized lives of the rural, it is crucial to ask in what sense these lives are invisible and what each form of invisibility makes (im)possible. Two case studies are discussed: the popular television crime drama *Midsomer Murders* (1997-present), set in rural England, and the 2006 novel *The Long Dry* by Cynan Jones, set on a Welsh farm. With regard to *Midsomer Murders*, I show how it affirms the rural idyll's construction of the English countryside as a space of whiteness. With regard to *The Long Dry*, I argue that it exposes the rural idyll, in Lauren Berlant's terms, as a waning genre whose good-life fantasy is no longer viable, while also opening up the possibility of a posthuman idyll adequate to the contemporary globalized rural.

Cet article explore comment certaines vies rurales sont rendues invisibles par la domination durable du genre de l'idylle rurale, qui est particulièrement forte dans la culture britannique. En m'appuyant sur mes précédents travaux sur les 'fantômes vivants', sur Jacques Derrida et sur Akira Lippit, je soutiens que, face aux vies invisibilisées des ruraux, il est crucial de se demander en quel sens ces vies sont invisibles et ce que chaque forme de l'invisibilité rend (im)possible. Deux études de cas sont discutées : le drame policier télévisé populaire *Midsomer Murders* (1997-présent), qui se déroule dans une campagne anglaise, et le roman de 2006 *The Long Dry* de Cynan Jones, situé dans une ferme galloise. Quant à *Midsomer Murders*, je montre comment il renforce la construction idyllique rurale de la campagne anglaise comme un espace de blancheur. En ce qui concerne *The Long Dry*, je soutiens qu'il dénonce l'idylle rurale, dans les termes de Lauren Berlant, comme un genre en déclin dont le fantasme de la « belle vie » n'est

plus viable, tout en ouvrant la possibilité d'une idylle posthumaine adéquate au monde rural contemporain mondialisé.

Texte intégral

> When has absence ever been an absolute givenness?
> Is it not always a question of what is seen, acknowledged,
> and counted as present, and for whom? (Barad G113)

Introduction

1   In academic and public debates about globalization, as well as in cultural representations of globalization, the main focus has been on the urban environments where, it is often repeated, a majority of the world population now lives. The rural has been much less reflected upon as a dynamic site of globalization. This despite it still being home to almost half of humanity; essential to ensuring sustainable food and energy provision; heavily affected by migration and tourism flows; and a primary site for resource extraction and waste disposal. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, in the Global South in particular, globalization has prompted a 'spectralization of the rural' involving its 'conversion . . . into a database for pharmaceutical dumping, chemical fertilizers, patenting of indigenous knowledge, big dam building and the like' (92–93). The term 'spectralization' signals how this globalized rural is not readily visible, but nonetheless maintains a presence as the 'forgotten front of globalization' (Spivak 93). In the Global North, too, the rural harbors some of the less palatable pillars of globalization, such as megafarms and landfills. In addition, rural-urban inequalities have been exacerbated as a result of depopulation, the reduction of rural services and the closure of rural industries, leading rural communities to claim that the effects of globalization on their lives are not being recognized and that they are being 'left behind' (Wuthnow).

2   Importantly, Spivak also sees the rural as a resource for an alternative to urban-driven globalization. She looks to the Cuban revolutionary José Martí's 'ruralist left-humanism' for a way to counter the spectralization of the rural, not with a return to nationalism or localism but with 'an internationalism that can . . . shelter planetarity' (92). According to Spivak, Martí allows the rural's longstanding connection with the metaphor of Nature or Earth to challenge and move beyond the privileging of 'the idea of city/nation'—by figuring the rural as 'placing history itself in the forces of nature and thus away from the specificity of nations' (94). Spivak's warning that a rural-derived planetarity should avoid a 'primitivist romanticization of the rural' (93) remains pertinent as, especially in the Global North, an undeniable factor in determining what does and does not become visible of the globalized rural is the continued dominance, across the social and cultural realms, of the genre of the idyll, which associates the rural with an escape from globalization.

