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*Extraction, Abandonment and Care*

Gupta, P.; Nuttall, S.; Peeren, E.; Stuit, H.

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PALGRAVE STUDIES IN GLOBALISATION,  
CULTURE & SOCIETY

# Planetary Hinterlands

## Extraction, Abandonment and Care

*Edited by*  
Pamila Gupta · Sarah Nuttall  
Esther Peeren · Hanneke Stuit

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Centre for Globalisation Studies

University of Amsterdam

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Esther Peeren

University of Amsterdam

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Pamila Gupta • Sarah Nuttall  
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Editors

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### *Editors*

Pamila Gupta  
University of the Free State  
Bloemfontein, South Africa

Sarah Nuttall  
University of the Witwatersrand  
Johannesburg, South Africa

Esther Peeren  
University of Amsterdam  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Hanneke Stuit  
University of Amsterdam  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands



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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Luciano Concheiro San Vicente** is researcher at the Unidad de Investigación sobre Representaciones Culturales y Sociales (UDIR) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

**Pamila Gupta** is research professor at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa, affiliated with the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies (CGAS). She has published widely on a range of topics at the intersection of South Asia and Southern African studies.

**Luregn Lenggenhager** is a researcher and lecturer at the Centre for African Studies Basel and associated researcher at the University of Namibia. He coordinated an interdisciplinary research project on the Lower !Garib region. His fields of research further include history of nature conservation, environmental history and humanities, historical geography, and borderlands in Southern Africa.

**Catherine Lord** is a scholar and Lecturer in Literature and Media Studies, with tenure at Literature and Cultural Analysis, and Media Studies, the University of Amsterdam. She specializes in environmental humanities, literature, and cinema. Her current concern is eco-psychoanalysis, and she is working on a book project about environmental mourning.

**Sindi-Leigh McBride** is a writer from Johannesburg, and a PhD candidate at the Centre for African Studies, University of Basel. Her research looks at the politics and poetics of climate change in South Africa and

Nigeria. She holds an MA in International Relations from the University of the Witwatersrand and an MA in Political Communication from the University of Cape Town, and has worked in the private and nonprofit and public sectors in South Africa.

**Giorgio Miescher** is the Carl Schlettwein Foundation Senior Lecturer and Researcher for Namibian and Southern African Studies at the Centre for African Studies in Basel. He is also an associated researcher with the University of Namibia. He has widely published on Namibian history, historical geography, and visual history. He is currently completing a book manuscript on railway infrastructure and the constitution of the South African imperial realm on the subcontinent.

**Rila Mukherjee** taught history at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and the University of Hyderabad, from where she retired in October 2022. She is the author of *India in the Indian Ocean World* (Springer Nature, 2022) and Editor-in-Chief of the Brill journal *Asian Review of World Histories*. Based in Kolkata, she travels extensively.

**Emily Ng** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Previously, she was Postdoctoral Researcher at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam. She is the author of *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao* (2020).

**Xavier Nueno Guitart** is Scientific Assistant at the Laboratory for History and Theories of Architecture, Technology and Media of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL).

**Sarah Nuttall** is a professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at WISER at Wits University in Johannesburg, South Africa. She is the author and editor of many books, and her work is widely cited across disciplines. Most recently, she is co-editor, with Charne Lavery, of *Reading from the South: African Print Cultures and Oceanic Turns in Isabel Hofmeyr's Work* and, with Isabel Hofmeyr and Charne Lavery, of *Reading for Water: Materiality and Method*.

**Tjalling Valdés Olmos** is a lecturer in the department of Literary and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). His PhD project examined the role of genre and affect in representations of the globalized US rural. Paying specific attention to the persisting legacies of settler colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, the project also engages disruptive

rural imaginations, like the queer rural, the black rural, and the indigenous rural. Olmos is affiliated with the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), and has previously taught and studied at the Ohio State University and Utrecht University.

**Marrigje Paijmans** is Assistant Professor of Dutch Literature at the University of Amsterdam. She explores the intersection of colonialism and environmental degradation in early modern texts, and its resonance in present-day culture. She has recently published on this in *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* and *Cultural History*.

**Esther Peeren** is Professor of Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam and academic director of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). Currently, she directs the ERC-funded project “Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World” (2018–2024). She is the author of, among others, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Palgrave, 2014).

**Murray Pratt** is Emeritus Professor of Contemporary Cultural and Literary Studies at the University of Amsterdam. His publications include research on text and image in English and French, and recently on Chinese speculative fiction in translation. He is currently working on representations of humans on the verge of the Anthropocene.

**Ruth Sacks** is a visual artist and academic who is a member of faculty at the University of Johannesburg’s Visual Art Department. She completed a PhD at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research (2017). Her recent exhibitions and publications focus on the postcolonial African city in the Anthropocene.

**Hanneke Stuit** is Assistant Professor of Literary and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam, with research interests in carcerality and the countryside. She is the author of *Ubuntu Strategies: Constructing Spaces of Belonging in Contemporary South African Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and co-editor of *Peripheral Visions in the Globalizing Present: Spaces, Mobilities, Aesthetics* (2016).

**Andrew van der Vlies** is a professor at the University of Adelaide, Australia, and extraordinary professor at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Books include *South African Textual Cultures* (2007), *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (2017), and, as co-editor, *South African Writing in Transition* (2019).

**Becca Voelcker** is a film historian and writer. She has published widely on feminist filmmaking, East Asian cinema, artist moving image, and films about landscapes, extractive capitalism, and social justice. She obtained her PhD at Harvard University, writing a global history of ecopolitical film.

**Jennifer Wenzel** is Professor of Postcolonial Theory and Environmental and Environmental Humanities, jointly appointed in the Department of English and Comparative Literature and the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. Her books include *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (2009) and *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (co-edited with Imre Szeman and Patricia Yaeger; 2017).

**Kate Woodward** is Lecturer in Film Studies at the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at Aberystwyth University. Among her research interests are Welsh screen fictions, landscape and film, Welsh language music videos, and cultural policy in Wales since devolution.

**Maarten Zwiers** is Senior Lecturer in American Studies and History at the University of Groningen. He is the author of *Senator James Eastland: Mississippi's Jim Crow Democrat*. His research project "Race Land: The Ecology of Segregation" received a three-year ERC grant. He specializes in rural studies and US southern studies.

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PART I

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Materialities: Extraction, Logistics



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Conceptualizing Hinterlands

*Esther Peeren, Hanneke Stuit, Sarah Nuttall,  
and Pamila Gupta*

In March 2021, the Ever Given, one of the largest container ships in the world, blocked the Suez Canal for seven days, causing severe delays in global supply chains, constituting a major disruption to China's Belt and Road Initiative, and leading to an estimated \$54 billion in trading losses (Lee and Wong 2021). This event exposed the hinterland as much more

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E. Peeren (✉)

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

e-mail: [e.peeren@uva.nl](mailto:e.peeren@uva.nl)

H. Stuit

Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam,  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

e-mail: [h.h.stuit@uva.nl](mailto:h.h.stuit@uva.nl)

S. Nuttall

WISER, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

e-mail: [sarah.nuttall@wits.ac.za](mailto:sarah.nuttall@wits.ac.za)

P. Gupta

Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State,  
Bloemfontein, South Africa

e-mail: [GuptaP@ufs.ac.za](mailto:GuptaP@ufs.ac.za)

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than it is commonly taken to be: “a mere backstage ‘ghost acreage’ that supports the putatively front-stage operations of large population centres” (Brenner 2016, 123). The Suez Canal, ever important but usually taken for granted, suddenly—hauntingly—became hypervisible in its capacity to disrupt the world economy.<sup>1</sup>

Developed by French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps and opened in 1869, the Suez Canal was, from its inception, a deeply colonial project, designed to enhance the efficacy and hence the profitability of global trade. Until its nationalization by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1956, it was operated by a concessionary company with mainly British and French shareholders. As one of the major transport nodes of the world, through which 13.5% of global trade passes (Lee and Wong 2021), it exemplifies both how “logistics maps the form of contemporary imperialism” (Cowen 2014, 8) and how this mapping often still follows colonial routes. The *Ever Given*, its name perhaps fitting to the thematics of colonialism, capitalism, and climate this volume explores in relation to hinterland thinking, in its turn embodies how global inequalities enshrined by late capitalism’s neocolonial thrust take shape in the present: the ship is owned by a Japanese company, operated by a Taiwanese shipping company, managed by a German company, and manned by a fully Indian crew (Lee and Wong 2021), the latter remaining invisible and largely unconsidered as events unfolded.

Attention was focused on the hinterland’s key role in keeping global supply chains moving by the globally mediated spectacle of the enormous ship, carrying countless containers full of consumer goods, stuck astride the Canal with a growing queue of stalled ships behind it as frantic attempts were made to refloat it (using machines made to look like toys by the scale of the *Ever Given*). Most mainstream media reports were solely concerned with the economic effects of the blockage, while some activist media explored the global shipping industry’s environmental impact and

<sup>1</sup> The importance of the Suez Canal for the global economy is underlined by Notteboom: “The global container shipping network now primarily relies on the equatorial route in which the Suez Canal is a key maritime passage. 6852 container vessels transited the Suez Canal in 2010, an increase of 46% compared to 2001. ... About 646 million tons of cargo passed via the Canal in 2010. ... Total container volumes reached an estimated 33 million TEU in 2010 compared to 20 million in 2004. Nearly 93% of these container flows are related to the Europe–Asia trade routes. North America (East Coast)–Asia trade represents about 5.3% (figures Boston Consulting and Suez Canal Authority)” (2012, 165). Notteboom also notes the Suez Canal’s “single-lane character” as an important vulnerability (2012, 175).

exploitative working conditions.<sup>2</sup> However, there was not much interest in looking closely at the specific geography of the Suez hinterland, which comprises not only the waterway itself but also the mix of rural and urban settlements bordering it. Nor did people consider how its materialities, people, and life forms would be affected by the refloating effort, which was led by the Suez Canal Authority and a Dutch salvage company, and involved the removal of “more than 20,000 tons of sand and mud” (Lee and Wong 2021, 7).<sup>3</sup> This affirms Neil Brenner and Nikos Katsikis’s assertion that, despite the hinterland’s status as a crucial support for global capitalism, “the hinterland itself has remained something of a ‘black box’” (2020, 26). In the end, even as the global capitalist system’s fundamental vulnerability to disruption in and from the hinterland was briefly exposed by the Ever Given, the successful and relatively speedy unblocking operation allowed the idea that the hinterland is meant to serve the capitalist center at any cost and, as such, needs to be looked at only *from* the presumed center through the lens of that center’s interests to persist.

## DEFINING THE HINTERLAND

This instrumentalist, outside-in view of the hinterland pervades the academic field that has most consistently engaged with it. Taking up George G. Chisholm’s use of “hinderland” as referring “to the backcountry of a port or coastal settlement” in the 1888 *Handbook of Commercial Geography*,<sup>4</sup> transport geography made the hinterland an integral part of analyses geared toward understanding how ports function and compete,

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <https://www.corpwatch.org/article/suez-canal-aftermath-time-question-environmental-and-social-impacts-our-megaship-mania> and <https://www.climatechange.news.com/2021/04/01/took-suez-canal-crisis-highlight-scale-polluting-shipping-sector/>. The degree of oil and heavy metal pollution in the Suez Canal has been documented by, among others, Abou El-Megd et al. (2020) and Sharaf and Shehata (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Niroumand-Jadidi and Bovolo (2021) show how “the blockage of the Suez Canal and subsequent dredging caused an abrupt increment (+400%) in the concentration of TSM moving north from the ship’s location.” Total Suspended Matter affects light penetration, which, in turn, can change the underwater ecosystem. Although the increment in this case was temporary, longer blockages or structural increases in dredging to prevent further blockages could have consequences for water quality and the fishing and tourism industries along the Suez Canal.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/science/hinterland>.

and how their efficiency may be increased.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, different kinds of port-hinterlands were distinguished and questions of delimitation (of where a port-hinterland ended and on what basis—geographical or functional—this should be determined) and of overlapping (of hinterlands serving multiple ports) were much-debated (Sdoukopoulos and Boile 2020). The 1960s saw the advent of containerization, which enabled “spatial de-concentration” and brought about “the transition towards network and corridor-shaped hinterlands” (Sdoukopoulos and Boile 2020, 4). The ensuing logistics revolution has meant that port-hinterlands have become more extended, more discontinuous, and more varied, and relations between ports and inland regions more complex and multi-sided. Despite this, most transport geographers still do not consider hinterlands relevant beyond the ways in which, by their definition and function, they impact port development and competition. They are not interested in doing what this volume seeks to do: thinking and looking *from* the hinterland to its landscapes, life forms, and livelihoods. What they also miss is that the port-hinterland extends not just over land but also, increasingly far and deep, into the sea. As Isabel Hofmeyr so aptly puts it in *Dockside Reading*, “port cities aim to pave the ocean and assert sovereignty over the conjuncture of land and sea” (2021, 4).

In this book, we consider the concept of the hinterland as crucial for understanding the global and planetary present as a time defined by the lasting legacies of colonialism, increasing labor precarity under late capitalist regimes, and looming climate disasters. We offer it as a lens to attend to the times and spaces shaped and experienced across the received categories of the urban, rural, wilderness, or nature, and to foreground the human and more than human lively processes that go on even in sites defined by capitalist ruin and political abandonment (Tsing 2015; Neel 2018).

But what exactly does the hinterland (derived from German *Hinterland*, “the land behind/to the back of”<sup>6</sup>) entail? The main definition of “hinterland” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, like that of Chisholm, first and foremost binds it to water but then broadens its geographical reach: “The

<sup>5</sup>Transport geography is “a sub-discipline of geography concerned about the mobility of people, freight, and information and its spatial organization. It includes attributes and constraints related to the origin, destination, extent, nature, and purpose of mobility” (Rodrigue 2020).

<sup>6</sup>For an overview of how the term was used in German from the 1840s, see Brahm and Rosenhaft (2016, 4).

district behind that lying along the coast (or along the shore of a river); the ‘back country’. Also applied spec[ifically] to the area lying behind a port, and to the fringe areas of a town or city.” That the relation between the coast, river, port, town, or city and the hinterland has never been one of mere spatial distribution on a local scale, as we implied earlier, is signaled by the quotes used to illustrate the term’s meanings and usage. These quotes, the earliest of which is from 1880, almost all evoke capitalist trade (with the hinterland providing resources, products, labor, or consumers), colonialism (with the hinterland exemplifying its appropriative and extractive reach across continents), and climate concerns (given land’s dependence on rain, sun, and water to be suitable for growing crops). The hinterland’s intimate connection to all three Cs—capitalism, colonialism, and climate—appears most plainly in a *Daily News* quote from 1891 that reads: “Lord Salisbury even recognizes ... the very modern doctrine of the Hinterland, which he expounds as meaning that ‘those who possess the coast also possess the plain which is watered by the rivers that run to the coast.’”<sup>7</sup>

Godfrey N. Uzoigwe contends that the doctrine of the hinterland not only was crucial to the late nineteenth-century Scramble for Africa, but also played an important role in the earlier colonization of North America in the form of the “principle of contiguity or continuity or ‘manifest destiny’” (1976, 194). He emphasizes the indefiniteness of the hinterland’s scope, which meant that whole swathes of the African continent could be claimed as the hinterland of a single port settlement. Similarly, Louisiana’s hinterland was taken to extend as far as Oregon. All solutions proposed during and after the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference to the problem of competing colonial powers claiming the same areas as *their* hinterland proved ineffective. This underlines how the hinterland was not in fact limited by the reach of a river’s fertilizing waters and thus not at all a “‘natural’ sphere of interest” (Brahm and Rosenhaft 2016, 5). In theory, it could be stretched out to match colonialism’s boundless greed; in practice, in an era of fierce colonial competition, it almost always needed to be inscribed on the land and its multiple life forms through “effective occupation” (Uzoigwe 1976, 196).

<sup>7</sup> As Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury (1830–1903) pursued British colonial expansion during the initial phase of the Scramble for Africa (1881–1914).

## COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL HINTERLANDS

The demarcation of the hinterland was a bone of colonial contention between Britain and Germany especially. Matthew Unangst describes how, originally, the hinterland doctrine held that a colonizer's "territory should extend into the interior of the continent along the same lines of latitude or longitude as its coastal possessions" up to where a natural border was encountered (2022, 496). Upon this view, propagated by the English jurist Travers Twiss, the interior was regarded as *terra nullius* or empty land that could be claimed before it was explored or even laid eyes on. As a new colonial power, Germany challenged this physical delineation of the hinterland and sought instead to circumscribe it based on the inland reach of economic and military activity, which would limit the territory of more established colonizers like Britain and invalidate claims to sovereignty by African rulers lacking (extensive) coastal possessions.

This new definition of the hinterland, which allowed colonial powers to "justify territorial expansion as merely turning an existing economic region into a political one" (Unangst 2022, 508) won out and more generally shaped not just the colonial but also the postcolonial world order. As Unangst explains, the economic hinterland was taken up in the late twentieth century by newly independent nations to assert themselves as an alternative geopolitical force. At the 1970 meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Lusaka, "a union of the 'littoral and hinterland States of the Indian Ocean'" was established, linking Africa and Asia across the ocean as a "cosmopolitan space pre-dating European expansion" capable of challenging Portuguese and British control over these waterways (Unangst 2022, 497, 498). That this union, despite defining hinterlands as "States whose main access to the sea is the Indian Ocean," included China, which has no such access, makes clear that the hinterland easily lends itself to political uses (of various kinds, including colonial, postcolonial, capitalist, and communist) by laying equal claim to spaces of both land and water on the basis of ambiguous, shifting principles that allow these spaces to be strategically expanded and constricted (Unangst 2022, 512).

In other cases, wherein the concept of the hinterland is invoked in an indistinct manner, bordering on the metaphorical, crucial aspects of particular hinterlands and their politics can become invisible, and the hinterland may end up too tightly bound to particular geographies. This is the case in Gerhard Ens's *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of*

*the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century*. The book's main title seeks to express how the 1870 Manitoba Act led the Metis—people of mixed Indigenous and European descent whose involvement in the fur trade made them part of “the world of European mercantile capitalism” (Ens 1996, 5)—to no longer consider the Red River area (now part of Canada) as their homeland. Forced to return to subsistence agriculture after losing their “occupational niche in the fur trade,” the Metis, according to Ens, found themselves facing failed harvests and high mortality rates, leading many to move elsewhere (1996, 175).

Ens uses “hinterland” only in the title of his book and that of one of its chapters. The term is never defined but rather suggested to denote the falling fortunes of the Metis. This brings about a twofold obfuscation. First, it clouds how the Metis “homeland” was already a colonial hinterland, initially expropriated from Indigenous peoples by the Hudson's Bay Company. Second, it obscures how the Manitoba Act consolidated this hinterland status by facilitating “the rapid influx of Canadian settlers” from Ontario and “the introduction of large-scale commercial agriculture to the West” (Ens 1996, 175, 158). Thus, while the position of the Metis did indeed change significantly after 1870, this change occurred *within* a persisting hinterland: for the Metis, from a hinterland experienced as a homeland, Red River became a hinterland of abandonment. In other words, hinterlands and homelands always hold within them complex relations. This is obfuscated when Ens links the hinterland to the “re-pastoralization” of the Metis after a period of “proto-industrialization” that folded them into the capitalist world market, thus placing it outside or before colonialism, capitalism, and climate change (1996, 173). What his own research clearly shows, however, is that the dispossession of the Metis after the Manitoba Act was in fact due to the *intensification* of capitalism-colonialism in the Red River area that the Act facilitated. In this volume, Luregn Lenggenhager and Giorgio Miescher discuss the Lower Orange River/!Garib area that straddles the border between South Africa and Namibia, between the eighteenth century and the present, as variously experienced as central and peripheral in relation to multiple, shifting centers, while Rila Mukherjee traces the changing contours and cultures of the far and near hinterlands of Kolkata, during and after colonialism. As such, these contributions underline the need to specify in what way(s) and for whom a certain area is or was a hinterland, and of what kind.



## CONTEMPORARY HINTERLANDS

In relation to contemporary hinterlands, too, it is important to carefully parse their specific characteristics, functions, and potentialities, and to recognize both what links them to historical hinterlands and what sets them apart. Most insistently, contemporary hinterlands seem to materialize as increasingly widespread and densely layered “sacrifice zones” for capital (Brenner and Katsikis 2020, 28) and of the climatic, with clear (neo)colonial overtones. The ever more generalized system of extractivism that characterizes today’s global capitalism operates through “imperial networks (or platforms)” that “not only *link* already-existing spaces of poverty and richness; they also *create* new spaces or instances of poverty” (Ye et al. 2020, 164–165, emphasis in original). In other words, these networks, which comprise industries like mining and intensive agriculture, but also logistical infrastructures crucial to sustaining and speeding up global trade including data farms, distribution centers, and waste processing plants, produce further hinterlands to be exploited and, upon exhaustion, abandoned in a state of “barrenness” (Ye et al. 2020, 157).