3   Although over the course of its long history the idyll has taken different forms, all of these entail a certain 'mystification' of rural activities that works to naturalize and legitimate particular, usually conservative, social relations (Short 144). Some of the idyll's incarnations have proven particularly persistent and 'linger as ghosts' in contemporary perceptions and portrayals of the rural across the world (Short 145). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, what allows the idyll to persist, in literature and in life, is a deep-seated longing for the core idyllic notion of a 'small but secure and stable little world of the family, where nothing is foreign, or accidental or incomprehensible' (232) —a world diametrically opposed to the intensely interconnected one of globalization.

4   As a genre, the idyll provides, in the words of Lauren Berlant, 'an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art', a framing for the event that predetermines how it will be reacted to (6). A 'waning of genre' is what should occur when the event no longer fits the generic frame. In this situation, there are two options. One is to continue to see the event as if it still accorded with the affective expectation, so that one can keep reacting in the same way; this involves an act of disavowal. The other is to adjust the response to the event's actuality, departing from the generic framing; this will cause the genre to be reconfigured or discarded. Berlant contends that the latter option is more constructive, as it involves an acknowledgment that certain genres are no longer attuned to social reality. The former, however, is more commonly chosen, as people are inclined to hold on to familiar genres like the idyll, even when these prove unable to deliver the 'conventional good-life fantasies' they promise (Berlant 2).

5   Berlant associates the tendency to hold on to familiar genres that can ultimately only disappoint with an affective structure she calls 'cruel optimism', arising 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (1). Optimism involves the revisiting of a 'scene of fantasy' like the rural 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' (2, original emphasis). Such optimism turns cruel when 'the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation' (2). When relating to the rural through the genre of the idyll makes people feel comfortable—for example by making them believe that the rural offers protection from the pressures of globalization—even though this blinds them to the aspects of rural reality that make the idyll's good-life fantasy unrealizable, cruel optimism is in play. Berlant focuses on the harm that cruel optimism causes to the desiring subjects themselves, but, as I have argued elsewhere (Peeren 2018), it can also lead to these subjects harming others as they seek to cleanse the rural of anyone not deemed to belong in the idyll's safe little world.

6   In this article, I will explore how certain rural lives are rendered spectral—not fully visible and viable—by the cruelly optimistic adherence to the genre of the rural idyll, which is particularly strong in British culture. Such spectral rural lives—which, in rural studies, have been conceptualized as the rural's 'others' (Cloke)—include the poor; criminals; adolescents; travelers; people of color and the legacies of colonialism; seasonal farm workers; migrants and refugees; farm animals; and pollutants and pathogens. I will begin by arguing that conceiving of these 'others' as 'living ghosts' reveals what kind of invisibility they are pushed into and the degree of agency that this affords them. Drawing on my own previous work, on Jacques Derrida and on Akira Lippit, I will contend that, when dealing with the invisible lives of the rural, it is crucial to ask in what exact sense these lives are invisible and what each form of invisibility makes possible or impossible. Next, I will turn to two case studies: the popular television crime drama *Midsomer Murders* (1997-present), set in rural England, and the 2006 novel *The Long Dry* by Cynan Jones, set on a Welsh farm. My discussion of the 2011 controversy around statements made by a *Midsomer Murders* producer to legitimate the lack of non-white characters on the show highlights how, before and after the controversy, *Midsomer Murders* affirms the rural idyll's construction of the English countryside as a space of whiteness in which BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) bodies have no place and, if they do appear, are forced to assimilate or unseen by being

relegated to what Lippit calls the avisual. With regard to *The Long Dry*, I argue that it exposes the rural idyll as a waning genre whose good-life fantasy is no longer viable given globalization's impact on the rural. In addition, it acknowledges the non-human actors normally rendered invisible in the rural idyll as active agencies that play a crucial role in shaping the contemporary rural. The possibility for a posthuman idyll adequate to the globalized rural that this conjures will be outlined by way of the work of Karen Barad, who also provides the epigraph for this article.

Living Ghosts, Haunting and Forms of Invisibility

7   In *The Spectral Metaphor*, I wrote about certain people appearing, in the present and while still alive, as dispossessed ghosts: they are rendered invisible, ignored, and considered exploitable and expendable; or, sometimes simultaneously, turned into objects of intense fear and violent attempts at extermination. The way in which such living ghosts oscillate between, to put it in the terms of Barad's epigraph, being absented and being 'counted as present' underscores how the spectral metaphor can function as a means of calling attention not only to disavowed pasts, but also to present processes of marginalization. As Barad indicates, moreover, whether someone or something will be counted as present—and for what their presence is seen to count—is qualified by a 'for whom?': for whom is this someone or something present, and is this someone/something present to them as to be cared for and safeguarded, or as to be disregarded and destroyed with impunity?

8   It is the 'for whom?' that complicates the assumption that all ghosts, and all those who live like ghosts, have the power to haunt, with haunting taken as a form of agency that insistently draws attention, forcefully demands a response and has a disturbing impact on the haunted (Gordon, Derrida 1994). Yet, as popular culture teaches—in, for example, the films *Beetlejuice* (1988) and *A Ghost Story* (2017)—not all ghosts are able to haunt with the same force, and some do not manage to haunt at all. If a ghost is present without seizing the interest and attention of the haunted (as opposed to that of other ghosts), without inciting some sort of a response, whether to flee, to exorcize or to engage, no haunting occurs. To haunt in a manner that would effectively counteract their marginalization, living ghosts need to be 'seen, acknowledged and counted as present' (Barad G113)—or, as Judith Butler puts it, as 'grievable' and therefore to be safeguarded in life and death (75)—by those who made them into living ghosts.

9   Thus, the status of being (like) a ghost ought to be separated from the capacity to haunt. Haunting is not something ghosts are able to do of their own accord, but is fundamentally relational—involving a 'for whom?' Its occurrence and force are dependent upon a certain receptivity in the ones encountering the ghost. Whereas, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida focuses on the ethical choice to be made by the haunted once a haunting has been established—between trying to exorcize the ghost and learning to live *with* it—this concerns a prior ethical stance of opening oneself up (or not) to being haunted in the first place. In the Shakespeare play Derrida uses as his departure point for theorizing spectrality, Hamlet is not drawn to the ramparts of Elsinore Castle by sightings of just any ghost, but has his attention peaked by the promise of the ghost of his father; it is his desire to find out what his father wants that renders him receptive to the haunting that ensues: 'If it assume my noble father's person, I'll speak to it' (*Hamlet* Act I, Scene II). In the (conscious or unconscious) decision whether to give a ghost the attention it requires to be able to haunt, identification with the ghost is often a determining factor, against Derrida's association of the specter with 'radical alterity and heterogeneity' (1994, 75). The role identification plays in making ghosts count as present enough to exert a haunting force explains why non-human ghosts have an especially hard time impressing themselves in a haunting manner that compels a 'something-to-be-done' (Gordon) upon what remains a human-centered world.

10   Much like the ghost's power to haunt, the ghost's invisibility, too, is not straightforward. All living ghosts participate in a certain invisibility, but this invisibility is not of a singular, invariable kind, as Derrida has shown. In *The Gift of Death*, he first distinguishes the *visible-invisible*, which denotes something that would be visible if it were out in the open but that remains unseen because it is 'kept in secret' (90). Crucially, there is, in the visible-invisible, a potential for exposure by the secret-keeper, once again invoking the relationality of the 'for whom?'. Second, Derrida discusses the *absolute invisible*, which 'falls outside the register of sight' and includes, besides what may be apprehended through other senses, the divine gaze by which 'God sees me, he looks at me in secret, but I don't see him, I don't see him looking at me, even though he looks at me while facing me' (35). In *Specters of Marx*, this divine gaze re-appears as the visor effect, the 'incomparable power' of the ghost—specifically that of Hamlet's father, who appears in full armor—'to see without being seen' (8). This power, Derrida stresses, is enhanced by the fact that the visor retains the capacity to 'see without being seen' even when it is up, by virtue of remaining 'an available resource and structure' for resisting identification (8). Here, Derrida ignores that, in Shakespeare, the armor is precisely what allows the ghost to be identified as that of King Hamlet and thus as a ghost Hamlet is open to being haunted by. Living ghosts that lack the sovereignty of the ghost of Hamlet's father and are not considered grievable cannot partake of the power of the visor effect; their agency is much more limited.