In their 2020 article “Operational Landscapes: Hinterlands of the Capitalocene,” Brenner and Katsikis point out that 70% of the earth’s surface is now “used area” and that hinterlands should therefore be taken far more seriously in thinking about “the contemporary urban problematique” (2020, 24). For us, truly taking hinterlands seriously means contesting the urban bias that pervades much of even the most innovative work on hinterlands. Brenner and Katsikis themselves, for instance, tellingly restrict the hinterland to “the diverse non-city landscapes that support urban life” (2020, 24).<sup>8</sup> As Eugene Van Cleef already made clear in his 1941 article “Hinterland and Umland,” the trade center served by a hinterland does not have to be a city or town, but can also be a village (1941, 308). Looking to present-day hinterlands, moreover, Phil A. Neel (2018) stresses that they may very well be found in or near cities: protracted industrial areas, slums, sprawl, and rust belts full of ghost towns proliferate across urban, rural, and wilderness spaces. What contemporary hinterlands support, then, is less an exclusively urban life than a form of globalization that includes what both Neel and Monika Krause (2013)

<sup>8</sup> See also the collection *The City’s Hinterland: Dynamism and Divergence in Europe’s Peri-Urban Territories* (Hoggart 2016), which makes the urban bias explicit in its title.

have termed *ruralization*, where the hinterland does not peripherally serve as a “metabolic input” for a given city (Brenner and Katsikis 2020, 25) but functions as a central process in its own right. Neel, referring to “places like northern Wisconsin—once imagined to be a great industrial complex, now reduced to an essentially rural existence” (2018, 112), links ruralization to extreme decline, in a way that resonates with Ens’s description of the Metis’s journey from homeland to hinterland as a regressive one from proto-industrialization to re-pastoralization. Krause, however, recognizes ruralization as a potentially (re)generative force, for example, in the form of urban farming—discussed in this volume as an ambiguous hinterland practice by Ruth Sacks (in relation to a community project in Johannesburg) and Becca Voelcker (in Agnes Denes’s 1982 artwork *Wheatfield*, which saw a field of wheat grown in central Manhattan, New York City).

As we indicated earlier, such processes of ruralization remain largely invisible in discussions of the hinterland. Despite wanting to challenge the “urban-age metanarrative,” Brenner, for instance, ends up making the rural disappear altogether in his proposal for “an urban theory *without an outside*” (2016, 120, 124, emphasis in original). He also maintains a rigid distinction between *hinterlands*, defined as “historically inherited [spaces] in which various ‘free gifts’ of nature embedded in the land (materials, energy, labour, food, water) are appropriated to produce primary commodities,” and *operational landscapes* “consolidated through the active production of colossal urban-industrial spatial configurations that have been reflexively designed to accelerate and intensify the accumulation of capital on the world market” (Brenner 2016, 125–126). We instead argue that the two cannot be so easily distinguished and that a new conceptualization of the hinterland is needed that allows for rural and urban realms—and the processes of urbanization and ruralization unfolding across them—to be theorized as entangled (Nuttall 2009), as emergent in their difference from a dynamic process of intra-action (Barad 2007). In doing so, we emphasize the continuities between the hinterlands inherited from the (colonial) past and the operational landscapes of today by calling both hinterlands, as for the cases of South Africa’s fading ostrich industry and border-crossing energy companies described in, respectively, Pamila Gupta’s and Sindy-Leigh McBride’s chapters.

LOOKING *FROM* THE HINTERLAND

There are critical perspectives that recognize the importance of looking *from* the hinterland and reading *for* the affectivities of the hinterland, both those associated with the destructive demands that Anthropogenic capitalism-colonialism places on it and those afforded by the hinterland despite and in excess of these demands. Such perspectives examine the contemporary hinterland's historical intertwinement with warfare and imperialism, as well as the dispossessing effects on the hinterland of the way contemporary logistics "suture[es] a form of calculative reason premised on system-wide optimization to the reconfiguration of physical and social landscapes" by means of a "universalizing logic of rational flow" (Chua et al. 2018, 618, 617; see also Tsing 2009, Cowen 2014, and Danyluk 2018). Moreover, they recognize that this flow, even if carefully calibrated and securitized, remains susceptible to interruptions, both accidental, like the Suez Canal blockage, and deliberate, like the strikes, protests, and forms of sabotage that have unfolded in hinterlands across the world, including around the newly planned Mexico City airport, as explored in this volume by Luciano Concheiro San Vicente and Xavier Nueno Guitart. Such interruptions mark hinterlands as "sites of vulnerability and potential emancipation" (Chua et al. 2018, 623), where reclamations may—literally—gain ground.

The individual chapters of the book seek to map where contemporary hinterlands are located, how and by whom they are contested, and how they challenge rusted notions of the urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness as easily distinguishable both geographically and in terms of the functions they are assigned by colonialism, capitalism, and climatic conditions. While interventions like Neel's *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (2018) and Milica Topalović, Martin Knüsel, Marcel Jäggi, and Stefani Krautzig's *Architecture of Territory—Hinterland: Singapore, Johor, Riau* (2013) have been crucial to our own thinking, they have also tended to concentrate on hinterlands in a single defined regional context. What we offer is a multi-sited and multifaceted engagement where new light is shed on the escalation of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) into a regime of brutality that, across divergent spaces, functions as "a vast enterprise of occupation of territories, capture of bodies and imaginaries, disassembly, disconnection and demolition" (Mbembe 2020, 14,

our translation<sup>9</sup>). An important recent consideration by Jennifer Wenzel has recognized the hinterland as a prime terrain for brutalist experimentation where “waste lands are transformed into wasted lands and wasted lives—lands and lives *laid waste*” (2019, 142).<sup>10</sup> In our book, building on this, a conceptual architecture of the present is made visible by thinking together hinterlands across the Global North and South—and hinterlands that traverse social spaces, cultural imaginations, and more-than-human worlds—from a range of theoretical and (inter)disciplinary perspectives across the humanities and social sciences.

Our central premise is that in order to understand how hinterlands, while functioning as sites for brutalist experimentation and active laying waste (sometimes quite literally, as in the case of the plastic waste industry in Chinese hinterlands examined by Emily Ng), are also characterized by survival, endurance, refusal, fugitivity, and even resistance, the conceptual, aesthetic, and affective registers and forms in which hinterlands are generally conceived need to be reworked. An important starting point for this theoretical and cultural work lies in recognizing how the hinterland’s meaning as denoting any space—whether figurative or literal—“lying beyond what is visible or known” (OED) tends to overwrite the hinterland with the assumption that it is unmapped, backward, and therefore not worth knowing about, or safely beyond the reach of even surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Taking our cue from Wenzel’s abovementioned work on the role of the cultural imaginary in how climate change is thought and attended to emotionally, we ask how the hinterland has “*become* unimaginable, beyond the capacity to be imagined” except in very restricted ways: “What representational processes, through which images are framed and stories get told, shape and limit the capacity to imagine” the hinterland (Wenzel 2019, 18, emphasis in original)?

Perhaps the most important limit on the capacity to imagine the hinterland in all its facets is the idea of the hinterland as an untouched “back country” that is assumed to wholly feature traditional rural ways of life. In Ens’s study, this idea appears as a projection negatively associated with regression, but it is more widespread in a positively valued form that is

<sup>9</sup> French original: “Une vaste entreprise d’occupation de territoires, d’emprise sur les corps et les imaginaires, de désassemblage, de déliaison et de démolition.”

<sup>10</sup> Wenzel’s definition of wastelands as “the original raw material of capitalism and colonialism awaiting transformation into arable, cultivated, revenue-producing land” (2019, 142) identifies them as what this volume calls hinterlands.

akin to the rural idyll, where the hinterland promises an escape from the pressures of globalization. A characteristic example is Gestalten's 2016 coffee-table book *The Hinterland: Cabins, Love Shacks and Other Hide-Outs*, which, according to the publisher's cover blurb, "explores architecture and design approaches to creating the refuges that refresh and revitalize amidst the beauty of nature." The hinterland as sanctuary also surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw many in the Global North, at least initially, exchange cities for places such as "Croatia's hinterland," which were perceived as safer, as offering refuge from contagion and contamination.<sup>11</sup>

Like the material and ideological risk of idyllic renditions geared toward offering urban audiences escapist fantasies (Peeren 2018), there is also a clear risk in the idealization of the hinterland's material, discursive, and social ruination (Stoler 2013). Certain genres like the gothic lend themselves to bringing out the ways in which landscapes in "the hinterland remember death," especially in relation to the plights of first nation people under settler colonial regimes (Blackadder quoted in Doolan 2022; see also Doolan 2019). However, when such genres overly romanticize abandonment and decay in the hinterland, they can run the risk of glorifying what is actually a structural setting of imperial ruination (Stoler 2013). Kate Woodward's contribution to this volume, in taking up the drowned hinterland of Capel Celyn in Wales, makes clear that gothic elements can encourage the remembrance of the (socially) dead of the past and reconfigure nationalist imaginaries in ways that are more inclusive, generative, and globalized. In turn, Catherine Lord's reading of Patrick Keiller's experimental film *Robinson in Ruins* shows how a biophilia that refuses to indulge in nostalgia but seeks to re-operationalize anti-capitalist rebellions from the past in the present may be conjured in the hinterland by infrastructural markers and life forms like lichens that are not generally deemed aesthetically appealing.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.dw.com/en/croatias-hinterland-a-dream-destination-in-the-pandemic/av-59130581>. Of course, as the pandemic progressed it became clear that hinterlands were not immune to the virus and harbored population concentrations (in, e.g., prisons and meat processing plants) particularly prone to spreading it while lacking health services and especially intensive care beds. In addition, the origins of Covid-19 are likely to lie precisely in the "sources of capital and economic geographies" that are part of China's so-called hinterlands (Wallace 2020, 79).

## PART I—MATERIALITIES: EXTRACTION, LOGISTICS

As a counterpoint to the flattening out of the hinterland's multivalent material and affective charge by idealizing or romanticizing imaginations, we highlight, especially in the first part of this volume, how, from the nineteenth century to the present, what has primarily characterized the hinterland is precisely its function as a catalyst for the global spread of the capitalist-colonialist-climatic assemblage.<sup>12</sup> The continuing expansion of this assemblage means that the hinterland can encompass areas belonging to and running across vastly different geographical and conceptual typologies inclusive of the urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness, and of multi-species co-habitation. Breaking free of the rigid boundaries often put between these categories, we emphasize how hinterlands may, in fact, be situated on land, water or ice, during sun, rain or wind, and warm or cold temperatures, in the air, or even in outer space. That the hinterland underwrites and *sustains* the capitalist-colonialist-climatic assemblage, moreover, indicates that it should be considered as central rather than peripheral to this system and can in no way be considered as separate, as an outside where one can retreat from global modernity.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Arguably, this role of the hinterland goes back as far as the formation of the early Mesopotamian states in the Tigris-Euphrates region from roughly 3100 BCE. In *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017), James C. Scott engages the hinterland (a term he only uses once) through the notion of “the barbarian zone,” where “barbarian” is a tongue-in-cheek way to highlight the ecological and cultural diversity and complexity that existed outside the “agro-ecology of the State” (33). Whereas the State is structured by the confines of the domus complex, where people crowd together within enclosures and work on monotonous tasks “strapped [...] to the metronome of a major cereal grain” (20), the barbarian zone features “hunting, slash-and-burn cultivation, shellfish collection, foraging, pastoralism, roots and tubers, and few if any standing crops. It is a zone of physical mobility, mixed and shifting subsistence strategies: in a word ‘illegible’ production” (33). The contrast, as Scott himself admits, is exaggerated and tends to romanticize pre-pastoral communities, but we find it nonetheless helpful for thinking the ecological specificity and agency of the hinterland in a dynamics of state regulation and economic regimentation.

<sup>13</sup>The hinterland, then, is not equivalent to the periphery of world systems theory. Whereas “the periphery is the backwater of the world system” (Klak 2013, 101), a zone of exploitation “in which are concentrated low-profit, low-technology, low-wage, less diversified production” (Wallerstein 1976, 462), and from which surplus value flows unidirectionally to the core, hinterlands “may take an active part in global relations” (Epple quoted in Brahm and Rosenhaft 2016, 5). Hinterlands may be located in what for world systems theory are core countries and are increasingly likely to feature high-tech and high-wage jobs (for example in the offshore oil industry, but also in agribusiness).

Part I focuses on how past and present hinterlands may be designated for but should not be taken as fully exhausted by processes of extraction and the logistics revolution. In the opening chapter, Emily Ng discusses Wang Jiuliang's 2016 documentary film *Plastic China*, which follows two families working in a small-scale plastic processing factory in Shandong province in north-east China. Viewers travel with the incoming plastic waste (mostly from Western countries) from ship to port to a small processing factory in the hinterland. In Chinese, hinterland is "belly land," Ng tells us, connoting "not only a storage space but also themes of digestion, the vulnerability of the viscera and an inner centrality." The chapter reflects on how, in the official cut of the film, "ecocritical momentum" is produced through an aesthetics of the "toxic sublime," yet Ng also comments on what is deemed an "undigested scene" within a "global capitalist metabolic system": in the hinterland of the recycling factory, the way the camera frames children playing in mounds of toxic waste plays up to the notion of the white western savior and risks "reproducing developmentalist-humanitarian chronotopes, geontological divides, and Sinophobic tropes." An alternative cut of the film, Ng contends, makes clear that this hinterland, and the lives lived within it, can be read through other, more enabling affective and political registers.

Like Ng, Becca Voelcker focuses on an artwork that has been received as a critique of capitalism's reliance on extractive hinterlands. She takes as her focal point the spectral *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, produced by artist Agnes Denes in the year 1982, when she and a team of agriculturalists planted and harvested two acres of wheat in a then landfill (now Battery Park) adjacent to Manhattan's Wall Street over a four-month period. The work has been consistently celebrated as "environmentalist" by Denes and art critics alike, both then and now, some 40 years later. Yet, as an artwork it contains the seeds of its own ambivalence, asserts Voelcker. As bringing a hinterland into the "citadel" of New York City (Denes's word), it works not only as a confrontation, exposing the metropole for all its extractive imperialism, but also as a "pleasure" (Voelcker's word) in that the wheatfield's pastoral beauty possibly bolsters the very patriarchal capitalism that it purports to expose, including essentialist notions of nature and femininity. Voelcker's ecofeminist study is guided by hinterland diagramming, as enabling a looking at the artwork's behind-the-scenes production. In this way, she arrives at a more careful assessment of the artwork, taking in both *Wheatfield's* achievements in exposing the hinterland as *of the city*, essential

to its functioning, and its complicities in affirming the hinterland as a classed and gendered escape from the metropole.

Not only can hinterland materialities be invested with multiple, contrasting meanings and affects, as Ng and Voelcker make clear, they are also subject to constant change as a result of ever-new extractive processes, developments in global capitalism (from the logistics revolution to financialization), and advancing climate change. A river acting as a dividing line between Namibia and South Africa becomes the focal point for connecting and complicating hinterlands in a chapter by Luregn Lenggenhager and Giorgio Miescher. The Lower Orange River (or Lower !Garib) region has been the site of marginalization, extraction, and displacement (of the Khoi and San specifically) over the *longue durée* of colonialism (both British and German), apartheid, and postcolonial governmentalities. The river's layered history of occupation is one of alternating remoteness and centrality as it featured agricultural small farming, settler-owned farmland of game and livestock, a hardened colonial border, a strategic military base, commercial sheep and irrigation farming, a diamond deposit and industrial mining, and, finally, annexed territory. Showing the Lower Orange River to be a simultaneous space of inclusion and exclusion with characteristics of both center and periphery, the authors map out a nuanced historical geography of the Southern African region from the perspective of its riverine past, present, and future.

Hinterlands are becoming "increasingly unstable" as land reclaims the sea for development purposes and becomes ever more "amphibious," Rila Mukherjee argues in her contribution. Kolkota, once a port city, is now a megacity with 15 million people. Parts of the Sundarbans mangrove swamps and many islands have become part of Kolkota's municipalities. The "up" and "down" islands of the Sundarbans are its near and far hinterlands, featuring different ecologies and infrastructures, but also distinct forms of religious syncretism, as the "up" islands become more intimately connected to the urban center, while the "down" islands are more and more abandoned. The management and transformation of Calcutta in the nineteenth century into a "concrete space" is, moreover, increasingly challenged by massive cyclones, storm surges, and extreme flooding, also written about by Amitav Ghosh. Mukherjee describes the impact on especially the far hinterlands of Kolkota of the sweeping away of land bridges and other infrastructures of connection thus: "as the far hinterland's economy sinks into obscurity, and as embankments collapse time and again, its people will live as they have always done, with ever present danger."



Luciano Concheiro San Vicente and Xavier Nueno Guitart take up this concern for how turning hinterlands into logistics spaces affects hinterland communities in their discussion of the construction of a new airport for Mexico City in the lakebed of Texcoco, for which planning began in the early 2000s. The idea was to build the airport on reclaimed land and thus to expand the city into its wet hinterlands. The airport construction was meant to invent a new kind of (dried-out) hinterland which would also be an “architectural emblem of global Mexico,” the authors argue. But this “global Mexico” was to stand on muddy and unstable ground. When communities who lived on the land contested the construction vigorously, it was decided to build the Texcoco Ecological Park instead. What locals consistently argued was needed, however, was neither an airport nor a park, but a lake. The chapter asks: if the accumulation of wealth generates dispossession in the hinterlands, how do the hinterlands push back? Not just local communities but the lakebed itself, and thus the reclaimed land, is shown to resist rapid appropriation by economic interests.

Historic and enduring hinterlands of colonial forestry and extractive mining industries (of gold and diamonds) in the Cape Colony of South Africa lie at the heart of the chapter by Sindy-Leigh McBride, which closes the first part of the volume. Here, the magisterial yet oxidized statue of Cecil Rhodes that stands today in the Company Gardens in Cape Town becomes a starting point to expose the twining of colonialism and climate always and the broken afterlives of imperial dreaming in South Africa today. The metaphorical and material hinterland are mutually reinforced in the body of this chapter: the first half reflects on the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference held in Glasgow during the month of November 2021 to expose the hypocrisy of fossil fuel corporations thinking with Anthropogenic social responsibility; as both bankrollers of climate-concern conferences and drivers of climate change, they engage in a form of greenwashing that renders the destruction and abandonment of hinterlands invisible. The second half of the chapter focuses on how coal-fire power production is creating new hinterlands destined for barrenness by way of a case study of two South African energy companies (Sasol and Eskom) in operation today across Southern Africa. In the end, McBride asserts, the colonial dream to control climate gestured by the Rhodes statue stands as an ongoing hermeneutic injustice reliant on the notion that hinterlands are there to lay waste to and blind to the fact that this laying waste will ultimately also ruin the center.

## PART II—AFFECTIVITIES: ABANDONMENT, DREAMING

In the second part of this book, the entangled materialities that make up contemporary hinterlands—their molecular substances, infrastructures, and their human, animal, and vegetative bodies—are linked to affectivities. One way to do this is by taking recourse to what anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, in her study of West Virginia’s coal-mining hinterland, refers to as “the space on the side of the road,” which “emerges in imagination when ‘things happen’ to interrupt the expected and naturalized, and people find themselves surrounded by a place and caught in a haunting doubled epistemology of being in the midst of things and impacted by them and yet making something of things” (1996, 4). Focusing on this space moves the concept of the hinterland beyond the analysis of situations of discursive, economic, material, and political disavowal that utilize either an existing or fabricated spatial remove to effect a demarcation of certain places from what counts as civilization. Rather, this section of the book asks “what happens if we approach worlds not as the dead or reeling effects of distant systems, but as lived affects with tempos, sensory knowledges, orientations, transmutations, habits, rogue force fields...?” (Stewart 2011, 446). The lived affects that circulate in the hinterland worlds discussed in the chapters in this section range from desperation, exhaustion, indignation, and hatred to defiance, hope, and joy. This indicates that, despite its assigned function as a realm of extraction, a wasteland to be wasted, the hinterland is capable of exceeding (if never fully escaping) its instrumentalization by the capitalist-colonialist-climatic assemblage. At the same time, the chapters in this part show that the politics circulated through the affective economies of the hinterland range widely and are not guaranteed to be progressive or without their own blind spots.

Pamila Gupta explores “hinterland thinking” in relation to the small town and the township in South Africa, as refracted through Rob Nixon’s *Dreambirds* (1999) and Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009), both memoirs and fragments of political becoming via visual, sensorial, and sonic recollections of childhood. Hinterland as an act of writing, a “contiguous folding” of the material and the metaphorical not so easily demarcated into rural and urban, is also explored here, as is the idea that each memoir may be the hinterland of the other. Places like Oudtshoorn, which Nixon writes about, are spaces of “pivot globalizations,” in Gupta’s term, home to fleeting industries such as ostrich farming and to fleeing migrants, as well as imaginative oases linking to bigger worlds. As Nixon writes:

“South Africa’s hinterland abounded in such towns.” These are stories “of extraction and dreaming both,” Gupta elaborates. Dlamini’s Katlehong, a township that was poor but not poor in life, is read for its sociability, its connectedness to elsewhere, its informality, and its radio stations. It is in these registers that Dlamini parses this hinterland’s geographical adjacency to the big city as productive of enabling affects, dreams, and political and writerly consciousness.

The swampy hinterlands of Louisiana are where Maarten Zwiars locates his chapter. The Deep South is shown to be a neglected site for looking at the rootedness of larger American political machinations, one where wetlands and authoritarian politics come together through a connected history of white supremacy with oil drilling. One early twentieth-century masculinist figure stands out: plantation family man, segregationist strongman, and rightwing political campaigner Leander “Judge” Perez, who was in control of Plaquemines Parish, a site of oil and natural gas extraction. He managed to keep this “watery empire afloat” (Zwiars’s words) over a long political career that spanned 40 years (1920s–1960s), to the detriment of this bayou’s natural environment and inhabitants, both human and non-human. Although the wetlands were also a site of refuge, for runaway slaves and, later, the Underground Right to Vote Movement and Black fishermen, the idea of a marshland given to extraction twined with corrupt and racialized politics remained dominant. It eventually traveled North to become the blueprint for the now infamous Republican jingoist cry of “drain the swamp” that heralded Republican Donald Trump’s presidential bid in 2016. Here, the hinterland, turned toxic by economic and political machinations, functions, materially and affectively, as a harbinger of things to come—environmental disaster and far-right populist insurrection.

Tjalling Valdés Olmos reflects on ways of responding to capitalist ruination and abandonment in the far hinterlands of the American West via a reading of Neel’s *Hinterland* and Chloe Zhao’s 2020 film *Nomadland*. If Neel tends to rely on modes of resistance such as riots, rebellion, or class war, as well as on binaries of far and near which reify the rural-urban binary and privilege the more recognizable modes of resistance of the peri-urban, Valdés Olmos suggests that *Nomadland* portrays more ambivalent forms of resistance—and repetition—that draw upon affective sensoria and economies. Neel, he argues, “vacates the far hinterland politically,” at least for the left, but if one turns to the interruptions and “glitches” that Lauren Berlant identifies, one can read Zhao’s film as interrupting the

frontier narratives of the classic Western. While referencing this genre's tropes, the film also questions the capitalist, heteronormative, and settler colonialist fantasies it conjures, Valdés Olmos argues. And yet, ultimately, *Nomadland* does repeat the ideals of rugged individuality and "strenuous subjectivity" this terrain offers to white people, here a woman, Fern. Black and Indigenous modes of communal survival, world-making, and resistance in this hinterland, which rely on very different imaginations of its materialities and affective affordances, thus remain invisible to the film's purpose.

If hinterlands are often read for stasis and political impasse, then we can re-evaluate these assumptions via the fiction of South African-born writers Alex La Guma and Zoë Wicomb, Andrew van der Vlies suggests. Both writers create protagonists who find in the hinterlands, particularly far ones, latent "energies of revolt" that can be turned into forms of active resistance to the apartheid status quo, personal and collective. In La Guma's *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, the urban-peripheral spaces or near hinterlands of Cape Town are sites of apathy, while the novel's ending and dedication, in Van der Vlies's words, propose "a revalorization of the hinterland not as sleepy rural station-sidings ... but sites of future resistance ... and political (and personal) actualization." Similarly, he argues, Wicomb's female protagonist in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) finds in the "far fringes of the far hinterland" a connection with place that is "neither circumscribed by nor has its significance prescribed by" apartheid or whiteness. In fact, the latter carries the potential for her to become a writer, including via the materiality of the hinterland—the fynbos and proteas of the Gifberge—itself. Van der Vlies thus urges that we consider the reanimating energies to be glimpsed in or behind the "stasis" so often foregrounded in depleted hinterlands and overly economic readings, in order to revalorize this stasis as potential.

The disruptive local, national, and transnational ghosts emerging from a "lost" hinterland, in the form of a village that was purposely submerged under water to make way for a reservoir, are the focus of Kate Woodward's chapter. She looks at how three recent filmic and televisual representations of the 1965 flooding of Capel Celyn in Wales portray it as a hydropolitical event that remains in the Welsh consciousness. Despite mass objections at the time, the Tryweryn River was dammed, flooding the small village and its surrounding farmland to produce a reservoir to service nearby Liverpool and the Wirral. This patterned act of flooding in (colonial) Wales was equally one of displacement and destruction, affecting 48 people, 12

houses and farms, the post office, the school, a chapel, and a cemetery. That this drenched village was one of the last Welsh-speaking areas in Wales is the reason that its cultural memory and landscape as a national icon endures and is powerfully etched in art, music, literature, television, and film. The fate of Capel Celyn showcases how a sodden and mythic Wales functions as a hinterland in the larger geography of the United Kingdom—alongside Patagonia in Argentina, where Welsh nineteenth-century migrants were sent on the promise of a new homeland, thus becoming colonizers themselves (as explored in one of the filmic representations under discussion). While the sacrifice of this peripheralized agricultural village to ensure the smooth flow of water to urban settlements could not be stopped at the time, the television series and films, in Woodward's reading, envision the material and emotional disruption it caused as pressing upon the present in the form of water-born ghosts that refuse to let the interconnected "drowned postcolonial haunted hinterlands" of Wales and Argentina be forgotten.

The potential for cultural imaginaries to use particular aesthetic and affective registers to draw attention to forgotten histories of not just hinterland losses but also hinterland rebellions, and to envision new hinterland futures, is also addressed by Catherine Lord. She looks closely at an experimental political film that centers on a radical main character named Robinson (after Defoe's famous protagonist), who fights against capitalist extraction in London's hinterland at the time of the global financial crisis of 2008. Patrick Keiller's wondrous *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) is read for its portrayal of still very active British post-industrial wastelands, including cement mines, ruined churches, and sixteenth-century country estates such as that of Hampton Gay, with its history of worker rebellion. What also appears in this filmic far hinterland, lingered upon by the camera for minutes at the time, are lichens, flowers, fences, and government gas markers (GPSS). Often overlooked as they "hide in plain sight," they mark the hinterland, Lord argues, as a place where organic and non-organic matter works in symbiosis with humans (including displaced agricultural workers, the underpaid, and the poor) and the land itself (in particular, resilient lichens and flourishing flowers). Keiller's hinterlands are, on the one hand, places of derelict ruins, abandoned military bases, class oppression, and accelerating global warming. On the other, they are sites of wildness, of potentiality to dismantle late capitalism and forge a socialist community agenda that involves building eco-homes and a commons under public ownership. Cinematic biophilia as an affective modus

operandi is achieved through the attention drawn by the wandering character of Robinson—a cameraman, landscape photographer, and stand-in for Keiller, the filmmaker—to the sightly and unsightly elements that symbiotically give form to the hinterland and that suggest ways of life beyond capitalist enclosure.

### PART III—ECOLOGIES: CARE, TRANSFORMATION

The chapters in the third and final part of the book point to the alternative ways of living together and new forms of care, including for non-human life forms and the planet, that may if not altogether flourish then at least persist or be imagined as persisting in hinterlands, literally by the road, to recall Stewart, or in other unlikely, seemingly inhospitable places, as well as under trying conditions of drought, flooding, raging winds, or pestilence. Such ways of living need not be progressive, as Part II also demonstrates. The fragile, tentative forms of care, for self and others, located in the hinterland often emerge from strategic mobilizations of the tension between the hinterland's status as an accessible space harboring resources whose availability for exploitation is taken for granted and its association with that which lies beyond what is visible or known. This part also emphasizes how hinterland ecologies are lived differently by their human, animal, vegetal, mineral, and other (including cyborg) constituents and how these differences may offer terrains, however fragile, for imagining hinterlands beyond the capitalist-colonialist-climatic assemblage.

Hinterland ecologies are not necessarily landbound, Esther Peeren shows, in her analysis of Ben Smith's 2019 novel *Doggerland*. The story is set on a deteriorating windfarm on the North Sea, maintained by a "boy" and an "old man" in a dystopian future where both capitalism and climate are depleted. Besides setting the hinterland literally at sea, the novel also identifies it as a desolate "milieu that leaves its human inhabitants reduced to necessary but interchangeable labor, affectively at sea," Peeren writes. Animal life does not fare any better, as no birds or fish remain in this "faltering" logistics space. Yet, there are fissures in the "capitalist-colonialist net" that allow the men to care for each other and find beauty in the polluted sea and that cause certain species (jellyfish) to thrive. In addition, by invoking water's "endurance through deep time" the novel seeks to "summon a beyond-the-hinterland," a future after capitalism-colonialism and after the human. Here, though, Peeren argues, the novel's vision of water's resilience risks "underplaying the hinterland's destructive force," for

water, at the molecular level, “does not persist unaffected by the hinterland at sea.”

Sarah Nuttall re-reads J. M. Coetzee’s novel *The Life and Times of Michael K* for its conditions of pluviality (rain that causes flooding) and dryness, showing how they are crucial to the novel’s registers of extraction, abandonment, and care in its looped hinterlands from the port city of Cape Town to the uplands of the Karoo. In the near and far hinterlands, Michael K is an exposed and largely abandoned subject reduced to the labor he can provide. Yet the novel explores, too, the possibility of living outside (or, in a more complex vein, within) these hinterland regimes—beyond the terms of “camp life” in a “time of war.” Crucial to the undoing of the terms of K’s multiple confinements as a raced, classed, and disabled subject, however, are questions of water, wetness, and dryness, pluviality and deep drought, in which rain or the lack of it can save or destroy life as well as the smallest project of personal freedom, Nuttall shows. Thus, it is in the colonial-apartheid matrix of power that the looped hinterland becomes a site of extraction and small abundance, with Coetzee incorporating registers of both in K’s quest for “self-possession, subsistence, and regeneration.”

In her chapter, MARRIGJE PAIJMANS explores such difficult tensions between extraction, abuse, self-possession, and the imagination as a line of flight in the context of animal husbandry in Marieke Lucas Rijneveld’s 2020 novel *My Heavenly Favorite*. The Netherlands is the second largest exporter of agricultural products, after the United States. While the presence of large-scale livestock farms remains almost invisible in the Dutch countryside, PAIJMANS draws forward this obscured space as a hinterland of extractive capital. Rijneveld’s novel, much like the ones explored by Peeren and Nuttall, explores the interstices of the extractive hinterland by focusing on how it fosters a girl character “becoming animal” in Deleuze’s sense. By taking imaginative flight, via physical proximity to farm animals and via pop culture, the girl takes to the animal hinterland of the village she lives in to escape the predatory gaze and actions of a pedophilic vet. This is not an unambiguously anthropomorphic novel, as animal agency is drawn in at the level of affect: the “forces and feelings” that “connect and divide bodies within sensual experience” allow the animal hinterland, on PAIJMANS’s reading, to emerge as “neglected and exploited, yet at the same time morbidly attractive and regenerative.” She explores, via the novel, how a society which routinely harms animals produces harmful relations

among humans as well and how this entanglement, foregrounded in the novel, is what opens the animal hinterland to analysis.

The hinterland as “a necessary, if unseemly, supplement to named ‘lands’” invites the compound focalization approach taken by Murray Pratt in his chapter on literary hinterlands and the planetary. Writings from Amitav Ghosh and Achille Mbembe are summoned with a sense of urgency as forms of reparation and renegotiation with Earth, and as a way forward, a method for anthropogenic thinking and working with three contemporary novelistic vignettes of hinterlands in three distinct locations: a fictional conglomerate Indian city in Deepa Anappara’s *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* (2020); the Glaswegian suburb of Pithead, featuring an “abandoned mining heap,” in Douglas Stuart’s *Shuggie Bain* (2020); and a dystopic fantastical future Chinese waste-sorting settlement named Silicon Isle in Chen Qiufan’s *Waste Tide* (2013). A defining characteristic of hinterlands, “their salvage punk proclivity for juxtaposition and *bricolage*,” is mobilized to offer a new reading of neglected and disadvantaged lives set amongst fractured fictional terrains imbued with exhaustion and exploitation. Yet these subaltern lives—human and, in Chen’s science fiction, cyborg—are also afforded agency by these three novelists, by way of focalizations that highlight how linguistic inventiveness; the power of storytelling, poetry, and dance; and the repurposing of dwellings and environments (of body and mind) to make sense of one’s worldview are able to unsettle dominant logics, attain affective value, avert disaster, and bring forth planetary justice. Hinterlands are thus productively seen as both the “bruise left by brutalizing capital” and the “promise of recalibrated relations with the world that sustains us,” in Pratt’s words.

Forms of care suggesting potentialities for the transformation of the hinterland beyond the extractions and abandonments inflicted upon it by the capitalist-colonialist-climatic assemblage are not only envisioned in literary texts. Ruth Sacks discusses Johannesburg’s inner-city hinterlands in terms of planting and plant histories in contexts of growing food shortages. She highlights two edible plants, blackjack and maize, as instances of small-scale growing and piecemeal farming in and around the city. A plant-oriented reading offers us a clearer understanding of the grown food system, she suggests, and assists in working out what “better food futures” might look like. The Greenhouse Project in central Johannesburg, the focus of her analysis, points to the blurring of hinterland and city as inequality and climate change escalate. The exploitation of “captured soils” in the city’s desiccated hinterlands historically produced ecological



upheaval and hunger, but now offers a “potential salve to uneven food distribution.” A reframing of colonial categories of “botanical value and class-based sustainability” points to the future gains of “slower, smaller, and healthier loci of growing, harvesting, and living.”

In the final chapter, Jennifer Wenzel discusses the “hinterland underground,” specifically the economic and ecological hinterland metabolisms constituted by “dynamic subterranean flows and stocks of matter and energy whose effects profoundly shape what might seem like stable ground.” She turns our attention to the “sub-surface,” and specifically the subsoil, also known as the “overburden”—the layers of soil, rock, vegetation, and water that must be excavated in order for mining operations to get to the ore and minerals below. The subsoil is offered as a subtle sub-verticality, a crucial material membrane, just under what we see when we look horizontally. Wenzel shows that the search for subterranean fossil fuel energy “broke with the territorial as broad surface” as it shifted downward via the shaft of mining extraction. Do hinterlands, Wenzel speculates, become “forgotten backwaters” particularly when the loci of supply “shift underground”? How are horizontal and vertical hinterlands related materially and metaphorically? Linking histories of mining and agriculture—questioning long-standing associations of agriculture with improvement and horizontality and of mining with extraction and verticality—Wenzel shows how both “mined” (disturbed and radically transformed) the subsoil, so that when farmers used steel plows to pull up the grasslands in what became the Dust Bowl on the North American Great Plains, the subsoil, so crucial to the ecological sustainability of the region, dried up and blew east in massive dust storms. Wenzel reads the subsoil-turned-dust as Mary Douglas’s “matter out of place,” as the hinterland arrives as portend and warning in the cities of the east, and situates subsoil as a site of care going forward.

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Together, the three parts of the book draw on a multiplicity of genres, disciplines (sociology, history, anthropology, literary studies, art history), and locations across the Global North and South (United States, England, Wales, Scotland, Netherlands, South Africa, China, India, Mexico), as well as being attuned to both land and water, the terrestrial and the oceanic, and human/plant/animal relations. Collectively and cumulatively, they make clear how a focus on hinterlands reveals anew the impasses flowing

from the entanglement of the haunting afterlives of colonialism, the changing infrastructures of global capitalism, and the impending threat of environmental collapse. In doing so, the book aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021), who argues that our analyses must necessarily now explore their terrains from two perspectives: the global and the planetary. The two, he notes, have for a very long time been addressed separately. If the globe is a human-centric construction, a planetary perspective irrefutably draws in non-human worlds, linking human histories to the planet as such. To echo a term used by Jennifer Wenzel in her chapter, the earth can no longer be taken as “stable ground” on which to project human-engineered purpose. Nigel Clark notices how scientific facts can never entirely displace the “visceral trust in earth, sky, life and water” (quoted in Chakrabarty 2018, 5) that humans have come to possess, yet observes that all four terms are under duress today. The “uneven histories” of extraction (as well as combustion and emission) shape the present and future in material form, writes Wenzel, and so it is that “one cannot tell this expanded story of globalization without acknowledging the environment as its condition of possibility and its product” (2019, 5). The formerly colonized world is thus “indispensable, not marginal, to this history,” and the task for those writing now is to decipher how capitalism, colonialism, and the climatic function through “continuity and rupture” (Wenzel 2019, 5–6).

If a “rescaling of attention” (Wenzel 2019, 4) is needed, the question of the planetary must attend to complex questions of time.<sup>14</sup> In Chakrabarty’s sense, this involves a calibration of our critical attention to include shifts in the earth as system and not only changes to “the extent we are recognizing human influence” (2018, 9) on that system. Or, in other words, what both Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003) and Debjani Ganguly (2020) have referred to as an alter-global conceptualization.<sup>15</sup> The planetary is not just a matter of reach or scale alone but suggests itself

<sup>14</sup>For Chakrabarty, we need to factor in geological timescales that are registered across millions of years and in which “human history” makes a mark, but ultimately a small one. Thus, we cannot focus only on “the extent we are recognizing human influence on the planet”—even where the latter is acknowledged as the “impact that ushered in a new period in the planet’s history” (2018, 9). Climate justice scholars emphasize the uneven distribution of “human” influence on the planet while focusing less on geological time scales or Earth system geo-alterities.

<sup>15</sup>Spivak wrote that “the planet is in the species of alterity” (2003, 72) and Ganguly has referred in her work on planetary realism to “geoalterity” (2020, 445).

as a mode of being and thinking. Crucial to the planetary then is learning to apprehend, write, and live differently in a world “that isn’t quite what we thought” (Wenzel 2019, 20). It is for all these encompassing reasons that we title this book *Planetary Hinterlands*, as we explore the conditions of extraction, abandonment, and care in multi-sited hinterlands of vulnerability, harm, and re-constitution today.

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## Belly of the World: Toxicity, Innocence, and Indigestibility in *Plastic China*

*Emily Ng*

In January 2018, on the eve of the Trump administration's trade war against China, the Xi administration began halting the import of 24 categories of solid waste from foreign countries, including most plastics, citing environmental and health concerns. Within the span of a year, plastic imports dropped by over 90 percent in the People's Republic of China (PRC), causing a seismic shift in the international waste markets (Staub 2019). Prior to this waste import ban—officially known as Operation National Sword—the PRC processed around half of the world's discarded plastic and was the top destination for plastic waste from the US, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere (Wen et al. 2021). Following the ban, countries across the globe rushed to find new destinations for their refuse, with some municipalities halting recycling programs altogether (Javorsky 2019).

Released a year before the Chinese state's initial discussions of National Sword—and rumored to have been an impetus for it—Wang Jiuliang's 2016 documentary film *Plastic China* follows two families working in a small-scale plastic processing factory in Shandong province in northeast

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E. Ng (✉)  
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

China. The film's setting feels neither urban nor rural in a classic sense. After an opening shot of a toddler playing in a cave of plastic, the film moves to the industrial loading docks of Qingdao (Tsingtao) Harbor. The camera follows the slow, smooth movement of a cargo ship as it enters the port (Fig. 2.1a). Echoing the Germanic etymology and original definition of hinterland as that which is *behind* the (often colonial) port (the city and harbor of Qingdao were built as a concession to German forces in 1898, during the European “scramble for concessions” in China), viewers are invited to travel with the containers as they are lowered onto truck beds and move beyond the dock, through small market towns and villages (Fig. 2.1b–c). The containers soon shed their shells, revealing sacks of waste as they move against the backdrop of idyllic sun-lit wheat fields (Fig. 2.1d). The pairing of radiant green and gold fields with the industrial aesthetics of container trucks and global garbage sets the scene for a sense of matter out of place and, if we follow Bakhtin (1981), also out of time—the cyclical, repetitive temporality evoked by the rural idyll, in which human rhythms and natural rhythms move in harmony, is intruded upon by capitalist modes of abstraction and mechanized labor. At last, one of the trucks arrives at its destination: the small family-owned plastic waste processing factory where most of the film will take place.