11   Not absolutely invisible but manifestly there in the social realm, living ghosts are either hidden and thus visible-invisible, like irregularized migrants 'kept in secret' as they are smuggled across borders, or apprehended in the mode of what Lippit calls avisuality:

> Avisuality not as a form of invisibility, in the sense of an absent or negated visibility: not as the antithesis of the visible but as a specific mode of impossible, unimaginable visuality. Presented to vision, there to be seen, the avisual image remains, in a profoundly irreducible manner, unseen. Or rather, it determines an experience of seeing, a sense of the visual, without ever offering an image. (32)

12   Avisuality marks something that is presented to vision and can potentially be captured by vision, but that is nevertheless not seen. It is what one cannot imagine seeing in the sense of acknowledging it and counting it as present, allowing it to become part of one's field of vision as an image offered by another. The avisual 'exceeds the capacity of the spectator to see it, to withstand its very spectacularity' (Lippit 41). It is a blinding image, an image unseen in what it, on its own terms, shows. Avisuality is concretized as a relational structure when Lippit links it to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, where it appears in its full paradoxicality as '"a peculiar disposition of the eyes" of others who "refuse to see" [the invisible man]' even though they constantly notice him as a black man (98). The invisible man's avisuality means that his blackness —and the prejudices associated with it—is all white people can see of him. Lippit relates the avisual to what Fred Moten, following Saidiya Hartman, describes as the hypervisible:

> The mark of invisibility is a visible, racial mark; invisibility has visibility at its heart. To be invisible is to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly recognized as the unrecognizable, as the abject, as the absence of individual self-consciousness, as a transparent vessel of meanings wholly independent of any influence of the vessel itself. (1)

13   The avisual, then, denotes a very particular kind of invisibility bound to an excessive visibility: Ellison's invisible man will be *noticed* because of his blackness, which is socially marked as aberrant, but he will not be *seen* beyond his blackness. He is not acknowledged as having anything other to show than his blackness, which, in the eyes of white people, disqualifies him from being counted as a (hu)man.

      Thus, when thinking about the invisible lives produced by the rural idyll, we should not just ask what living ghosts haunt it, but also what living ghosts roam the rural

without being counted as haunting presences, and how they may come to haunt after all. In addition, it is crucial to ask what kind of invisibility is involved and how it can be remedied. The process that is particularly prevalent in British culture of 'editing out' those elements of the rural that associate it, against the rural idyll, with modernity (Shirley 8) can take the form of excluding modern—and globalized—aspects of the rural, rendering them visible-invisible, but may also render these aspects avisual, which includes them as unseen. In the next section, I will explore why the 'editing out' of BAME lives from *Midsomer Murders*' rural idyll could not be resolved by a simple 'editing back in' of these lives.

The Rural Idyll as a Space of Whiteness in *Midsomer Murders*

15   *Midsomer Murders* is an ITV crime drama set in a fictional conglomeration of villages in rural England with a large viewership in the UK and around the world (Bergin 84). Each episode features a murder mystery—often involving multiple corpses—that is duly solved by the main protagonist, Detective Chief Inspector Barnaby (in the early years, this was Tom Barnaby, played by John Nettles; since 2000, it has been his cousin John Barnaby, played by Neil Dudgeon). According to Tiffany Bergin, *Midsomer Murders* draws on but also parodies 'the British "Golden Age" crime fiction tradition', which, in placing an 'emphasis on restoring innocence', is 'deeply conservative' (86). In addition, Bergin sees the series as evoking a strong sense of rural nostalgia, while also gently mocking its own idyllic portrayal of the English countryside. Bergin is right that *Midsomer Murders* parodies some elements of the idyll and is generally not taken as a realistic portrayal of English rural life. However, by locating its departure from the rural idyll primarily in the large number of murders and the often-ludicrous ways in which these occur, the series can still affirm the good-life fantasy held out by the idyll. In fact, this fantasy is made to seem viable precisely by having those seen as not belonging in the idyll murdered, identified as murderers or murder suspects, or simply not appear at all.