Fig. 2.1 a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China*



Extending port-centered definitions of hinterland and agriculture-centered ones of rurality, recent scholarship approaches the hinterlands of today as spaces—both peri-urban and rural—intimately connected with global trade, housing not only classic forms of non-urban production but also logistical processes from data farms to garbage disposals to renewable energy generation (Neel 2018; Introduction to this volume). While both the countryside and hinterlands may be considered sites of material resource provision (agricultural and otherwise), their spectralization in urban-centered imaginaries—including the sense of their incompatibility with global capitalism—casts them as peripheral, justifying their devaluation and obscuring their inextricability with the city (Spivak 2000; Williams 1975).

While “hinterland” evokes remoteness, emptiness, and marginality in figurative Anglophone usages, in modern Chinese, hinterland has been translated as *fudi*, lit. “belly land,” connoting not only a storage space, but also themes of digestion, the vulnerability of the viscera, and an inner centrality.<sup>1</sup> A term related to *fudi* is *neidi*, lit. “inner land,” which carries similar connotations of remoteness and marginality to the English hinterland, but is associated with landlocked rural and provincial geographies rather than with port-adjacent hinterlands. In Chinese economic and geographic scholarship, hinterlands—not unlike in the technical Anglophone usage—are framed as crucial for the growth and sustenance of urban regions: “[The] hinterland supplies resources for the economic activities of central cities, so the range and the quality of hinterland are very important to a city’s development” (Pan et al. 2008, 635). Approaching *Plastic China* as a cinematic portrayal of hinterlands in multiple potential senses, this chapter considers how the film deploys an aesthetics of the toxic sublime and a temporality of stagnation by the measures of progressive time. When juxtaposed with themes of childhood innocence and potentiality, these produce an ecocritical momentum driven by a moralized sense of disgust, pointing to what is deemed an indigestible scene within a global capitalist metabolic system.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Tong Wu for the reflection on vulnerability. Thanks to Shola Adenekan for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> See Schneider and McMichael’s (2010) critical rethinking of Marx’s rendering of capitalism and/as metabolic rift.

## EATING TIME: PLASTICS BETWEEN POST/SOCIALISM AND GLOBAL CAPITALISM

In her essay “Life and Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic,” Heather Davis (2015) describes plastic use as “tempophagy”—time-eating—where the compressed bodies of very old plants and animals (in the crude oil from which plastic’s synthetic polymers are derived) are re-consumed through the very short consumerist lifespans of the single-use take-out container. Plastic, as she puts it, “can be considered the substrata of advanced capitalism” (Davis 349).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in *Synthetic Socialism*, Eli Rubin describes mainstream perceptions of plastic in 1950s–1970s East Germany, where it signaled a nearly inverted set of values to those it was assigned in capitalist imaginaries and usages. In the former German Democratic Republic, plastic was considered a “precious collective resource, to be cherished and not disposed of,” in stark contrast with the notions of inferiority and disposability assigned to plastic by West Germans and others outside of the Soviet sphere (Rubin 2008, 11). Bauhaus-inspired industrial designers in East Germany emphasized the functionalist, anti-capitalist qualities of their plastic creations. Between the fast, throwaway, distinction-making consumerism of capitalism and the slow, built-to-last, equality-focused consumption of socialism, plastic reveals itself to be polysemous, capable of hosting contrasting political-economic temporalities.

Unlike in East Germany, plastic was not a prominent material, physically or symbolically, in Maoist China. Food tended to be transferred in paper, beer was stored in returnable glass bottles, and parcels were often sent in cotton bags; the boom of plastic arrived only after the death of Mao and the “opening” of the Chinese economy to global markets in the late 1970s. The explosion of demand for plastic, owing to China’s new role as factory of the world (due to the comparatively low costs of labor), soon outpaced the country’s capacity to produce it, and the Chinese state came up with a solution: to import waste plastic from wealthier countries that were “both more addicted to plastic use and increasingly concerned about the state of their environment” (Hilton 2020, 131). The same

<sup>3</sup> A far cry from the pleasurable amazement associated with plastic’s capacities for “infinite transformation” described by Barthes in the 1950s (1972, 97), plastic has come to signal a fatal and indeed stubbornly unchangeable substance, part and parcel of the Anthropocene and its movement toward planetary doom (Carrington 2016).

shipping containers that carried exports to the world would now return, filled with the remains of what had been consumed. With the massive rise of waste import, small, informal enterprises for hand-sorting imported plastic waste multiplied, often on the outskirts of cities and in rural areas. By the 1990s, “China had gone from a country that produced and consumed almost no plastic to be the world’s biggest producer,” and plastic grew to be ever-present, not only for the export markets, but also for new items of domestic consumption—and waste—within China itself (Hilton 2020, 130–131; Wen et al. 2021).

Prior to the recent hypervisibility of Chinese plastic waste import and processing, what sustained the mass import of global plastic waste in China, aside from the economic dimensions of low-paid labor and low cost of shipping (thus allowing the avoidance of expensive processing at home), was precisely the rendering-invisible of plastic waste to global consumers and regulators. Media coverage of *Plastic China* and the dramatic “cutting” of foreign waste imports by Operation National Sword have brought this previously low-profile state of affairs into the global lime-light, making plastic waste a visual signifier of a political battleground between capitalist and post/socialist worlds. The chronotopic projection of an ever-advancing, ever-accelerating, smooth-flowing, border-free capitalism meets a dramatic “blockage” to the global digestive system of plastic consumption. Approaching waste as matter out of perceived “use-time,” with recycling being a case of potential transformation from waste-time back into use-time (Viney 2014), the post/socialist hinterland of the plastic reprocessing factory might be considered a purgatorial zone previously out of sight for many global consumers, where waste acquires another life. The now-visible specter of the family-run processing plant, filled with young children, comes to haunt transnational audiences through their exposure to previously unseen bowels of plastic consumption and murky underworlds where a portion of plastic was quietly reincarnated. Not unlike ritual separations of purity and pollution in other places and times (Douglas 1966), plastic seems to undergo a transnational ritual of purification in a zone now demarcated and distanced as wasteland and waste-time, in spite of the central role of such spaces in plastic’s return to global consumer markets in its purified version: “made from recycled plastic.”<sup>4</sup> Such waste and waste-times are not exclusive to capitalist or post/socialist

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to Naor Ben-Yehoyada for the conversation on ritual purification and to the Kinship and Semiotics group at Columbia for the discussion of an early version of the chapter.

worlds but pose the question of a reluctantly shared body, as stubbornly indigestible materials move through the intimate organs of the global digestive system, oscillating between “use” and “waste.” Here, I return to *Plastic China* to explore aesthetic themes of toxicity and indigestibility, as well as the question of finitude and potentiality posed by the film’s juxtaposition of plastic and humans—especially children.

### THE ENDS OF LIFE: TOXICITY AND INERTIA

After establishing the initial contrast between industrial containers and idyllic agricultural landscapes, the film deploys a particular aesthetics of toxicity, juxtaposing the inorganic inertia of plastic with the potentiality of childhood. Such imagery evokes—as online commentaries attest to—visceral affects of disgust and indignation, in an era when climate concerns and sustainable food movements have grown increasingly prominent globally. Initial shots of the family-run processing plant show Kun, the factory owner, pushing a massive roll of plastic waste, alongside an already-present mountain of plastic rising above his height (Fig. 2.2a). The child protagonist, Yi Jie—eldest daughter in the family employed by Kun—and the other children of the two families are shown working and playing near, on, or in these heaps of plastic (Fig. 2.2b–d).



Fig. 2.2 a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China*

In her work on geontopower, Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) describes the distinction between life and nonlife—in addition to the more commonly critiqued distinction between human and nonhuman—as foundational to Western philosophies of being, extending into late liberal forms of governance. In these renderings, that which separates animate beings filled with potentiality from inanimate objects lacking such potentiality is the temporal limit of finitude: that which cannot die holds no potential. Inertia is contrasted with cycles of birth and death, marked by growth, change, and decay in the interim. The human child, in this sense, epitomizes such imaginaries of potentiality. To repeatedly juxtapose children with plastic—an ultimate symbol of “lifeless” substance infamous for its incapacity to biodegrade—thus tugs at the heart of the geontological split. By existing outside of life and death, plastic “represents the fundamental logic of finitude, carrying the horrifying implications of the inability to decompose, to enter back into systems of decay and regrowth” (Davis 2015, 353).

This uncanny pairing of life and inertia intensifies its affective force through images of ingestion and, more specifically, of what might be called a toxic consubstantiality. In a scene that garnered much online commentary, the young Yi Jie dips her comb in the water where some of the white plastic fragments are being washed and runs it through her hair—“...brushing her hair with toxic water!” as one online commentator exclaims. The disgust mobilized by the combination of wetness and plastic’s evocation of toxicity is heightened with images of gray sludge (Fig. 2.3a) produced amid the nonbiological “digestive” process of plastics, in transition from their discarded forms as waste into recycled pellets for further use. Paired with such colors and textures, olfactory signals enter the scene—close-ups of burning plastic, plumes of thick gray and black smoke, the wrinkled nose of Yi Jie (Fig. 2.3b) and commentary from adult employees on the “disgusting” smells of the garbage. The disturbing proximity between the processing of indigestible plastics and the life-sustaining processes of human digestion culminates in shots of the families eating food cooked with the flames of burning plastic, which includes dead fish scooped from the nearby plastic-filled river (Fig. 2.3c–d).

### INNOCENCE AND THE TOXIC SUBLIME

At the same time, and not external to this theme of toxicity and the threat to life, a sense of aesthetic awe is evoked by the texture and selective coloration of plastic waste—heaps awash in white (Fig. 2.2a–c)—the



Fig. 2.3 a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China*

gleaming, semi-translucent visuality and crunch of which seem to counterpose itself to the green and brown organicity associated with nature and with rurality. Indeed, in shots that focus on the children living at the family factory, the composition is such that the whiteness of the plastic begins overwhelming the children in visual proportions, nearing the top edge of the frame or exceeding the frame altogether—a sea of plastic with seemingly no end (Figs. 2.2b–d and 2.4a–b). This sense of grandeur, paired with concerns over environmental pollution, is described by Jennifer Peeples (2011) in terms of the “toxic sublime” in her analysis of post-1970s ecological photography in the US, especially that of Edward Burtynsky. Drawing on Kant’s and Edmund Burke’s characterizations of the sublime as that which is vast, magnificent, infinite, and unfathomable and *moves* the mind toward a form of negative contemplation, Peeples points to the simultaneous sense of revulsion and awe captured by the toxic sublime, whose contemplation can offer impetus for change.

This sense of the toxic sublime, with caveats I will turn to in a moment, is also present in *Plastic China*, particularly through the visual immersion of the viewer in its mountains and seas of white trash: white—a paradoxical color of modern cleanliness when paired with waste, a Western color of the angelic and of childhood innocence, and in China, a color of death, worn historically and today at funerary ceremonies. The symbolic





Fig. 2.4 a–b Screenshots from *Plastic China*

multiplicity of white as color and the common sensibility toward plastic as inorganic and never-decomposing together conjure a time out of time, an inertness that points at once to human finitude and a plastic eternity—all while evoking both innocence and mourning. Such paradoxes of aesthetic attraction and aversion are precisely what Peebles describes in the potential effect of the toxic sublime, which aims to produce a moment of hesitation and contemplation, specifically of one’s own complicity with the state of affairs.<sup>5</sup>

While Peebles emphasizes works such as Burtynsky’s, which she argues deliberately exclude humans from their depictions of toxic landscapes, thus leaving the viewer in ethical suspension by interrupting their impulse to seek out subjects for pity and blame, the sublime aesthetics of *Plastic China* are paired with character-driven shots and plotlines that return the viewers to a search for usual suspects. By centering on Yi Jie as the child protagonist caught between two adult masculine figures, the film foregrounds a modern dissonance between a backward rural paternalism and an implicit forward-moving good of modern schooling and access to capitalist consumption. The former is embodied by Peng, Yi Jie’s father, who

<sup>5</sup> See also the collection of Somatosphere essays on “Toxicity, Waste, Detritus” (Gupta and Hecht 2017).

is shown to spend his money on alcohol (a “bad” use of time and capital) and who refuses to let Yi Jie go to school (Fig. 2.4c), in contrast to the hardworking, pro-education factory owner Kun (Fig. 2.4d), who labors toward his dream of owning a brand-new car, so that he may get rid of what his mother calls his “crappy” old van. While the irony of the “good” of furthering cycles of consumption and waste is likely not lost on the filmmaker or viewers, the film’s reliance on character tropes of forwardness and backwardness plotted against the rubric of modern progressive time is hard to ignore. Moreover, this developmentalist temporality is spatialized onto a humanist dissonance between waste(land) and (childhood) purity.

### WASTE: BETWEEN CONSUBSTANTIATION AND LOCALIZATION

In an ambitious effort to identify four elementary modes of human relationality—communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing—anthropologist Alan Fiske (2004) describes *consubstantial assimilation* as formative of what he calls communal sharing relations. The sharing of food and other comestible substances—including those some deem toxic such as tobacco and drugs—Fiske suggests, draws an equivalence between material bodies and provides the foundation for a certain style of human relationality centered on likeness; for him, kinship is the prototype of such a relation. In *Plastic China*, plays and alternations of sympathy and disgust—the relatibility of the laughing children and the deplorability of their illiberal parents; the ethics of an any-work-necessary stance amid poverty; and a how-could-they sensibility toward a plastic-infused life—mirror a tension between a sharing of toxic consumption as condition for global kinship and an implicit denial of consubstantiation through the localization of toxicity to a plastic *China*.

The spatialization of the issue speaks, of course, to the geography of waste export and the film’s aim to expose a previously obscured issue: certain modes of life, perceived as tainted, built out of the debris of perceived purity on the other side of consumption—imaginings of recycling as a “clean,” ethical act of regeneration. Early in the film, close-ups of discarded materials from far-flung sources signal the transnational origins of the waste: a Science Plan dog food bag from US-based Hill’s pet foods, wrapping materials from Italy’s Magro paper products, a crushed margarine lid from UK-based Flora ProActiv. The day-to-day denial of one’s own toxicity is capacitated by the smooth shipping of (here Western) waste abroad. Yet this reminder of shared digestion within the global capitalist



system—from “mouth” to “belly”—quickly recedes, and much of the film homes in on the localized peculiarities of toxicity, on the one hand, and Chinese fantasies of the foreign through its material goods, on the other.<sup>6</sup> Yi Jie is shown carefully cutting out and arranging images of pink shoes and clothes from foreign magazines, and the children are shown playing with discarded foreign toys. While many qualities can be evoked by these scenes (creativity, resourcefulness, or the possibility of circular economies, for instance), Anglophone online commentary tends to be centered on pity.<sup>7</sup> Between the affective affordances of the film and this dominant angle of reception, the hinterland of the recycling factory is figured as a space of foregone childhood, in which the West is positioned as both the origin of a stunted life and the means of exiting it. The foreign-waste-land is posited as a land of coercion and stagnation (reinforced by the local patriarchy), with Western-style education and consumption positioned as the apparent escape.

Here, it is useful to contrast the 82-minute official cut of *Plastic China* that circulated globally—first through film festivals (Sundance, Full Frame, IDFA, and more) and then through major online streaming services (Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Google Play, YouTube, and others)—and the 26-minute cut that gained widespread attention in China prior to the official cut. In the shorter cut of the film—what Wang Jiuliang refers to as the “media version”—some themes and aesthetics distinct from the official cut are put into play. Thematically, the ethical implications of *foreign* waste and *local* toxicity stay front and center in the shorter cut, through the filming locations, interviewees, and conversation content. Rather than at Qingdao Harbor, for instance, the film begins at a recycling center in Berkeley, California, and shows US employees sorting through piles of plastic waste, with a visibility not far from their Chinese counterparts to come, albeit using a conveyer belt and wearing gloves (Fig. 2.5a). While not so pointed in its staging of proportional overwhelm and disgust, there is a similar sense of dirt, manual labor, and a certain haphazardness at the heart of recycling, far from, say, an aesthetics of purity and cleanliness (Fig. 2.5b). Many of the workers shown appear to be BIPOC, including the recycling director interviewed; they speak of their lack of full

<sup>6</sup>Thanks to Nomonde Gwebu for the reminder on the “mouth.”

<sup>7</sup>See Jennifer Wenzel (2017) on waste as “Alpha and Omega: the beckoning origin of development and its troublesome end product.”



**Fig. 2.5** a–d Screenshots from *Plastic China* (media version); top two images set in the US (California) and bottom two images set in China (Shandong)

knowledge about what will happen with the materials they sort after they are shipped off to China.

Aside from the US-based recycling staff, the China-based characters are also more wide-ranging. Rather than centering on the two families and the question of Yi Jie's education, an array of villagers—plastic waste processing staff from various facilities as well as other residents who share the local landscape—are shown debating the ethics and legality of waste import and unofficial processing factories, including the conundrum of harm to health and environmental versus economic necessity. The local effects of plastic waste processing are highlighted through interviews with villagers: the polluting of local groundwater leading to the need to purchase bottled spring water, the difficulty of harvesting wheat covered in plastic debris, a sense of increasing rates of cancer even among the young, and more.

Notably missing in this shorter cut are the centralization of the character and storyline of Yi Jie and the intensified aesthetics of innocence of the official version. While Yi Jie, Peng, Yi Jie's mother, and Kun and his children all appear in the shorter cut, the cast of characters is more widely scattered, centering on questions of community, conundrum, and a critique of state and economic power rather than on the character development of the child and the two patriarchs. The aesthetics of this cut also

differ from those of the globally circulated version. Although still filled with ruinous landscapes of plastic waste, the color palettes of the plastic vary widely across shots—a mishmash of blues, yellows, pinks, browns, blacks, and whites (Fig. 2.5c–d). The implication of the party-state is also emphasized more: multiple images featuring Chinese Communist Party slogans and flags pepper the scenes (these are also present in official cut, but they only appear once and, unlike in the short version, are left without subtitling, thus likely to be missed by Anglophone viewers).

Compared to the cut first shared with audiences in the PRC, the version circulated on the global stage appeals distinctly to the abhorrence of a spoiled childhood, with the central promotional image for the film being one of Yi Jie holding her infant sister, swallowed by a sea of white (Fig. 2.6).

Unlike this appeal to a humanitarian aesthetics, the media cut focused on the deplorable flow and transformation of foreign waste into local toxicity—and, unlike in the official cut, both Japanese and Western origins of waste (through the words visible on discarded packaging) are highlighted. Moreover, the media cut implicitly mobilizes viewers to attribute responsibility to the (Chinese) state, with its repeated references to Chinese Communist Party emblems and slogans. This discrepancy is not lost on the filmmaker and likely gestures toward a multiplicity of strategies for evoking responses from distinct viewerships. In an interview with media scholar Jin Liu, for instance, Wang Jiuliang responds to a question on audience reaction:

Audiences abroad and at home are angry. For the foreign audience, they're angry and want to know why their trash ended up going to China. They also feel guilty over the alternative lifestyle of these two families and start to reflect upon their own consumption styles. For the Chinese audience [after watching the 26-minute media version], they were angry about the terrible impact of foreign waste on the environment and people in China. (Wang 2020, bracketed comment in original)

While both centered on the production of righteous anger and disgust as moral-political affects (see Ngai 2005), the two cuts offer distinct stagings of the conundrum: one that evokes the guilt in the face of the innocent other (paired with a disgust toward toxicity and illiberal backwardness) and one that evokes indignation in face of the injustice of the dominant foreign other (and also disgust, but centered on the foreign source of internal toxicity). The former, while not unlikely to be effective in its



Fig. 2.6 *Plastic China* DVD cover

production of affects, simultaneously reproduces an image of China as a site of unfreedom and authoritarian paternalism—reminiscent of Cold War imagery of lost childhood on the other side of the iron curtain,

deployed by both sides (Peacock 2014). This is not an accusation of Wang with relation to directorial intentions or of the capacity of the film to propel social action. Rather, it is to attend to the aesthetics of ecocritical affect production that accompanies cultural imaginaries of hinterlands, wherein China is staged through a curious mix of pity and disgust (both political and bodily), recapitulating historical Western depictions of China as lacking in both hygiene and liberty, and, more broadly, humanitarian imagery as producing an object of concern through which an imagined “international community” constitutes itself (Heinrich 2008; Ko 2005; Malkki 1996). Indeed, this mix of pity and disgust is evoked in recent articulations of hinterlands as a conceptual geography—Phil Neel’s *Hinterland* (2018) calls for a global unity beyond politics of blood and nation while opening with a vignette that reproduces familiar Sinophobic tropes: the stench of Chinese bodies to a Western nose sitting on an overpopulated train.