16   That *Midsomer Murders* is taken to contain a realistic kernel in its idyllic portrayal of village life as it unfolds around the murders became clear in 2011, when a row erupted after co-creator and producer Brian True-May, in an interview with the *Radio Times*, noted:

> We just don't have ethnic minorities involved. Because it wouldn't be the English village with them. It just wouldn't work. Suddenly we might be in Slough. Ironically, Causton [the town in *Midsomer Murders* where the police station is] is supposed to be Slough. And if you went to Slough you wouldn't see a white face there. We're the last bastion of Englishness and I want to keep it that way. (Hutchison)

17   Here, the generalized English village is asserted to be exclusively white, and the specific city of Slough wholly non-white. Neither is accurate: English villages—including those where *Midsomer Murders* is filmed—are more diverse than True-May allows (Bergin 92), and although Slough is among the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK, the 2011 census identified it as 45.7% white.[1] In presenting his racist distortions, True-May positions himself as part of a 'we' that at first appears to refer to the makers of *Midsomer Murders* but later seems to have expanded to include all white (rural) people who feel that their national identity—as English rather than British—is under threat and should be defended from 'ethnic minorities'. True-May also conjures a racist 'you' that acts as the 'for whom?' in a posited scene of avisuality: it is this 'you' that would go to Slough and not see a white face there, as the manifest presence of white faces is erased by what the 'you' perceives as a threatening vista of all-encompassing blackness.

18   True-May's heralding of *Midsomer Murders*' exclusively white villages as 'the last bastion of Englishness' invokes the 'collapsing of rurality into whiteness' that Sarah Neal links to the persistence of the rural idyll and its underpinning of English nationalism (443). The idyll constructs the rural—and the nation of which it is regarded as the heart—as a space of whiteness free from racial otherness: it 'represents a place of security away from the commonly perceived urban malaise of English cities which have, in the post-war period, become increasingly diverse ("unEnglish") and synonymous with an undesirable black/Other' (Neal 445). Strikingly, in *Midsomer Murders*, Causton, although supposedly modeled on Slough, is portrayed as just as white as the surrounding villages. Whiteness extends to the urban, erasing the contrast between the white English village and the non-white city upheld by True-May. In this way, the whole fictional world of *Midsomer Murders*—and by implication the whole of England or even the UK—can be imagined as a realm safe from the 'undesirable black/Other'.

19   In the wake of the media storm caused by True-May's statements, he apologized for any 'unintended offense' caused but did not take back what he had said (Hutchison), was suspended and then reinstated as series producer, and eventually stepped down (Bergin 92). The controversy highlighted how, until 2011, only one non-white character had appeared in 89 episodes of *Midsomer Murders*. In its wake, between 2011 and 2016, 24 'ethnic characters' appeared (Buckley). While this may seem to signal a progressive move on the part of the series' makers, merely including previously visible-invisible BAME lives is not enough to allow them to come to haunt the rural in a transformative way that would account for the racist operation through which they were kept hidden.

20   As Cloke shows, 'rurality has been linked with racial purity' not on the basis of the actual absence of non-white people from the rural but on the basis of their elision from official histories (382). This has produced a perception that they do not have a place in the rural, so that when they visit or live there, they are taken to 'represent unusual intrusions into the conventional cultural norms of rural life' (Cloke 379). As the black author Andrea Levy recalls: 'I always get the feeling when I walk into a country pub that everyone is looking at me, whether they are or not. You are glowing with colour' (quoted in Cloke 379). This 'glowing with colour' marks the hypervisibility associated with the non-image of the avisual—with being unseen, through a racist visual structure, as more than a black body that cannot belong to the rural idyll. Cloke recounts how racialized others are subjected to an imperative of assimilation that seeks 'to bleach [their] cultural identity', but emphasizes that submitting to this imperative will not prevent them from encountering 'extreme and banal racisms' (385, 380). In order to ensure 'a more socially inclusive future', these racisms need to be made 'highly visible' (Cloke 380). What should be highlighted are not just BAME bodies in the rural, but the process through which they are rendered visible-invisible or avisual by the continuing reign of the rural idyll.