## CLOSING

As this volume makes apparent, hinterlands can open up new conceptual spaces for critical inquiry when distinctions such as rural and urban face what Lauren Berlant calls a “waning of genre” (2011, 6)—when conventions of relating to fantasy grow out of sync with the historical present. In the case of *Plastic China*, the oft-forgotten global dimension of rural spaces is usefully foregrounded with the maritime arrival of transnational waste. Distinct symbolic-affective constellations are evoked across different cuts of the film to bring attention to uneven distributions of waste and the troubled conditions of life they afford and to mobilize ethical-political responses from distinct viewers. While this might prove effective, such aesthetic strategies also risk reproducing developmentalist-humanitarian chronotopes, geontological divides, and Sinophobic tropes.

The official cut of the film, explored in this chapter, risks slotting certain forms of life back into a split between deplorable, life-strangling Chinese particularities and an enlightened, life-giving cycle of modern education and material wealth. These divides locate futurity and potentiality outside the spatial imaginary of the hinterlands and back into that of global middle-class modes of life—ones which rely on the consumerism-centered visions of the good life (new toys, new cars) that intensified plastic production and waste in the first place. To cite two Anglophone online comments, which echo the sentiments of many others: “My heart aches

for the poor children... They have aspirations, hopes and dreams. I wish some day they'll get the opportunity to escape this dreaded place"; "It'll be hard not to look away... The poverty level... is something to make you cry and count your blessings at the same time."<sup>8</sup>

In the case of plastic waste, themes of use and waste, inertia, and finitude also enter the scene. Such waste-times, marked by moments of flow and blockage between purported centers and peripheries, gesture toward acts of shared tempophagy (time-eating) and tempopepsia (time-digestion), wherein multiple "mouths" and "guts"—the post/socialist and late/capitalist—together consume and attempt to digest the indigestible.

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<sup>8</sup> Comments from "Plastic China," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovvujut-p6g>, Accessed 24 July 2022. A full comparison with Chinese online commentaries is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one response to the same YouTube video—written in Chinese and markedly different in its focal point—is telling: "拍的挺好的，推动了社会的进步。。现在洋垃圾正式全面禁止了。" ("[The film] is shot quite well, promoting society's progress... now foreign garbage is formally fully banned").



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## Cultivating Hinterland: What Lies Behind Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield?*

*Becca Voelcker*

### PLANTING IDEAS

In 1982, the artist Agnes Denes and a team of agriculturalists and volunteers planted and harvested two acres of wheat in a landfill site in lower Manhattan, a short distance from Wall Street and facing the Statue of Liberty. Volunteers cleared the ground of rocks and waste, 200 truckloads of earth were brought on site, and 285 furrows were dug for planting the wheat kernels. Volunteers maintained the wheatfield for four months, cleaning it of wheat smut, weeding, fertilizing, and spraying it against mildew fungus, and installing an irrigation system. On 16 August, they harvested the crop and gained 1000 pounds of wheat. The kernels were sent to art galleries in 28 cities around the world (Denes 2019, 41).

Denes titled the project *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*. She described it as representing “food, energy, commerce, world trade, and economics. It referred to mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological

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B. Voelcker (✉)  
Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

concerns” (“Agnes Denes”). Denes was photographed standing in the field of swaying, golden grains, holding a staff in her hand.<sup>1</sup> The World Trade Centers towered in the background. Some likened her image to that of a goddess (“Agnes Denes” 1982). Others compared her work with art historical traditions that celebrate American agrarianism and extol its wheatfields as the nation’s breadbasket (Jones 2019, 225). Others still celebrated her environmentalist politics (“Agnes Denes”). Denes encouraged these different interpretations, describing *Wheatfield* as both “an intrusion into the Citadel, a confrontation of High Civilization,” and “Shangri-La, a small paradise, one’s childhood, a hot summer afternoon in the country, peace, forgotten values, simple pleasures” (Hartz 1992, 118).

*Wheatfield* has consistently been celebrated as “environmentalist” by Denes and by critics then and today. But how does Denes’ idea of nature as a set of “forgotten values” conceal asymmetries of power? What industrial, classed, racialized, and gendered conditions are obscured by *Wheatfield*’s spectacular impact? Denes was driven by undeniably eco-ethical intentions, hoping to confront North America’s economic locus of power with a reminder of the agricultural hinterlands upon which its wealth is founded. A city’s history is also the history of the hinterlands upon which it depends for extracting natural resources and labor (Cronon 1992, 19). *Wheatfield* represents hinterland as it confronts the metropolis and exposes how class conflict lies behind the artificial separation of urban and rural space—that is, how capital extracts from the hinterland and focuses on the metropole, thus alienating a huge number of people and depleting landscapes of their biodiversity (Neel 2018, 13, 17).

But *Wheatfield*’s position as an artwork is ambivalent. Its lovely presence on a then-underdeveloped piece of land risked bolstering the very “Citadel” it purported to criticize. Denes’ choice of the word “citadel” indicates her association of New York City with imperial power. The word renders the metropolis a privatized space for affluent people, which *Wheatfield* apparently confronted. But *Wheatfield* also risked contributing to the public imagination a marketable image that perpetuated an oppositional narrative of nature-hinterland/culture-metropolis (Curtis and Rajaram 2002). With this came a related, essentialist association of nature and femininity. *Wheatfield*’s pastoral beauty is an aesthetic so aligned with

<sup>1</sup>For the photograph, see Agnes Denes’ website: <http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html>.

classist and gendered norms that it risks being reincorporated by, rather than confronting, patriarchal and capitalist power structures. Given these complications, how should we understand *Wheatfield* today?

By studying *Wheatfield* as a diagram of entanglements between various stakeholders involved in its production, this chapter nuances understandings of Denes' aims and achievements. To do this, the notion of hinterland—literally, what is “behind” a city, providing it with natural resources and labor power—guides this chapter as I ask who and what lay behind *Wheatfield's* cultivation. Hinterland helps me envision a diagram of power and influence into which *Wheatfield* inserted itself as both a “confrontation” and a “simple pleasure.” Diagramming *Wheatfield* in this way sheds light on art's potential for disrupting ecologically and socially unjust systems and cultivating alternatives—as well as its potential of falling into positions of compromise or complicity. Though planted 40 years ago, *Wheatfield* yields important questions for art and spatial practice today, as polarizations between urban and rural contexts are exacerbated by the climate emergency.

Denes was keenly aware of the crisis facing the climate. She described *Wheatfield* in heroic terms as a political effrontery to the environmentally and socially damaging capitalist “system” and its “machinery.” It called “people’s attention to having to rethink their priorities,” she said (Denes 2019, 283). Yet her use of wheat as “a universal concept” to criticize intensive agriculture and food shortages is perhaps short-sighted (Denes 2019, 283). The Hard Red Spring variety of wheat she used is specifically suited to America’s cooler northern states and is prized for bread baking (Curtis and Rajaram 2002). A “universal” concept might equally or more accurately deal with soy or rice. But Denes knew her audiences. Wheat’s centrality to a species of American pastoralism rooted in founding myths of economic and territorial expansion underpins the project and accentuates its provocation. “Look,” *Wheatfield* seemed to say, “if this is what Wall Street’s wealth is built upon, why are agriculture and its hinterland locations exploited and ignored?” But *Wheatfield* itself ignored an exploited people, being planted on the land of the Lenape people, which Dutch colonists claimed in the seventeenth century. Wall Street is named after a wall the Dutch built that came to exclude the Lenape. The Lenape grew mixed crops and kept animals on this land—they did not cultivate large areas of wheat there. Denes’ choice of crop refers to white settler colonists’ industrialized monoculture techniques, and its aesthetic—whether seen as beautiful or confrontational, or both—should therefore

be understood as an aesthetic grown directly from colonial and industrial-agrarian roots.

Denes' harnessing of agrarianism to progress her politics points to her larger strategy of working with contradictions and her ability to maneuver between different audiences and cultural markets. In a statement about her use of Venn diagrams in 1971, Denes discusses her interest in cultivating seemingly contradictory interpretations. "While a work of art may be subject to misunderstandings," she reasoned, "it does exist independently of them" (Denes 2019, 76). *Wheatfield*, then, constituted a kind of Venn diagram of interpretations. It existed "independently" as two acres of wheat and accrued different and sometimes contradictory readings. In so doing, it offered less the "confrontation" its title and artist promised, and more a materialization of the tangle of agriculture and business interests, of nature and capital, that characterizes the planet's increasingly globalized and urbanized environments (Rawes 2013, 40; Jones 2019, 225). This was a tangle of agrilogistics (Morton 2013, 42). It was also a tangle of idealized nature and its (disavowed) exploitation. Denes' installation of a flock of sheep in the gardens of the American Academy in Rome (1998–2002) attempted a similar diagramming of complex interests. Again, the piece combined agrarian nostalgia with agribusiness, this time cultivating associations with cloning—Dolly the sheep had been born two years earlier (Denes 2019, 275).

### UNEARTHING EXTRACTIVISM

*Wheatfield*, then, like the sheep in Rome, diagrams a socio-economic power structure of hinterland and metropolis. The wheat and sheep "intrude" upon the "Citadel" as reminders of their vital yet disavowed roles in infrastructures of food transportation, preparation, storage, consumption, and disposal (Jones 2019, 225). Extractivism comes in different guises, and *Wheatfield* encourages consideration of several. First, it critiques extractivist approaches to land and labor, whereby the soil becomes depleted, and people exhausted, by intensive production (Marx 1992, 283). Its material components—soil and wheat—become means of recognizing the tangle of socio-political and material constituents that determine planetary boundary conditions and, when pushed out of balance, indicate the need for ethical renegotiation in a kind of eco-politics (Salazar et al. 2020, 5).

Second, *Wheatfield's* adjacency to Wall Street urges consideration of other, more abstract but equally extractivist economic techniques well underway by 1982, such as real-estate and market speculation (Brenner and Katsikis 2020, 30). Just a decade earlier, the US stopped converting dollars to gold at a fixed rate. This increased possibilities for financial speculation, including the trading of future stock values of grain. Planting a real wheatfield outside banks' headquarters, Denes inserted a reminder of the material basis upon which their profits once relied. Location was crucial for this—it is harder to ignore something when it is on your doorstep. Indeed, *Wheatfield's* location beside the Financial District underlines the fact that extractivist capitalism depends upon a spatial arrangement whereby an operational center controls the flow of extracted products transported from (rarely seen) places of poverty to places of wealth where high prices are obtained for them (Ye et al. 2020).

Wheat and other cereals are foundational commodities in the New York Stock Exchange's history. The marble pediment on its façade at 18 Broad Street depicts commerce and industry. Beside a strong woman representing Integrity stand figures of Science, Industry, and Invention on one side, and Agriculture and Mining on the other. This latter sector is symbolized by a man carrying a sack of grain and a woman in a scarf leading a sheep. She holds a staff remarkably like the one Denes holds in her photograph in *Wheatfield*. In the background of this section is a relief of wheat sheaths. Beyond the farmer couple, two men inspect a piece of mined rock. These figures are industriously extracting resources from the earth. A marble sea laps on either end of the pediment, symbolizing global trade. This is a celebration of nineteenth-century capitalism. Resources are depicted in abundance, and workers in good health.

Denes' *Wheatfield* is harder to interpret. She wanted it to confront capitalism. But her golden crop is beautiful. Like the carving, it shows nothing of the reality of hinterland extractivism—none of its destruction of biodiversity, its widespread pollution, its depletion of human and animal energies, and its displacement of indigenous peoples. Without priming on Denes' political intentions, audiences of *Wheatfield* might be forgiven for viewing it as a real-life extension of the celebratory Stock Exchange carving, with Denes herself representing Integrity. Like her field of sheep, *Wheatfield* therefore constitutes a double bind in its uneasy combination of spectacle and politics (Jones 2019). These artworks make powerful critiques and picturesque postcards.

Denes selected *Wheatfield's* location in Battery Park, a former landfill site squeezed between the Financial District and the Hudson River, to achieve this tension between the political and the picturesque. She negotiated this location with the New York Public Art Fund, a non-profit organization that part-financed *Wheatfield*. The arts activist Doris C. Freedman, whose own father was a New York architect and property developer, founded the fund in 1977. Freedman was keen to support art that reached audiences who would not normally be exposed to it in their everyday life and that could thus improve civic cohesion (Cascone 2017). On the one hand, *Wheatfield* did just this, blowing in the summer breeze, far from the confines of museums and galleries. On the other, it was mainly visited by bankers during their lunchbreaks, art enthusiasts, and tourists. If a family from Queens or from wheat farming country in North Dakota had wanted to visit *Wheatfield*, they would have faced significant travel times and expenses.

For precisely this reason, the Public Art Fund recommended other sites, including Wards Island, a piece of land sandwiched between the lower-income and more racially diverse boroughs of Harlem, the Bronx, and Queens. This location would have been more geographically and economically accessible for many New Yorkers (few people lived near Battery Park at the time). It would also have chimed with Wards Island's long-standing use for social facilities including hospitals and recreation grounds. But Denes wanted confrontation and spectacle. She envisioned an audience of bankers, financial lawyers, and bureaucrats as targets. Whether they felt confronted, or soothed, by the swaying field remains unclear. Denes boasted that some were moved to tears when the field was harvested (Denes 1993, 390). Again, it is unclear whether this had anything to do with *Wheatfield's* political implications. Just as likely, *Wheatfield's* banker neighbors were moved at witnessing something so aesthetically pleasing in a space that was previously a no-man's-land where waste was dumped, people occasionally walked dogs, and sporadic art projects took place.<sup>2</sup> It was surely inspiring to see a poor patch of land turn golden and upsetting to see it turned back into a wasteland with the harvesting.

If man has dominion "over all the earth" as the Bible promises, and as nineteenth-century industrialists zealously enacted, then crops and

<sup>2</sup> Agricultural advisor to the project, John Ameroso, in email correspondence with author, 28 August 2021. Former curator at New York Public Art Fund, Emma Enderby, in email correspondence with author, 23 August 2021.

quarries like those depicted on the Stock Exchange pediment must have owners.<sup>3</sup> Land ownership is a foundational principle for capitalism. “Private” originates in the Latin *privatus*, which means “restricted,” and relates to “deprive.” A designation of privacy regulates who has access to something or somewhere and who does not (Nitzan and Bichler 2009, 228). Battery Park was already being assessed for Battery Park City development by 1982, but it captured Denes’ imagination by its appearance as a no-man’s-land. The space comprised material excavated in 1973 to make space for the World Trade Centers. It was as if Denes was coaxing fresh life from the waste of global trade, caring for the land through a collective and voluntary cultural-agricultural form of labor very different to that upon which the nearby financial markets depended. Although *Wheatfield* was enclosed by a fence (conveniently, this was not visible in most of the photographs made of it), it was intended to enact not ownership, but a form of custodianship and care.

Care is a gendered concept closely tied to extractivism. Patriarchal power structures have exploited women’s reproductive capacities by identifying them with a proximity to “nature” and an aptitude for caregiving. Denes demonstrates a playful awareness of this as she has herself photographed nurturing *Wheatfield*. This occurred precisely when ecofeminism emerged as a subfield within feminist and environmental theory, rising to prominence with the publication of Carolyn Merchant’s 1980 *The Death of Nature* and Vandana Shiva’s 1988 *Staying Alive* (Nirmal 2021; Jarosz 2001). *Wheatfield* invites us to consider the same intersection of topics as these books did, as well as several conferences held in the following decade that cemented the correlation between patriarchal oppression and ecological violence (Buckingham 2015).

Rather than conform to an essentialist association of women and nature prevalent in some cultural feminisms at the time, for example in the Goddess Movement (Warren 2001), Denes’ cultivation of *Wheatfield*, and her careful documentation of the insects and animals that temporarily made it their habitat, demonstrates a more socialist ecofeminist approach. It emphasizes women and nature (including animal and vegetable species) as oppressed groups who live on the margins of global capitalism and whose appropriated resources make that system possible (Clark 2012). This differentiates her practice from what she recognized as Land Art’s masculine constructions of (usually permanently installed, often

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:26.

manmade) material (Denes 2019, 282). Denes' ecologically prefaced projects involve plants and animals to emphasize inter-species collaborations that change over time (through growth, decay, or harvesting). As a prime example of this approach, *Wheatfield* demonstrates how social and ecological justice must be prefaced on ethical collaborations across groups of people, with other species and with land itself. It exposes an anthropocentric idea of independence as fantastical and damaging.

### GROWING COMPLICATIONS

This ecofeminist reading of *Wheatfield* is incomplete, however, if it does not also question certain material aspects of the project. Why, for example, did Denes rely on unpaid volunteers? Sourcing a grant to pay them would surely have furthered the project's championing of agricultural and care-giving work so often placed out of sight (in physical or symbolic hinterlands), and under- or unpaid. Denes was a founding member of A.I.R. Gallery, which opened in 1972 as an artist-run non-profit space supporting women and non-binary artists. *Wheatfield* could surely have emanated A.I.R.'s ethos by remunerating the workers responsible for its creation and care. Materialist feminism developed throughout the 1970s with campaigns such as Wages for Housework that reclaimed care from idealized associations with labors of love (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Federici 2012). Denes sits somewhat uncomfortably between this form of feminism and a cultural variety that sees women as essentially "closer" to nature. Materialist feminism sees the latter's "affinity" position as reductionist (Mellor 1997). When Denes is shown standing alone in *Wheatfield*, her team of volunteers out of sight, she evokes agrarian goddess imagery in line with cultural feminism and misses an opportunity to highlight materialist feminism's calls for systemic change.

In a similar soloist tendency to undervalue volunteers, Denes downplayed earlier art projects that put Battery Park on the cultural map before *Wheatfield*, preferring to frame her contribution as unique within a physical and cultural wasteland. These projects included an installation by the sculptor Mary Miss in 1973 and *Art on the Beach*, a project by the group Creative Time that ran each summer between 1978 and 1988. Project by project, Battery Park became physically cleaner, culturally more desirable, and financially lucrative. Today, it is called Battery Park City and comprises high-cost housing, retail, and entertainment spaces. Denes anticipated



this, foreseeing that Manhattan would close itself again like a “fortress” after her project (1993, 390).

But it would be naïve to suggest that the projects of Mary Miss, Creative Time, and Denes operated independently from a neoliberal project to financialize land. Taking root at this time, neoliberalism describes a theory of political economy based on the belief that human well-being is best advanced by the maximization of private property, entrepreneurial freedom, and global free trade (Harvey 2007). Art often provides areas with cultural assets useful for increasing land value; artist communities are often harbingers of an area’s gentrification (Malik and Phillips 2012). Crucial to a neoliberal construction of space is the separation of people by class so that more wealthy people rarely encounter their poorer neighbors and their needs (Fitz 2019, 30). Racial dynamics caused by structural inequality play a part in this. *Wheatfield*’s target audience was the banks. Put another way, white, male bankers were the ones who primarily enjoyed the privilege of seeing it.

Iterations of *Wheatfield* reproduced in a disused railway curve in London (2009) and an empty lot in central Milan (2015) have also contributed to urban regeneration, coinciding with funding opportunities in the prelude to the 2012 London Olympics and Milan’s 2015 Expo. While the London project grew into a decade-long community garden that continues to thrive and welcome diverse local publics—albeit in an increasingly unaffordable area—its Milanese counterpart lasted only months during a period of redevelopment in which a vast business district was constructed, backed by Qatari and American funders.<sup>4</sup> Denes’ original New York *Wheatfield* could also be criticized for the short-term nature of its spatial presence.

A closer look at *Wheatfield*’s funding also raises questions. Alongside the Public Art Fund, *Wheatfield* was supported by American Cyanamid, a pharmaceuticals company involved at the time in numerous legal issues related to its environmental pollution of a river in New Jersey and price-fixing exposed in several litigations.<sup>5</sup> It was American Cyanamid that supplied Denes with a combine harvester (Enderby 2021). The corporation’s PR was overseen by the notorious lobbyist E. Bruce Harrison, whose

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to Peg Rawes and Nicolas Henninger for this information.

<sup>5</sup>*Wheatfield*’s sponsors were New York City Public Art Fund, The New York State Council on the Arts, The New York State Urban Development Corporation, The Battery Park City Authority, and American Cyanamid.

fundes included the National Agricultural Chemical Association (comprising pesticide producers). Harrison is known as the father of “green-washing,” and his books include *Corporate Greening 2.0* (Stauber and Rampton 1995). Harrison and American Cyanamid tried to hush revelations of the harms chemical pesticides and fertilizers wrought on natural habitats, including Rachel Carson’s ground-breaking 1962 book *Silent Spring* (Aronczyk 2021). Supporting Denes’ *Wheatfield* offered them a way to appear “green” while maintaining the capitalist, white, and patriarchal power structures upon which they depended. Was Denes making strategic and subversive use of available resources by accepting American Cyanamid’s support or risking her eco-ethical principles through a form of collaboration?

A similar ambiguity characterizes what Denes did with *Wheatfield*’s harvested straw. According to Denes, she donated it to New York City’s Mounted Police (Jones 2019, 226). Mounted constabularies are often deployed to suppress civil protest; New York City Police Department has a troubled record for class, race, and sex-based brutality (Erzen 2001; Nelson 2001). Was Denes’ gift naïve or ironic and subversive?

Beyond real estate, combine harvesters, and straw lies the larger question of art’s political agency and confinement in relation to the Anthropocene-Capitalocene. The history of art has long since been exposed as sharing a history with capital and its structures of power and domination (Berger 2008). How can ecological and socially minded artwork like *Wheatfield* ever subvert this?

## HARVESTING COMPLEXITY

*Wheatfield* invites us to consider the idea of hinterlands. But as we have seen, a closer look at what lies behind *Wheatfield* as an artwork reveals its own tangle of dominant and oppressed interests. If we use the idea of hinterland to envision a diagram of power and influence, in which Manhattan is the locus of economic control and Middle America its source of wealth, then where does *Wheatfield* insert itself? Does it disrupt a crucial part of the diagram, or conform to it? The answer is both. *Wheatfield*’s stated ambition to critique economic globalization and its role in damaging the climate is undoubtable. But its placement, funding, and cultivation insufficiently extricate it from the networks of capital it purports to confront. Studying *Wheatfield* today helps shed light on art’s potential for

disrupting ecologically and socially unjust systems—and the danger of ending up bolstering them.

*Wheatfield* critiques the capitalist proposition that nature is an endless bounty for profiteering. But, as Raymond Williams points out, propositions of the form “Nature is,” “Nature shows,” or “Nature teaches” are selective (1980, 70–71). Ideas of nature are human ideas, historically and politically determined. The same goes for *Wheatfield*. Denes’ ideas of nature are selective, tending toward both wilderness romanticism and a critical form of eco-socialism that visualizes, and thereby politicizes, the often-invisible links between urban life and the violence of hinterland extractivism (Brenner 2016, 126). Denes purposefully retains both romance and critique, and this retention is both *Wheatfield*’s legacy and its problem. *Wheatfield* uproots fixed definitions and cultivates complexity, yet never quite unsettles the idea of the hinterland, especially now that it has become such an iconic and reproduced image. What has grown after *Wheatfield* was harvested is a set of unresolved questions pertaining to global social and environmental justice. These questions reach far and wide, spreading like Denes’ wheat’s kernels, hopefully sprouting as future conversations and art practices.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Dividing, Connecting, and Complicating the Hinterland: The Lower !Garib/Orange River

*Luregn Lenggenhager and Giorgio Miescher*

### UNDERSTANDING HINTERLANDS FROM A HINTERLAND

The Lower Orange River (or Lower !Garib) marks today the border between Namibia and South Africa.<sup>1</sup> The river is an exceptional oasis in an otherwise mountainous and arid landscape. Besides a few mining and irrigation settlements, the area is sparsely populated. Given its exceptional ecology and the abundance of water, the Lower !Garib has sustained highly mobile communities and their livelihoods for centuries. Since the late eighteenth century, the colonial presence at the Cape unleashed pro-

<sup>1</sup> Officially, the river is called Orange River in Namibia. On the South African side, the name Gariep is also widely used and an application for officially renaming it is pending. Gariep is an Afrikaans way to spell the Khoekhoegowab name !Garib. We use Orange River and !Garib interchangeably.

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L. Lenggenhager (✉) • G. Miescher  
Centre of African Studies, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland  
University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia  
e-mail: [luregn.lenggenhager@unibas.ch](mailto:luregn.lenggenhager@unibas.ch); [giorgio.miescher@unibas.ch](mailto:giorgio.miescher@unibas.ch)

found processes of socio-cultural and economic transformation (Penn 2005). Long-term violent displacement and marginalization shaped the region and its societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; both sides of the Lower Orange River were subject to extractive capitalist economies established by both colonial and post-colonial central governments in Europe and Southern Africa, that is, in London, Berlin, Cape Town, Pretoria, and Windhoek (Silvester 1993, 1998; Dederling 1997; Rohde and Hoffman 2008; Legassick 2010).

Our focus on the region of the Lower !Garib sheds light on diverse practices of control, exploitation, and integration of peripheral (border) regions, or hinterlands, into colonial, apartheid, and post-colonial territorial and political formations. We study “material, symbolic, personal and discursive flows” (Lester 2003, 609) over the borders of Southern Africa and thereby wish to provide nuanced historical geographies of the subcontinent. Herein the concept of hinterland provides an idiosyncratic lens through which we might begin such an inquiry.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines hinterland as “the remote areas of a country away from the coast or the banks of major rivers.”<sup>2</sup> The region we are concerned with contradicts this framing, given that it is precisely situated along a major river and close to the Atlantic coast. It hence provides an opportunity to complicate notions of hinterland and specify why they remain productive for thinking about the Lower Orange River region, even if, or perhaps because, this area was recurrently relegated to peripheral geographies, while at the same time it engendered movement, circulation, and exchange along and across the river. In short, the river and its associated landscapes allow us to develop a notion of hinterland that is located in the specificity and ambiguity of time and space, and moves beyond the binary of center and periphery, or an imagined, *othered* hinterland.

How to study a hinterland without re-enforcing an urban perspective, a perspective that has always imagined the periphery from the center, asked the architect Milica Topalovic in her inaugural lecture at the ETH Zurich. She stated that “only when the centre of gravity and its blinding sources of light become temporarily obscured can the phenomena unfolding its shadow be adequately perceived and analysed” (Topalovic 2016, 17). We suggest to go even further and—to stay with Topalovic’s metaphor—not only to obscure the center but to turn up the lights in the

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/definition/hinterland>

hinterland and let it shine. In other words, our research actively tries to understand a hinterland from the perspective of a hinterland. We turn around Topalovic's question and ask what is the hinterland's relation to its city, if there is one at all? And—if thought from the hinterland—does it matter where and what this city or the center is? If hinterlands “can no longer be seen as remote, residual or anachronistic” (Topalovic 2016, 27), what does that mean for people who never saw themselves as anachronistic and remote, but, like in our case, have on different scales and at certain times formed a center of a cultural, economic, and political network, with diverse relations to changing, far-away centers?

To understand hinterlands from the specific area we researched, the Lower !Garib, it might be helpful to think along Phil A. Neel's conceptualization of US hinterlands, as *near* and *far* hinterlands (2018a, 17). The term “near hinterland” seems hardly appropriate for describing the Lower !Garib region, as the relevant centers of powers, such as Cape Town or Windhoek, have never been close enough to allow for the region to become a suburban “foothill of the megacity” (Neel 2018a, 17). The region, as we will elaborate later in some detail, rather fits into the category of the far hinterland, described by Neel as an impoverished area somewhere between “traditionally rural” and a place of violent resource extraction, where “supply chains narrow along thin strips of interstate, river, or railroad” (2018b, 33). To be precise, the Lower !Garib region was often all of this at the same time: a traditional rural area with few direct links to any centers, a hinterland defined by massive resource extraction and often poverty, and, in addition, a space of transit, in-between the centers of Cape Town, Windhoek, and even the global markets.

### SHIFTING HINTERLANDS AND COLONIAL BORDERS

Before flowing into the Atlantic Ocean, the Orange River crosses about 500 kilometers of land that is extremely dry and features an average rainfall below 100 mm per annum. In this aridity, the river and its rich vegetation along the banks constitute an elongated oasis and a source of human and animal life (Blanchon 2017). To farmers in the region, the river's permanent water has been of central importance for many centuries. Here, they can water their livestock, find grazing, and even plant additional fodder. People living along and in the vicinity of the Lower !Garib developed complex and innovative economic and social systems that enabled them to



sustain themselves. Archeological sites on the river banks and early travel reports of the eighteenth century confirm the Lower !Garib's historical role as a central artery of life in this (semi-)desert area.<sup>3</sup> Local population would have hardly called the Lower Orange River a hinterland. The notion of the Lower Orange River as the Cape's hinterland gained prominence and eventually consolidated into a dominant trope within a particular conceptualization of the region. In this narrative, the region was an unchanged, "anachronical" empty land—or hinterland—where all developments and changes came through the expansion of the Cape and the people that were pushed northward.

Andrea Rosengarten and others are challenging stereotypes of Southern African historiography which are built on narrative conventions of colonial determinism and teleology (Rosengarten 2023). Rather, Rosengarten is arguing for more flexible, spatial dimensions of group-making among nomadic pastoralists, mixed subsistence specialists, and newcomers in this region. Or, in other words, the region became an imagined hinterland from the perspective of the Cape Colony, which is still in many ways reflected in today's historiographic description of the region. From the perspective of the region itself, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marked by diverse newcomers leading to new networks, conflict, and exchanges—however, none of them directly linked to any particular center.

For eighteenth-century explorers from the Cape, the Orange River constituted remoteness, a threshold to unknown lands, which also remained inaccessible by sea.<sup>4</sup> To them, crossing the river held the promise of discovery of gold and other treasures of the African interior. Their hopes were disappointed, but the areas known as "Little Namaqualand" (south of the river) and "Great Namaqualand" (north of the river) were nonetheless subjected to the advancement and violence of the northern frontier. A complex dynamic of conflict, alliance, confrontation, and collaboration ensued, in the course of which advancing settlers, run-away slaves, violently displaced Khoi, San, and other groups, local communities and newcomers, traders, and Christian missionaries disputed the control of resources, power, as well as physical and social reproduction (Penn 2005; Dederich 1997). Pressure on livestock and game spiraled, and led

<sup>3</sup> For the archeological research on live along the river, see, for example, Kinahan (2001).

<sup>4</sup> The coastal desert and the lack of natural ports along the Atlantic coast kept colonial penetration from the sea to a minimum.

to the emergence of a characteristic raiding and hunting economy, in which mounted and armed commandos took center stage and intensified the northern frontier's expansion north of the Orange River into Great Namaqualand. It was around this time when parts of the region became an economic hinterland, a space of resource extraction for a global market: livestock was raided and sold to the economic centers. Cape Town was at this time in constant need of fresh meat to cater for international shipping, whereas the region's local hunting products such as ostrich feathers were in demand in salons all over the world (Stein 2007, 778).

In 1848, the Cape Colony claimed the whole territory up to the Orange River, and for the first time the river became an official colonial border. The formal integration of Little Namaqualand into the Cape Colony enabled the establishment of loan farms, where settlers could now count on state protection. These farms were based on rather loosely specified property rights that did not involve tradable land titles; they were mostly given to rich farmers from the Cape, who did not live on the loan farms (Dye and La Croix 2020).<sup>5</sup> This policy further dispossessed African farmers and forced many to either live under the protection of the mission stations established in the far north of the colony or cross the river and settle in Great Namaqualand. In the following decades, large parts of Little Namaqualand were divided up into settler farms (Surplus People Project 1995; Penn 2005). Due to the harsh, arid conditions, though, the region usually attracted settlers with very limited means. Therefore, it never became prime farmland but remained closely linked to the local rural economy with only limited contribution to South Africa's growing commercial farming industry. White farmers in Little Namaqualand could not invest in their land, for example, to fence it, and they were highly dependent on the presence of an African labor force. Hence, until far into the twentieth century, Africans recruited into farm labor maintained a certain degree of economic independence based on livestock ownership and grazing rights on settler-owned farmland (Rohde and Hoffman 2008; Gordon 2023). From a local perspective, the reliance of white farming on local workforce, knowledge, and trade—at least in the farming sector—contradicts constructions of the region as a fully dependent hinterland of the colonial centers at the Cape and in Europe. At the same time, commercial copper mining started in Okiep, South Africa's oldest

<sup>5</sup>The official surveying of most farms along the Orange River only happened in the twentieth century (Moore 2023).

mining town, situated around a hundred kilometers away from the river. This marked the beginning of a new economic sector, which had a lasting impact on the region and its relation to global centers.

The colonial border established along the Lower Orange River and proclaimed in 1848 did not mark a boundary between two colonial powers, but the formal limit of colonial expansion. For a few decades, the Lower !Garib divided an area of direct colonial rule in the south and a highly militarized territory north of the river under African control. Similar to the earlier developments south of the river, in Great Namaqualand, today's Southern Namibia, competing interest groups—Khoekhoegowab-speaking pastoralists, European traders, northward-trekking African farmers from the Cape, and missionaries—formed changing alliances (Lau 1987). Only in 1884, when imperial Germany successfully claimed Great Namaqualand as part of the German Protectorate, did the Lower Orange River turn into a formal border between two distinct colonial territories (Barnard 2000).

Germany's colonization of Namibia proceeded along two main axes from the seashore, starting at the ports of Lüderitz in the south and Swakopmund in the north, and continuing through the desert into the highlands. Whereas Windhoek, once founded by the powerful local leader Jonker Afrikaner, became the political center in the north, Warmbad—and later Keetmanshoop—became equivalents in the south. Given these southern colonial centers' relative vicinity to the river, German colonialism had a direct impact on the Lower !Garib area: settler farms were established, as well as police stations and a system of regular patrols. However, it was not until the early years of the twentieth century that colonial power fully unfolded in the southernmost parts of the territory (Silvester 1993; Botha 2000). Before that, for most African farmers and herders in the region, German colonialists were maybe just another group of powerful newcomers that still allowed for negotiations and even profitable arrangements, because the German settlers needed local labor and political support.

Under the leadership of Hendrik Witbooi, whose family had crossed the Orange River in the first half of the nineteenth century, many of the Nama groups took up arms against German rule. Four years of substantial human and financial investment and military force were required to defeat decentralized and highly mobile African commandos. During the anti-colonial war between 1904 and 1908, African forces would regularly seek refuge in the Cape colony, where they could regroup and prepare new attacks (Dederling 2006). Thus, the !Garib gained strategic importance

and the river was increasingly militarized. Imperial Germany fought this war with utmost brutality. Civilians died in their thousands on the battlefield, in concentration camps or were deported, making the war a genocide (Erichsen 2005; Zimmerer and Zeller 2008; Biwa 2012). The colonial strategy aimed to destroy independent local African societies to make space for an emerging settler economy and to turn Southern Namibia into a colonial hinterland of resource extraction with a self-sufficient white-owned agricultural sector. Consequently, from 1905 all African communities who had fought against the Germans were made subject to a total expropriation of land and livestock (Werner 1998).

After 1908, the German Empire heavily invested in the transformation of Southern Namibia into a commercial farming area. Huge farms were delimited, boreholes drilled, and the general infrastructure improved. In 1910–1912, the construction of a new railway line laid the grounds for a territorial, political, and economic integration of Keetmanshoop and Windhoek. Warmbad, the former center in the South, at the same time lost its importance because it was not linked to the railway. The discovery of rich diamond deposits close to Lüderitz in 1908 gave a further boost to the colonial economy, but the outbreak of World War I and Namibia's occupation by South African troops abruptly stopped imperial Germany's settler ambitions in Southern Namibia. The diamond deposits and farming potential had been a crucial incentive to South African occupation, and once again political turmoil and economic interest changed the status of the Lower Orange River, this time from an international to an internal border (Miescher 2012b; Rutishauser 2023).

This status persisted for 75 years, that is, from 1915 to 1990, though the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations never formally recognized South Africa's *de facto* annexation of today's Namibia. From a South African perspective, things had changed significantly in 1915 and the Lower Orange River region was no longer considered a hinterland but was placed at and promoted as the heart of a predominantly Afrikaner dryland farming community (Silvester 1998; Botha 2000; Swanepoel 2016). White farmers benefitted from massive support by the central government, while the space for maneuver for local African people was shrinking even more. However, with the discovery of huge diamond deposits at the mouth of the Orange River in the late 1920s, the region also became a backbone of the diamond mining industry and thus a specific type of global hinterland. These two economic sectors stood for two opposing hinterland dynamics, as we will discuss later.

During the period of South African rule, Namibia's most relevant colonial border shifted northward up to the Etosha Pan. Henceforth, the so-called Red Line, a combined veterinary and settlement border, drew the line between two essentially different domains: the heartland of settler colonialism in Central and Southern Namibia—closely linked also to the South African mainland—and the African interior in the northern part of the colony, where most Africans lived (Miescher 2012a). Whereas all traffic of humans, animals, and goods over the Red Line was heavily regulated and controlled, white people could cross the !Garib border without any restriction. Movement of African people over the river was controlled in the framework of the general pass laws; local border crossings were possible at some places, for example, for workers in the irrigations schemes on both sides of the river. Movements of animals and goods remained controlled here as well, albeit—at least in the memory of people living at the border—more relaxed than in the north (Moore 2020).

In 1990, after a long struggle for liberation, Namibia gained independence, and political priorities shifted toward the development areas in the far north beyond the Red Line. The South, once pampered and highly subsidized as settler heartland, lost political influence and access to state resources. It became a marginalized region, far away from the centers of power, and due to its small population, it was left with no decisive voting power within the political landscape of the emerging democratic country. Likewise, the end of apartheid in South Africa put an end to significant subsidies for white farmers, who had formed the ideological backbone of the old regime (Bernstein 2013). The redirection of state subsidies toward formerly disadvantaged constituencies was a heavy blow for settlers who farmed along the Lower Orange River, and many of the white-owned farms, especially the ones with low carrying capacity and without irrigation potential, were gradually deserted or sold to larger mining or farming companies. As a result, the Lower !Garib became a hinterland in ways not known for more than 100 years. Today, the region resembles a far hinterland, as described by Neel (2018a), an area that is marked by poverty and remoteness, and only sustains violent and “messy industries.” Though, depending on which economic sector is highlighted, agriculture or mining, the hinterland has been experienced differently.

## FARMING AND AGRICULTURE: A RURAL ECONOMY OR A COLONIAL HINTERLAND?

Given the uniquely favorable ecological conditions along the Lower Orange River, one might assume the emergence of a thriving irrigated agricultural sector during the colonial period. In fact, irrigation farming was important even before colonial farmers began with commercial farming in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Africans used the permanent water of the river for the production of fresh vegetables and fruits for local consumption and small-scale trade, as well as the production of additional food for livestock (Legassick 2010). Taking these African initiatives as role models, the South African administration and the missions also promoted irrigation farming along the Lower !Garib by building canals and small irrigation schemes in order to settle impoverished white South African families—and later also rural “Coloureds” (Visser and Du Pisani 2012; Moore 2023). Additionally, the South African government surveyed and sold many farms along the Lower !Garib to private investors. One of the buyers was a syndicate around the farmer and speculator Carl Weidner, which purchased farms along the river with the aim to turn them into large irrigated farms, mostly for the production of lucerne for sale in Namibia and South Africa (McKittrick 2015; Moore 2023).

However, neither the small-scale schemes nor the large private farms proved economically sustainable in the long run given the remoteness of the area and the challenges of transport and infrastructure. In fact, all local efforts to convince South African Railways to connect the Lower Orange River to the existing railway network, then the only feasible means of long-distance transport, failed (Boonzaaier 2008). On the Namibian side of the river, however, Karakul farming became a more lucrative business for white farmers, and the immense global demand for Karakul pelt and the shortage in Karakul rims led to an economic boom in the region (Swanepoel 2016; Moore 2020). This had two partly contradicting impacts on the Lower !Garib area. Firstly, up to the 1950s, it was prohibited to export Karakul from the occupied territory southward across the river into South Africa, and the internal boundary became a *de facto* veterinary border. Secondly, particularly after the lifting of the export ban to South Africa, and with growing numbers of Karakul sheep, irrigated lucerne production regained importance in order to feed the sheep and strengthened local production networks in which small-scale irrigation

farmers benefitted from the Karakul industry as local suppliers of fresh vegetables to the farms and their many workers.

But again, decline loomed on the horizon, and both forms of irrigation lost importance once the Karakul industry declined and transport costs for fresh products from outside the region dropped in the 1970s. In this case the better infrastructural connection of the region to the centers of power negatively impacted on the local economy of the hinterlands. As a result, many of the smaller irrigation farms were bought by fruit companies, which could operate cash crop production on a different scale. For a few decades only, then, the high demand for Karakul pelts had put the Lower Orange River at the center of a booming global industry. However, even during these gratifying economic cycles Africans could hardly benefit. They had no access to private land ownership and were excluded from loans and investments required for Karakul breeding and irrigation farming.

### SPACES OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION: A MINING HINTERLAND?

Far more important than farming in terms of scale, profit, and duration was diamond mining in the Lower Orange River area, which turned into a global mining center for more than a century. The “discovery” of the first diamonds in 1908 at Kolmanskop close to Lüderitz, 200 kilometers north of the river’s mouth, marked the beginning of a process of territorial enclosure and exclusion that shaped the region’s geography and population for a long time. A closer look at this history will enable us to explain what we mean by territorial closure and exclusion, and how this impacts this hinterland’s relations to the centers of power.