21   Notably, 22 of the 24 BAME characters that appeared on *Midsomer Murders* between 2011 and 2016 were in mixed-race relationships with white characters (Buckley), suggesting that BAME lives can only belong in the idyllic English village if they are bound to whiteness. In addition, the series has not featured narratives of racism; characters are killed for many reasons, but racism has not been a (possible) motive, with the significant exception of racism against travelers, whose undesirable whiteness is thematized in the 1999 episode 'Blood Will Out'. While a blogger noted of a 2012 episode featuring several British-Asian characters that 'the plot gives credit to the audience by never pandering to an idea that racism and distaste of mixed relationships could be behind any suspicions or motivations for murder',[2] in effect the inclusion of BAME characters in the rural idyll without also making visible rural racism reaffirms the view of the English countryside as a deracialized realm (Neal).

22   As Neal and Agyemon write, the biggest barrier to addressing racism in the countryside is white people's denial that it exists (5). Neal sees this 'refusal to recognize a race/rurality relationship' as predicated on 'a notion that it is the presence of black and minority ethnic populations which creates a "race problem" and therefore without

this presence the issue of race is not relevant' (448). What also plays a role is the denial of racism as a particularly violent structure of oppression that, in the rural as in the urban, has its roots in British colonial history. Instead of acknowledging this, rural racism is downplayed and separated from urban racism by subsuming it under the rural idyll's general hostility to all otherness, as happens in Anthony Horowitz's response to True-May's statement:

> The point about Midsomer Murders is that, in a village in Midsomer, all outsiders are equally unwelcome whatever their colour. If your family has lived here for 300 years, they're likely to be white. That's quite obvious. It was a foolish observation to make because colour is not an issue. (quoted in Singh)

23   The rural idyll's association with the exclusion of everything non-familiar is used here to argue that the rural is not racist but exclusionary in a color-blind, ahistorical way. As Neal notes, by claiming 'that there is a rural tradition of hostility to all outsiders . . . the processes of racism and racial hostility become no more than a centuries old, general reluctance to accept any newcomer' (456).

24   Pre-race row, *Midsomer Murders* presented the rural as a space of whiteness that extended to the urban and, by implication, the entire nation. BAME lives were rendered visible-invisible by being left out of the frame. Whereas in this period, the absence of BAME characters at least drew attention (Bergin 92), allowing them to exert a certain haunting force as an absence that was seen by some to matter, post-race row the series appears to present 'a more ethnically diverse picture of British society' (Zahlmann 471) or even a post-racial rural idyll. However, because of the lack of storylines in which their ethnicities or rural racism play a significant role, this ostensible inclusion masks the continued spectralization of BAME people in the actual English countryside. Instead of allowing a disruptive haunting by those *Midsomer Murders* had previously rendered visible-invisible that would make viewers truly *see* rural racism and its disabling effects, such a haunting was pre-empted by including BAME lives as if they had never been kept secret and seamlessly fit into the rural idyll. Because the newly introduced BAME characters are white-washed in every respect other than their appearance, the rural idyll of Midsomer does not have to wane but can remain intact as a space of whiteness.

25   That BAME lives may be included in the rural idyll in a way that does shake up the genre is clear from the 2020 re-make of the 1978–1990 television series *All Creatures Great and Small*. This series, set in Yorkshire in the 1930s, also featured no storylines involving BAME characters in its first season. In the Christmas special, however, a black woman married to a white farmer is introduced whose blackness is not disregarded but thematized as she recounts the racism she and her husband were subjected to by the local community when their relationship started. Here, the deracialized rural idyll is challenged, if only momentarily and with reference to the past (distancing rural racism from the 1930s characters and present-day viewers). A more sustained challenge to the rural idyll is mounted by the novel to which I now turn, Cynan Jones' *The Long Dry*.

The Posthuman Rural Idyll of *The Long Dry*

26   *The Long Dry* is the story of a day in the life of Welsh farmer Gareth, his wife Kate, their children Dylan and Emmy, various other characters from the community in which they live, and the animals on their farm, in particular a pregnant cow found to be missing in the early morning. Although the cow finds its way back, as Kate finds her way back to Gareth, from whom she has been estranged by a series of miscarriages— caused by chlamydia 'transferred [to Gareth] in fluids from handling the sheep' (Jones 49)—and an affair with a farmhand who may have fathered Emmy, the novel's portrayal

of the rural does not generate the sense of comfort associated with the rural idyll. While the story's setting is presented as eminently familiar to Gareth, who views himself as 'born to be on a farm' (Jones 58–59), this is not a world 'limited and sufficient onto itself' where 'a sequence of generations is localized that is potentially without limit' (Bakhtin 225). The farm has not been in Gareth's family long—it was bought by his father, who used to be a banker—and might not be Gareth's for much longer, not only because 'he knew physically that he could not farm for ever', but also because of financial strains linked to various regulations and the fact that 'the bank has globalized now' (Jones 27). Moreover, the narrative proleptically tells of Emmy's death from eating a poisonous mushroom—'Nine days from now she will start to die'—and emphasizes that Dylan 'has to want to get away from here' (Jones 69, 26). The farm, then, is far from a safe self-sufficient world and unlikely to be transferred to the next generation.

27   Gareth does hold out hope of buying more land to sell as plots for housing (the village is expanding) and of being able to 'rent out the top fields and some other land and keep the farm like an island, without having to work it at all' (Jones 27). However, the way most of the novel centers on past, present and future deaths and losses—a pregnant girl who committed suicide, Kate's miscarriages, Gareth losing a finger in a farm accident, a neighbor losing his pig herd to swine erysipelas, the botched mercy-killing of a dying rabbit, ducks being shot, a dead mole, two cows losing a calf, the family dog being put down and Emmy's impending death—marks this as cruel optimism. Even Gareth appears to realize that his plan is unlikely to be realized, as he concludes his thoughts of keeping 'the farm like an island'—which would restore the safe little world of the idyll but only in an openly artificial manner as it would lack true self-sufficiency—with a resigned 'Things are exhausted' (Jones 27). A sense of exhaustion pervades the narrative and is seen to have a paralyzing effect; at one point Gareth wonders whether 'perhaps a crisis would cure them too—would push away the tiny problems that were damaging them like splinters' and imagines that, if there was an outbreak of brucellosis in the herd 'that would be the end of it and they could start again. The exhaustion of doing the same thing every day would change' (Jones 78, 79). Gareth's anxious desire for something to end the stagnation evokes the impasse Berlant defines as 'a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things . . . and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event' (4). The rural lives portrayed in *The Long Dry* clearly no longer fit the genre of the rural idyll in its established form but have not yet found a new genre that would allow them to stop oscillating between the cruel optimism that denies the impasse and the unease that dwelling in it entails.

28   This new genre, *The Long Dry* insists, cannot be the anti-idyll in which the rural appears as 'an arena of horror' (Shirley 8). Jones's novel does not render the deaths and losses it charts as gruesome aberrations but as integral to rural life; they are described matter-of-factly, without sensationalism, and in the characters they precipitate sadness and resignation but not terror. There are also many moments of striking beauty, care and love in the novel. On the whole, *The Long Dry* highlights the conventional rural idyll's inadequacy to rural reality as well as the difficulty of letting go of its good-life fantasy, yet it also suggests that some of the idyll's elements remain pertinent to contemporary rural lives and can be built upon to make it more adequate to reality and more inclusive. Most notably, the novel affirms the idyll's 'conjoining of human life with the life of nature' (Bakhtin 226) in its indiscriminate charting of human and animal deaths, its metonymic linking of Kate's miscarriages to the two stillborn calves, and its juxtaposition of Gareth's wanderings and reflections with those of the missing cow. This positions the contemporary rural not so much as a realm in which the presence and centrality of the human is naturalized through its proximity to and cultivation of nature, as is the case in the conventional idyll, but as one in which the human and the natural are deeply intertwined.