Shortly after the discovery of diamonds, notably in an area with no exclusive mining rights, a diamond rush began, and individuals and small companies started to claim diamond fields for exclusive exploitation. Kolmanskop was the center of diamond mining and a thriving small town in the middle of the desert. The German administration did everything to prevent an uncontrolled diamond rush, and already in 1909 it proclaimed a huge territory along the Atlantic Ocean, a closed area, called “Sperrgebiet.” Soon afterward, the state-owned Deutsche Diamanten-Gesellschaft (German Diamond Company) was awarded exclusive mining rights. The declaration of the Sperrgebiet meant that lands between the

26° south (i.e., circa 100 kilometers north of Lüderitz) southward to the Orange River and 100 kilometers inland were declared prohibited, with access strictly controlled. For local communities, the closure constituted an enormous physical barrier to the lands closer to the coast that they used for grazing and hunting.<sup>6</sup> After the defeat of the German troops in 1915, the mining rights went to the South African-owned Consolidated Diamond Mines of South West Africa (CDM),<sup>7</sup> and the Sperrgebiet remained a closed area for the entire period of South African rule.

Once the diamond deposits around Lüderitzbucht were exhausted, the mining activities moved southward. The discovery of diamond deposits at the mouth of the Orange River in the 1920s led to the establishment of the twin towns Alexander Bay, just south of the river, and Oranjemund, just north of it, in 1926 and 1936, respectively. The eventual relocation of the diamond mining company's headquarters, including some of the buildings and infrastructure, from Lüderitz to Oranjemund was a symbol for how the Lower !Garib had turned into an extractive center for the global diamond trade. In the following decades, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers reached the twin towns, whereby recruitment practices differed depending on the side of the river people worked on. On the Namibian side, most workers came from Northern Namibia or even Angola, Zambia, or Zimbabwe, all of them grouped together under the term "Northern and extraterritorial native laborers," meaning that they all were recruited north of the Red Line (Amupanda 2020). On the South African side of the river, workers were predominately recruited from South African reserves and homelands, and other specific South African recruitment areas. The white workforce, on the other hand, usually came from various South African cities (Bertoni 2008).

Oranjemund and Alexander Bay were thriving company towns with hospitals, schools, shops, and recreational facilities. The mining towns at the mouth of the !Garib were completely sealed off from the area upstream. Heavy policing of the borders of the mining areas allowed for no interaction and exchange with local residents in the interiors. In other words, these towns became sealed off from their own hinterlands, with no profits flowing into the broader region. All workers, black and white, could only

<sup>6</sup>The government still granted emergency grazing rights in the Sperrgebiet to white farmers, at least until 1979 (National Archives of Namibia, Land Administration [LAN], 084/02, Grazing in Sperrgebiet).

<sup>7</sup>CDM was owned by Ernst Oppenheimer and later the De Beers Group.



reside in Alexander Bay and Oranjemund for the duration of their contracts, and single workers, again black and white, often stayed in segregated hostels deep inside the mining areas (Bertoni 2008). Strict racial segregation was imposed until the late 1970s. As a result, migrant workers hardly made a home for themselves here, even if they spent long years in the two coastal towns.

By looking at the period of South African occupation and later apartheid rule in the Lower Orange River area, it becomes clear that a particular region can be understood as a hinterland for some of its inhabitants, while for others it was a center. The massive economic investment in agriculture and the promotion of the Lower !Garib region as a heartland of Afrikaner farming created a strong sense of belonging, superiority, and power for white farmers that is untypical for hinterlands as sites of pronounced political abandonment, as, for example, described by Neel (2018b). The same system, however, forced Africans in the region into wage labor and made them dependent on “violent business” (Neel 2018a), creating a “space of resource extraction” for the colonial, global economy. Hence, living in a hinterland was experienced differently by different people, and as we have shown, hinterlands can also be fragmented within themselves, creating spaces of inclusion and exclusion that complicate concepts of a homogeneous hinterland closely tight to an urban center of power.

### NEW DYNAMICS ALONG THE LOWER !GARIB

Years of extensive mining have depleted the diamond deposits in the desert and along the Lower Orange River, and the mining companies have moved much of their extractive activities offshore. As part of this shift, corporate capital has lost interest in municipal administration and investment. Alexander Bay is in decline, whereas Oranjemund so far successfully fights against the same fate.<sup>8</sup> Both towns have recently been opened to the public and permanent residence is welcome. Notwithstanding these openings, Alexander Bay has turned into a semi-deserted ghost town. Residents of Oranjemund, on the other hand, have embraced the possibility of a prosperous future by turning their town into a travel and tourism gateway to both the Namib Desert and the Lower Orange River valley. At this

<sup>8</sup>However, in late 2021, Namdeb Diamond Cooperation expanded the lifespan of its onshore mines for another twenty years after being granted a massive tax reduction by the government.

stage, success remains a matter of conjecture, but there are signs of change—in Oranjemund and beyond. Aussenkehr, situated 180 kilometers upstream on the Namibian side of the river, has become the largest settlement on the Lower !Garib. Here, private investors run large irrigation farms that produce grapes for the international market. Since independence, Aussenkehr has attracted tens of thousands of seasonal workers, mostly from northern Namibia. In the beginning, the workers stayed on the farm and returned home once the work was done. Thus, after the private grape companies withdrew from their obligation to look after the workers staying on their farms, the Namibian government became preoccupied with developing Aussenkehr into a regular town where permanent settlement for farm workers and their families is a real option. Like Oranjemund almost a century ago, though on a different scale, Aussenkehr functions as an insular world on its own, with minimal connections to the broader region, but with strong ties to the global markets and its centers worldwide. Workers and consumer products all come from outside the region, the former from northern Namibia and the latter from the economic centers of South Africa.

An outlook on the Lower Orange River region's future shows contradictory signs of both opening up and further closure. An indication of a more permeable border, at least for wildlife and tourists, is perhaps the establishment of the /Ai-/Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park in 2003, situated between Aussenkehr and the river delta. Other developments seem to perpetuate and reinforce exclusion and territorial enclosures, such as the establishment of strictly controlled private conservation areas, the growing capture of irrigation farming by global capital, and, most recently, the closing of the border due to COVID-19. Surely, these contradictory developments will invite, once again, a reassessment of the Lower !Garib as a hinterland, or many hinterlands, for those who live there.

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## The Coast Bouleverses at Kolkata

*Rila Mukherjee*

Hinterlands, once a relatively fixed geographic category designating lands functioning as supply areas with transport networks behind a port or a city, are becoming increasingly unstable. As land reclaims the sea for developmental purposes, and as legal strategies transform coastal waters into “land-like, developable components of state territory” (Bremner 2014), the coast recedes and the hinterland shrinks, becoming amphibious with one foot on water and the other on land. Increasingly part of the metro mainland, the hinterland undergoes a process of bouleversement. In the process, as the hinterland moves closer to cities and ports, it transforms from the unknown space of outsider perception into an active *place* where people are seen to create their own identities and histories.

*Hinterland* is not just a spatial category; it is also a perspective. In the wider sweep of human history, it is perhaps important to keep in mind that relations between the city or port and its hinterland were/are anything but natural and unchanging. They have always been complex, and beyond the production of commodities they once depended at least as much on shared networks of trust, on what Gordon (2018) terms the “moral” hinterland.

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R. Mukherjee (✉)  
University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India  
e-mail: [rila.mukherjee@gmail.com](mailto:rila.mukherjee@gmail.com)

*Hinterland* is thus a slippery concept. From the earliest German use in the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a good deal of messiness about it. In spite of the differences of definition among geographers, *hinterland* was conceived of primarily in terms of an economic relationship between a port/metropolis and the “land behind.” This definition is now changing, but there does seem to be something fundamental (in the sense that one cannot exist without the other) in the relation of the city or port to the hinterland apart from rural-urban dichotomies (such as greater or less stratification, greater or lesser literacy) or in the studies of migration or urbanization (Gordon 2018).

As flows from the city or port to the hinterland become anti-flows whereby the hinterland becomes part of the city, the hinterland morphs from a predominantly economic space into new spatial and ideological configurations. Nowhere is the anti-flow more visible than in the case of India’s Kolkata (the erstwhile British Calcutta), once a port-city on the Hugly river and now a metro with some 15 million plus people who, increasingly involved in land-based activities, have turned their back to the sea. Because today’s cartographic and juridical instruments see the sea as land, the upper coast (comprising the northern portions of the Sundarban mangrove forest) is now an adjunct to Kolkata. Since 1970, the various municipalities which made up the northern part of the Sundarban were brought under the control of the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority for developmental work. Since then, the extractive economic functions of the hinterland have retreated, and the lands closest to Kolkata have become sites of gated residential communities with newly assertive territorialities.

Kolkata port is incidental to this new conurbation; Kolkata is no longer a port-city but a city with a port. Since independence in 1947, Kolkata port’s importance has decreased because of reduction in the size of the port-hinterland, economic stagnation in eastern India, and increased siltation in the river. In the fiscal year of 2013/2014, the port handled 41.386 million metric tons of cargo—significantly less than the 53.143 million metric tons of cargo it handled in 2005/2006. In 2018/2019 the port registered a growth of only 10.14% in traffic, handling 63.763 million tons of traffic against 57.891 in 2017/2018. In contrast, during 2016/2017, Bangladesh’s Chittagong port had handled 73.1 million metric tons of cargo. Chittagong port’s official website shows that its

annual cargo tonnage was 100 M in 2019/2020 and its annual container volume was 3.097 M TEUs in 2020/2021.<sup>1</sup>

### SEEING KOLKATA'S HINTERLAND

The Sundarban islands that once housed several port-towns now form Kolkata's hinterland. The Sundarban is a mangrove-forested area at the confluence of the Padma, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, spanning the coastline from Baleswar River in Bangladesh's Khulna division to the Hughly river in India's West Bengal. Classical Sanskrit texts were aware of the opposition between the settled agricultural community (*grama*) and the alien sphere of the jungle (*aranya*) with its people who were constantly moving in search of arable land, but in fact, the two spheres complemented each other in several ways. The jungle's inhabitants looked to the settled areas as a source of agricultural produce, young cattle, and other riches, and as a source of employment, mainly as soldiers, servants, and transporters. On the other hand, the *grama* needed the *aranya* for grazing ground; as a source of new land, manpower, and forest products; as a link between settled areas; and, finally, as a refuge from external invasion. *Grاما* and *aranya* were always in complementary opposition to each other, but scholars tend to highlight only the sedentary characteristics of South Asian society. They focus on the traditional agrarian nuclei of the subcontinent, mainly along the fertile alluvial river plains, and stress the expansion of agriculture through states and temples. As a result, South Asia is perceived as an almost exclusively sedentary domain (Gommans 1998), but the Sundarban overturns this vision of a predominant sedentary culture. It comprises both closed and open mangrove forests, land used for agricultural purposes, mudflats, and barren land, and is intersected by multiple tidal streams and channels that fragment it into numerous small islands.

There have been four lines or axes along which this coast-port-hinterland has been studied. One axis, visible from the last decades of the eighteenth century, concentrated on the hinterland's unique hydrology and geo-morphological features that contributed to a unique riverine economy and culture (Rennell 1781; Mukherjee 1938; Majumdar 1941; Bagchi 1944; Mukherjee 2015; Mukherjee 2017). Another saw the area in

<sup>1</sup> TEU is a twenty-foot equivalent unit shipping container whose internal dimensions measure about 20 feet long, 8 feet wide, and 8 feet tall. It can hold between 9 and 11 pallets.



terms of historical geography (Blochmann 1873; Bhattasali 1935), while yet another, exemplified by district gazetteers and travel accounts, attempted reconstruction of its social history (Bouchon and Thomaz 1988). The last strand, focusing on natural calamities, appeared in this century, when historians came to see these impacting human life. They had neglected calamities earlier, dismissing them as mere “accidental facts” and had argued instead for the human factor as the sole actor of history. However, unlike historians, cultural geographers, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists had long been engaged with understanding fluvial disasters and theorizing and debating them (Baviskar 2007).

However, whereas former cartographic practices drew lines between land and sea as a way of defining territory, current hinterland “amphibious sites” throw into question the categories, scales, and properties usually attributed to spatial practices. The Bangladesh-India conflict over New Moore Island, for instance, shows how international law transforms coastal waters into land-like, developable components of state territory. Although rising sea levels saw the island disappearing in 2010, engaging with such places requires thinking outside territorial and disciplinary boxes, reimagining boundaries and scales through more relational, multi-scalar, interconnected ones (Bremner 2014).

This chapter will show how elements of deterritorialization go hand in hand with processes of reterritorialization, and so it may be useful to speak of regimes of territoriality (Conrad 2016): changing relationships between metro and periphery, between population and infrastructure, between territory and global order. It will chart a reterritorialization by highlighting the distinction between the “up” and “down” islands of the Sundarban, one that reinforces their status as near- and far-hinterlands, and which will prevail until better connectivity and effective disaster management appear.

## THE OLD HINTERLAND

Earlier, ports were seen to be separate from political centers which were located in the far interior. Attempts to integrate the coast with the inland cities had limited impact on the coast. Conquest of a port-city or even a port-town was usually driven by strategic military and political concerns rather than by commercial ones. In Bengal, the joint expansion of Islam and the Islamic Sultanate focused on agrarian settlements in the interior, rather than on the port-towns; these settlements formed the hinterlands of

port-towns, supplying them with rice, grain, oil seeds, and cottons for trade. The coast and the ports, peopled by migrant merchants and sojourning communities, were largely autonomous.

Ma Huan's *Ying-yai sheng-lan* (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores, 1433) noted Chittagong's overseas networks and its fluvial hinterland ("Sonargawan" in Fra Mauro's world map [1450], an important river port prior to Dacca's emergence) thus:

travelling by sea from the country of Su-men-ta-la [Sumatra] ... the [Nicobars] are sighted, (whence) going north-westward for twenty *li* one arrives at Chih-ti-chiang [Chittagong]. (Here) one changes to a small boat, and after going five hundred odd *li*, one comes to So-na-erh-chiang [Sonargaon], whence one reaches the capital. It has walls and suburbs; the king's palace, and the large and small palaces of the nobility and temples, are all in the city. They are Musulmans. (Rockhill 1915, 436–437)

Around 1436, Fei Xin's *Hsing-ch'a-sheng-lan* (The Overall Survey of the Star Raft) saw Sonargaon not only as a hinterland to Chittagong, Bengal's only seaport, but also as the southeast's political center and maritime city, with its own hinterland surrounding it in turn. Pandua, in the interior northwest (in present West Bengal), was the provincial capital:

This country has a sea-port on a bay called Ch'a-ti-chiang; here certain duties are collected. ... After going sixteen stages (we) reached So-na-erh-chiang which is a walled place with tanks, streets, bazaars, and which carries on a business in all kinds of goods. (Here) servants of the King met (us) with elephants and horses. Going thence twenty stages (we) came to Pan-tu-wa [Pandua] which is the place of residence of the ruler. (Rockhill 1915, 441)

The coast, its ports, their hinterlands, and the cities of interior Bengal were thus quite separate entities. Each was a hub with distinct spokes, but as urban centers they were small when compared to the capital cities of the interior.

This spatial organization came under attack from the fifteenth century onward through massive riverine shifts. As villages disappeared and towns decayed, successive shifts facilitated British Calcutta's emergence. English traveler Ralph Fitch's sketch (ca. 1585) shows the Ganga and Meghna joining at Sripur, a local political center and port-town located south of Sonargaon. But 200 years later, East India Company surveyor James Rennell's maps (made between 1764 and 1772) show this confluence

shifting south to Dakhin Shahbazpur (Bhola Island). The Ganga's southward stretch from Jafarganj to Dakhin Shahbazpur is known as Kirtinasha (the Great Destroyer), an eloquent testimony to the power of the raging river. Bakla port-town was destroyed by a cyclone and storm-wave in 1584. Between 1811 and 1867, Sagor Island at the Hughly's mouth (for Sagor's importance, see later) was swept by six major cyclones; those of 1833 and 1864 took thousands of lives. The Ichamati, down which French jeweler-traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier journeyed in 1666 from Jafarganj to Dhaka, now contains hardly any water during the dry season.

Pandua, mentioned earlier, vanished, to be replaced by Gaur as capital on the interfluvium between the Kalindri and Bhagirathi (the upper portion of the Hughly) rivers. The Gaur that we know of was the second city of Gaur, and Saptagrama, the Portuguese Porto Pequeno, was its port. This second city of Gaur was damaged in the 1505 earthquake, and that earthquake again affected river courses. Earlier, the Bhagirathi had flowed east of Gaur, but in the second city of Gaur the river lay to its west. Gaur was so devastated by floods that it was finally abandoned in 1575; the last straw was a plague outbreak. The capital shifted to upland Tanda, but fluvial instability there generated a subsequent west-to-east migration, and upland Bengal's unstable physical morphology overturned port-capital-hinterland relations.

Around this time, there was substantial out-migration to Southeast Asia. Bengalis were present at Southeast Asian courts as servants, slaves, administrators, and eunuchs, often working as goldsmiths and cabinet makers. Tun Bandan, a warrior from Bengal, the Melaka sultan's close aide, died during the Portuguese conquest of the port-city in 1511. Tun Majlis, of Bengali or Turkish origin, then came to serve under Sultan Mahmud and followed him to Bintan after defeat by the Portuguese. He returned to Melaka in 1512 to reinstate the sultan but failed, reappearing nine years later in Gaur (Perret 2011).

Until the eighteenth century, the west-to-east fluvial shifts flooded the area running from Hughly to Sonargaon, creating swamps and marshlands. The shifts introduced new rivers into the landscape, bringing the southeastern hinterland closer to western Bengal: the Garai-Madhumati, Bhairab, Mathabhanga, Arialkhan, and Bangladesh's present-day Padma-Meghna river system, which connected the Hughly and Meghna-Brahmaputra channels. The hinterland expanded as the linkage enabled Hughly port to directly access southeastern goods through the new riverine networks. Noting history's conjuncture with ecology, Richard Eaton

(1993) observes that the shifts linked southeast Bengal with north India by the combined Ganga-Padma system at the very moment of Bengal's political integration with the Mughal Empire in 1575. Economic integration swiftly followed geographic and political integration, for direct river communication with north India dramatically reduced transport costs for southeast products, notably textiles such as fine muslins and grain, from the frontier to the imperial capital complex of Delhi-Agra.

### BRITISH PORT-HINTERLAND AXIS: FIRST MOMENT

Padma's linkage with the Hughly channel (on which British Calcutta appeared in 1690) enabled rapid development of Calcutta port, even as the southeast's older port-towns decayed. Along with Bombay and Madras, two other port-cities also established and ruled by the English East India Company, the port-city of Calcutta was much more than a new urban center: it had an urban core, a near-hinterland, and a far-hinterland. Their different material constitutions, involving expanded transport networks (the hinterland progressively grew between 1894 and 1940 from the initial textiles- and rice-provisioning space to a further 900 km by incorporating coal, tea, and jute, and thereafter to 1050 km by drawing in manganese and iron ore), meant that each hinterland—the near and the far—contained their own distinct economic and political dynamics.

Not a fairground or emporium in the way that other Indian ports still were, Calcutta was qualitatively different from a Mughal city or a commercial center in the interior such as Agra. It represented an occupationally specialized site with an overwhelming interest in commissioning textile production. As the Mughal Empire began to crumble in the eighteenth century, the well-defended company towns of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras became safe havens for Indian merchants and artisans. These three ports redefined the relationship between geography and commerce. With the exception of Calcutta, and perhaps of Portuguese Goa, many ports were located on sites that did not rely on river-borne trade to access the interior; they were not even located on rivers of any significance. Even Calcutta, which *was* situated on a river, did not greatly rely on this river in conducting its main business. Instead, these ports looked toward the ocean, attracting migratory merchants, artisans, skilled workers, and capital, along with goods, from the interior. For the first time in Indian history, as we noted, the ports were not dependent on the hinterlands, but the hinterlands came to the ports (Roy 2012).

## BRITISH PORT-HINTERLAND AXIS: SECOND MOMENT

The city that was Calcutta lay in a region that was once part of the Sundarban. Alexander Hamilton (2013 [1727], 7) emphasized Calcutta's marine character, noting that its founder Job Charnock could not have chosen

a more unhealthful Place on all the River; for three Miles to the North-eastward, is a Salt-water Lake that overflows in *September* and *October*, and then prodigious Numbers of Filth resort thither, but in *November* and *December* when the Floods are dissipated, those Filthes are left dry, and with their Putrefaction affect the Air with thick stinking Vapours, which the North-east Winds bring with them to Fort *William*, that they cause a yearly Mortality.