29   As such, *The Long Dry* invokes the possibility of a new genre of the posthuman idyll that would render the rural, instead of as a human-centered safe little world where nothing unexpected can appear, as constituted by many agents engaged in an unpredictable process of what Barad calls intra-action. Intra-action, rather than presuming interaction between pre-existing bodies, 'implies that bodies are constituted in their entanglement, as fundamentally relational' (Duggan and Peeren 352). As Barad explains, '*entanglements are the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies. Naturalcultural phenomena are entanglements, the sedimented effects of a dynamics of iterative intra-activity, where intra-actions . . . cut together-apart, differentiate-entangle*' (G111, original emphasis). A passage from *The Long Dry* exemplifies this dynamics:

> The cow walked lazily up the track between two rails of blackthorn. She'd heard the vet come and go. She hadn't liked the bog, which for a long time had been full of hidebehinds, which were brought across from the lumber camps of Wisconsin, and which Gareth's father had learnt about from the American troops he served with. No matter how quickly you turned around, how hard you looked for them, these creatures always stayed behind you, so no one had ever described them. The cow had only sensed them. She was slightly demented now. She felt she should give the calf but her body wouldn't. It was a strange feeling to the cow. (Jones 85)

30   Here, the cow, the vet, the bog, the hidebehinds, the Wisconsin lumber camps, Gareth's father, the American troops stationed with him in Scotland in the Second World War and the calf the cow is carrying are 'intra-acting agencies' that—in a process of differentiation-entanglement that cuts across time and space—together bring into being a rural that is and has been globalized, and where human and non-human life forms mutually affect each other, with the lumberjacks propelling the hidebehinds across the Atlantic and the hidebehinds disturbing human and cow alike. For Barad, intra-action is a haunting process, as it carries within it what might also have been: '*matter is spectral, haunted by all im/possible wanderings, an infinite multiplicity of histories present/absent in the indeterminacy of time-being*' (G113, original emphasis). Allowing these what-might-have-beens and the what-could-be's to haunt what has momentarily sedimented as the present moment opens up possibilities for reconfiguration and consistently presses the question of what is rendered absent or unseen and by whom.

31   The way in which the cow's purported reflections are put at the same level as Gareth's by The Long Dry's intricate narrative structure—characterized by frequent, barely marked shifts in focalization that often confuse the reader as to whose experience is being conveyed—to the point of being almost seamlessly merged in the above passage (which is partly focalized by the cow and partly by Gareth remembering his father's diary mentioning his hearing about the hidebehinds) exemplifies the novel's reconfiguration of the rural idyll as posthuman. Its posthuman idyll assigns a presence that counts to those non-human life forms on and around the farm—down to the hidebehinds and the chlamydia bacteria going from the sheep to Gareth to Kate—that the conventional rural idyll as a staunchly anthropocentric genre turned into living ghosts unable to haunt.

Conclusion

32   The conventional rural idyll explicitly opposes itself to globalization in its postulation of the rural as a safe little world, which was never not a distortion of the realities of rural life but is particularly harmful in obscuring contemporary globalization's ruinous impact on the rural, while the anti-idyll's inversion renders the rural wholly unsafe yet still isolated from modernity and globalization. What is needed to counter the spectralization of the rural diagnosed by Spivak and to ensure the rural idyll's waning is a new genre adequate to the globalized rural and capable of including those lives

rendered visible-invisible (excluded from its frame or kept secret) or assigned to the avisual (actively unseen) by the rural idyll. Such inclusion, my discussion of *Midsomer Murders* has shown, cannot stop at merely making these living ghosts visible but needs to *make seen* how they have been and continue to be marginalized—only then can they come to exert a haunting force capable of inciting social change. *The Long Dry*, I have argued, thematizes the waning of the rural idyll, the unattainability of its good-life fantasy and the tendency to nonetheless hold on to this fantasy with cruel optimism, while also reconfiguring the idyll beyond anthropocentrism. Its staging of a posthuman idyll at the level of the narrative structure—accessible to the reader but not to the novel's characters, who remain stuck in Berlant's impasse—makes clear that the idyll does not necessarily need to be left behind completely, but can be reworked to become more attuned to the full spectrum of intra-active agencies that constitute the contemporary rural and its haunting by '*a plethora of virtual wanderings, alternative histories of what is/might yet be/have been*' (Barad G113, original emphasis).

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Notes

1 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slough.

2   https://goldenroomblog.wordpress.com/2012/10/01/midsomer-murders-a-sophisticated-portrayal-of-cross-cultural-relationships/.

Pour citer cet article

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