Throughout the nineteenth century, property law and hydraulic technologies reorganized this mobile landscape by soaking ecologies into a propertied geography in the search for firm, dry land. Even as British legal and engineering technologies of fixing created a collective amnesia about this distinctive maritime landscape, human intervention continued to manage and transform Calcutta into a concrete space (Bhattacharyya 2019, 1, 5).

At the same time, the British were searching for other outlets to the sea for trade. To offset the recurrent problem of silting, Calcutta port needed satellite ports to export hinterland products such as salt, rice, and timber. In 1853, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce drew the government's attention to navigational difficulties in the badly-silted Hughly river, noting that it was impractical and near-impossible for vessels to berth there. The British-driven development of Canning on the Matla river in the Sundarban, close to Calcutta, became the answer. It is notable that *matla* is a corruption of the Bangla word *matal* (drunkard), attesting to the river's unpredictable course. Port Canning as a primary port and the development of Sagar Island as secondary or feeder port were intended to have far-reaching consequences for hinterland populations in terms of creating a larger market for hinterland products and services.

After the 1857 rebellion, as the idea of a second port gained momentum, plans to modernize Calcutta port were sidelined. Sagar had already been surveyed in 1813–1814, and the central portion cleared of jungle. Cultivation was now started by private individuals—not by the government—and ultimately the Sagar island Society was formed with a capital of

Rs. 250,000. Although initially the society made progress with salt panning and rice cultivation, reaping lucrative returns, in later years a cyclone struck, and the project was abandoned. Port Canning too was not a success. There was an influx of ships at Canning between 1865 and 1868, but a decline thereafter. After 1870 not one ocean-going vessel arrived at Canning. Even the mills stopped, until the time they could be leased out. In 1869, in an effort at revival, Port Canning was declared a free port, but as it saw no shipping it was ultimately abandoned. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce washed its hands of its management, accepted that fears regarding navigational conditions on the Hughly were greatly exaggerated and, by enlisting engineering works on the Hughly, turned its attention to Calcutta port once more (Bhattacharyya 2017a).

Between 1870 and 1877, Calcutta became a premier port. The total number of ships calling at the port increased from 931 to 1171, while the shipping tonnage rose by more than 70% (Mukherjee 1968). Calcutta's foreland expanded exponentially. It connected, through commercial and financial networks, to other port-cities that the British Empire traded with: Shanghai, Hong Kong, London, Tokyo, Paris, New York, and Bangkok. Murals depicting these eight cities, along with their most prominent landmarks, adorn the ceiling of the old HSBC building that existed from 1923 until 1955 on Shanghai's famous Bund. Partly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, the building presently houses Shanghai's Pudong Development Bank and tourists are welcome to view the murals, as I did in 2006. They showcase the once-immense reach of Calcutta port-city, which would erode after 1947.

## FROM PORT TO RAILWAYS

The opening of a railway line connecting Canning to Calcutta was also discussed when proposing the development of Port Canning. Debates rose as to whether a rail-line or canal was to be constructed; ultimately the decision favored a railroad. At this point, the East India Railway entered the scene, promoting its case for cheap rice transport to Calcutta.

With the extension of railways there, the Port Canning venture generated a major lifeline for the Sundarban. In a first, Calcutta was connected to the hinterland's outer periphery, and the British could, in theory at least, exercise power over the unconnected and disparate far-hinterland space. The Southeastern line linked Calcutta to Port Canning in 1863 and to Diamond Harbour in 1883, bringing the coast even closer to Calcutta.

Rail carriage was seen to be feasible for a large portion of paddy for the rice mills, which had to be brought from Dacca (then part of Bengal, since 1947 in East Pakistan and, after 1971, in Bangladesh), as the quantities required by the mills could not be brought in by country boats. The rail could further assist in carrying rice for local consumption, and this rail carriage would also be credited as rail earnings. The empty trucks that went from Calcutta to Canning would carry the forest products from Canning to Calcutta, and boats coming for the rice cargo could load the general cargo for a very moderate rate (Bhattacharyya 2017a).

Post-independence in 1947, the railway network expanded but, as it was now in East Pakistan, the Dacca connect was cut off in the 1960s. The hinterland took on a new life by turning toward metro Kolkata. As a vehicle for begetting histories of remembrance and forgetting, it became an active agent in the creation of Kolkata's urban space. Kolkata's creation and life-cycle was a history of forgetting the hinterland as people moved there from Dacca in successive waves of immigration after 1947 (partition) and in 1971 (after the creation of Bangladesh). This forgetting, we must remember, had been central to the creation of property for the extraction of value from the marshes in the British period; and now, the refugee settlements appearing all around Kolkata continued this practice. The city's outlying areas had already been organized into municipalities from 1869, but from 1970 onward, large parts of the Sundarban were made part of Calcutta, commencing with the Calcutta area code of "700." As a result, land prices shot up exponentially.

## FROM SPACE TO PLACE: ECOLOGY, RELIGION, AND POLITICS IN THE HINTERLAND

Presently, the urbanization process is seen to be accelerating. What started with two trains running daily to and from Calcutta has increased to over twenty at present, connecting the dense forests of the Sundarban and Kolkata. There is substantial migration from neighboring districts and other Indian states into those parts of the hinterland that enjoy transport connects with Kolkata. Canning, for example, is now a bustling market town supplying Kolkata with rice and fish.

As geography and ecology triumph over the economy, as the ports fade away and railways appear in their stead, the impact of this developmental shift is visible in the hinterland's changing lifestyles and mores. The

comparatively stable economic and environmental conditions produced through greater access to Kolkata generate a partiality to list islands in order of preference—the last being the ones farthest south and directly opposite the forest, where hunter-gatherers collecting honey and other forest products still exist. So, the hinterland is now divided into the “down” (far) and “up” (near) islands of the Sundarban. The “up” islands are those closest to Kolkata which have seen the most development through NGO initiatives and government schemes. These are now transforming into logistics nodes along the highways and bridges connecting them to Kolkata. They mix residential with logistics spaces, such that day-to-day life in the near-hinterland is shaped by the infrastructure of the global economy in a way not directly experienced in the central city. These terms “up” and “down,” initially used in the English language, are now part of local speech. Islanders use these terms to navigate a geography comprising far more than their natural geography—such as areas nearest or farthest from Kolkata, the location of one’s homestead and economic activity, the type of economic activity one engages in, marriage alliances, and lifestyle choices.

At present, the hinterland stands at the juncture of an amalgamated cultural space shaped by traditional beliefs that are battered from the outside. This is leading it toward a life-path away from the dense forests. Both in the “down” and “up” islands, apart from people “who do the forest” (such as the honey and beeswax collectors, wood cutters, and somewhat surprisingly also fisherfolk and prawn seed cultivators), there are landlords, salaried and working people, as well as the self-employed. The percentage of the self-employed is far higher in the “up” than in the “down” islands. Landowners comprising the better educated and service holders aspiring to a gentlemanly (*bhadralok*) status blend traditional mores with their semi-urban lifestyle to create a niche of their own. This rurbanization has created a binary between the “developed” and “less-developed” in a once-homogeneous region. One’s place in this binary is determined by attributes such as location, assets, total asset value, principal economic activity, types of transportation available, and even the types of deities appropriated for worship and the festivals one chooses to participate in (Bhattacharyya 2017a).

Social difference, expressed through deities and festivals, is also indicative of changing notions of territoriality in the hinterlands. Initially, the deities worshiped were divided into four categories: forest deities, deities offering protection from natural disasters, those giving protection from



diseases, and those protecting people from external attacks (Bhattacharyya 2017b). An amalgam of Hindu and Muslim beliefs and practices, they expressed the idea of a peaceful co-existence and the mutual sustenance of non-humans and humans in the same space. It was an economic agreement—the equitable sharing of the economic resources of the forest between humans and animals—that met religious sentiments.

This religious syncretism based on equitable sharing is now under attack. As hinterland people move to the metro, their chief forest deity, Bon Bibi—(*bon* means forest in Bangla and the term *bibi* betrays her Islamic origins, although there seems to be a long-standing belief among locals that the region’s Islamization changed Bon Devi and Bon Durga into Bon Bibi)—is morphed into the mainstream Hindu goddess Durga, whose worship is celebrated with elaborate pageantry every autumn in eastern India and Bangladesh. Thus, two parallel worlds exist in the Sundarban: one where Bon Bibi—far from being the product of a universal religion like Islam—is actually the result of a localized form of that universal religion. And another world also exists where the same deity is merged with Hindu worship as a mainstream deity like Durga, and sometimes Kali, and dominated largely by that faith’s religious practice, thereby moving Bon Bibi away from her principal roots. We see Bon Bibi worship taking a different turn altogether, especially in the “up” islands, where her affiliation is closer to Hindu deities and rituals associated with Hinduism, and so she is redefined as Bonmata (forest mother). In the islands nearer the densely forested coast—that is, “down” islands—ritualization of worship is still at an indeterminate stage, and the old Bon Bibi continues to rule over a syncretic milieu (Bhattacharyya 2017b).

### THE FLAILING FAR-HINTERLAND

Global history usually privileges motion over place and favors stories that *move* over tales of those who get *left behind*. This is particularly true of the “land behind.” As in Neel’s (2018) “dark” Middle America heartland, decades of failing extractive industries—salt-mining and timber logging come to mind—shrinking tax revenue, defunding state services, and creating public service gaps have kept Kolkata’s far-hinterland a cyclone-battered zone. The destitution was particularly visible after Cyclone Bhola struck West Bengal and East Pakistan on 11 November 1970 and took an estimated 500,000 lives. At that time, the Awami League party was confronting the Pakistan military junta that ruled East Pakistan, and

ineffective relief measures post-Bhola exacerbated an already tense political situation. During the election of December 1970–January 1971, the AL gained a landslide victory. But continuing unrest with Pakistan triggered the Bangladesh Liberation War, led to a mass genocide, and concluded with the creation of the independent country of Bangladesh on 26 March 1971. The combined processes of disaster mismanagement, repeated genocides, and the Liberation War triggered a refugee exodus into West Bengal the likes of which had not been seen since the Partition of 1947.

The forlorn condition of the “down” islands was visible again after Cyclone Aila struck the Indian Sundarban on 25 May 2009. Due to improved early warning systems and effective evacuation, less people died than at the time of Bhola, but the damage was still intense. In West Bengal, more than 100,000 people were left homeless. A storm surge breached over a 100 river embankments and at least 350,000 people were affected. Later reports indicated that upward of 2.3 million were displaced by the storm as 175,000 homes were destroyed and 270,000 were damaged. The region, which housed 265 of the endangered Bengal tigers, was inundated with 6.1 m (20 ft) of water. Dozens of tigers are feared to have drowned in Aila’s storm surge, along with deer and crocodiles.

On 20 May 2020 Cyclone Amphan made landfall near Bakkhali in the West Bengal Sundarban with winds of 155 km/h (95 mph). Much fewer people died than in 2009, but the government estimated that the storm caused at least US \$13.5 billion worth of damage and directly affected 70% of the population. Its effects were deemed worse than those of COVID-19, which was then raging. Links were severed as a storm surge of 5 m (16 ft) inundated a wide stretch of the coast. Floods extended 15 km (9.3 mi) inland. Embankments were overtaken. Bridges linking islands to the mainland were swept away. As the far-hinterland’s economy sinks into obscurity, and as embankments collapse time and again, its people will live as they have always done, with ever-present danger.

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## Reclaiming the (Hinter)land: Lake Texcoco and the Airport That Never Was

*Luciano Concheiro San Vicente and Xavier Nueno Guitart*

Every form of territorialization produces its own type of hinterland. The history of the term hinterland speaks of a practice of territorial control which allowed colonial powers to claim sovereignty over the region lying behind a port. In the past, hinterlands were largely rural, but today, due to the extension of the urbanization process, they have become peri-urban areas in which the city never finishes dissolving into the countryside. Hinterlands have proliferated around the increasingly concentrated wealth of networked cities. Where there is a port—a trading center—we often will find a hinterland surrounding it, that is, a subsidiary area that provides resources and people. At the margins of these new hinterlands, we can see how problems that emerged during colonialism are recast in the political language of today's global economy.

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L. Concheiro San Vicente (✉)  
National Autonomous University of Mexico, Morelia, Mexico  
e-mail: [luciano.concheiro@humanidades.unam.mx](mailto:luciano.concheiro@humanidades.unam.mx)

X. Nueno Guitart  
École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), Lausanne, Switzerland  
e-mail: [nueno@g.harvard.edu](mailto:nueno@g.harvard.edu)

Just as colonial ports, airports are nodes of entanglement between the local and the global. In our research, we consider the construction of a new airport for Mexico City in the lakebed of Texcoco, the plans for which were initiated in the 2000s. In the early twentieth century, large parts of the lake upon which the city stood were dried up through ambitious programs of land reclamation. The emerging land has been at the center of political disputes that pit rural against urban visions of development ever since. In this chapter, we focus on the latest attempts to render parts of the lake productive for the city at the expense of the families of peasants who combine small-scale agriculture with other productive activities or jobs that live and work in this area. The construction of a new airport for Mexico City is yet another iteration of what Matthew Vitz (2012) has dubbed the “Texcoco Problem.”

The official story of the airport must be read against a longer history of the reclamation of the lake by the expanding city. Lake Texcoco is one of the five lakes making up the lake basin of the Valley of Mexico, where Mexico City is located. Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica empire, was a lake city, built largely on artificial islands. The characteristics of the lakes meant that their waters were not drinkable—because of their salinity or because of the large amount of organic matter they contained. However, they were essential for agriculture. Thanks to a series of hydraulic works, Mexicas were able to avoid flooding and control the waters, which led to the development of an agricultural system of artificial islands called *chinampas* (Mundy 2015). In addition, vital resources were obtained from the lakes and their surroundings: fish and plants such as the tule (*Schoenoplectus acutus*), which was used to build chinampas and other objects such as baskets.

Spanish colonization established a completely different relation with the lakes. During the military siege and in the years following the conquest, fundamental elements of the indigenous hydraulic infrastructure were destroyed. An urban vision was imposed that moved away from the lake city. For the city to expand and survive, it had to dry up the lake beneath it. This destabilized the control of water that the indigenous people had before European colonization. Very soon a series of floods began to occur and from the middle of the sixteenth century, plans and projects began to be made to drain the lakes. This was not achieved until 1900, when the Great Drainage Canal was completed (Perló Cohen 1999).

Since then, Mexico City has seen the lakebed as its hinterland and its inhabitants as a surplus population that can perform subsidiary functions

in the service of the city's interests. But, from the perspective of its inhabitants, the expansion of the city should be countered by the restoration of the lakebed to its agricultural origins. At the crossroad between these two visions, one urban, the other rural and peri-urban, we find Lake Texcoco, which continues to manifest itself as a key actor that shapes the forms of territorialization and the different uses of space, whether as agricultural land, as international airport, or as ecological park. We propose to investigate the construction of the New Airport of Mexico City as part of the unresolved history of expansion onto the lake, and to argue that it is the soil—saline, unstable, and shifting due to its condition as a lakebed—that gives meaning to this hinterland.

### MACHETES AGAINST AIRPLANES

In August 2002, after nine months of violent protests, the recently elected President of Mexico Vicente Fox had to put a premature end to his most ambitious infrastructure project: the creation of a new airport for Mexico City in the lakebed of Texcoco. Early in his presidency, Fox had issued a decree to expropriate 5376 hectares of land belonging to thirteen *ejidos* (communal lands that had been created after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to grant agricultural rights to communities of peasants). Among these, five were losing 80% or more of their surface to the national project: San Salvador Atenco, Santa Isabel Ixtapan, colonia Francisco Madero, Acuexcomac, and Tocuila. Leaders of these communities organized an ambitious response that escalated into a full-fledged conflict with the state and gained the attention of national and international audiences. These communities have an ancient history and consider themselves indigenous communities (personal communication with Trinidad Ramírez in February 2022). As they say, “we are native, and therefore, we have the right to this land” (quoted in Ortega Bayona 2005, 16).

Armed with machetes, the images of the people of San Salvador Atenco and other municipalities rose to the front pages of national newspapers. As one of the leaders of the resistance, Ignacio del Valle Medina, told the media: “Machetes are a working tool and a defense tool, they also tell Fox that he was wrong with the decree, that we are not going to surrender in the fight to preserve our lands” (quoted in Izarraraz et al. 2011, 53). The machetes swinging in the air, in a defiant gesture against airplanes, made visible the contradiction between urban and peri-urban realities whose fate had historically been intertwined but rarely coinhabited. On the one hand,

there was the logic of the city, with its constant expansion and aperture toward the global economy. For the city, the area of Texcoco oscillated between a hinterland that defined the contours of the city's future expansion and a wasteland yielding environmental and social ills. On the other hand, we find the logic of the *ejidos*, which vindicated their rights to the land resisting the expropriation attempt by the government.

At the time President Fox issued his expropriation order, land tenure in Mexico was undergoing an important transformation. As a result of structural shock policies in the 1980s and the establishment of international trade agreements, Mexico had launched an important (although partly concealed) reform of the land with the amendment of Article 27 of its constitution in 1992. Until then, the structure of agricultural land tenure in Mexico resulted from the post-revolutionary model of *ejidos*. The reform of Article 27 allowed *ejidatarios* (members of the *ejidos*) to fracture the communal property and acquire individual rights that could be sold to private actors. The fiduciary relation that the state had established with *ejidos* had allowed it to expropriate them easily in the past. Under this new structure of land property, however, the task was becoming more complicated as the state had to negotiate with each individual once the *ejidos* were dismantled.

National authorities had not anticipated the scale of the response to the expropriations in 2001 and 2002. A swift take-over was envisioned. In the eyes of the authorities, the area that was being expropriated was practically valueless: mostly contaminated lands that contained too much saltpeter to be cultivated and were too soft to be built upon. Fox publicly stated that the people of Atenco had “won the lottery” when they were offered to sell their land and relocate (Venegas 2001). The profits of this lottery were, however, miniscule: 26 pesos/m<sup>2</sup> for irrigated land and 7 pesos/m<sup>2</sup> for all the rest (the currency exchange at the time was 9 pesos/1 USD). Intellectuals and the national media highlighted that this land was being acquired for a different purpose than it was used for at the time, and that the strategy of the government had been one of great contempt for the members of these communities.

According to this master-narrative of the formation of Mexico City, the vast infrastructural projects of the 1910s–1930s dried up the lake basin. Such a process has been variously recounted as an engineering feat, a tale of modernization, a colonial heritage, and an environmental disaster. The “Texcoco Problem,” as it has been dubbed, is a multifaceted reality that highlights the tensions that arise between urban and rural perspectives on



agricultural development and city expansion. Recently, Matthew Vitz has shown a long history of contradictory approaches to this land. Since the lake has been dried up it has been imagined as a real-estate opportunity, an ecological barrier for the city, a site for agrarian justice, and a stockhouse for an imagined autarchic city (Vitz 2012).

The protests that followed the attempt to expropriate the land of the thirteen municipalities reenacted the century old “Texcoco Problem.” Just as had happened in the past, through the creation of an airport, the city was envisioning a bright future for the region in which the people of the region had no say and were not allowed to take part. Armed with technical reports and excellent numbers, the governmental agents expected to easily overcome any resistance that they may have found. But it was the extreme contempt with which the expropriation order was launched that led to a substantial escalation of the revolt.

The Atenco movement was deeply marked by local context and its history dates back to the Zapatista movement of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. However, their struggle against the construction of the airport and in defense of their land can be read as a testimony of the recent changes in peasant politics and, in this sense, as part of a broader global phenomenon. The case of Atenco is reminiscent of other cases of resistance to airport construction—the Narita riots in Japan in the 1970s is one of the best known, but there are other examples such as the Notre Dame des Landes in France. In these insurrections we see the inhabitants of the non-urban and peri-urban hinterland turning against the current subsidiary role that cities imagine for them. As Neel has stated, nowadays these movements perform a resistance against becoming a wasteland for global production (2018, 17).

### THE TEZONTLE LAND RECLAMATION

On 3 September 2014 an event entitled “Advances and Challenges of the National Plan of Infrastructure” took place. Among the audience were some of the most important public servants and businessmen in Mexico. In his speech, President Enrique Peña Nieto highlighted that the saturation of Mexico City’s airport had peaked in the past years. The population in the metropolitan area had increased and Mexico was increasingly projected onto the rest of the world, seeing itself as a global location and node. These factors were crucial to understanding an uptick in flight traffic that had brought to the limit the carrying capacity of the airport’s

infrastructure. The President announced that he had settled for the same location—the Texcoco lakebed—as the 2001 project. Only this time, the government would not expropriate any land, but would build a more contained version of the airport in 4430 hectares of federal land (Peña Nieto 2014).

The winner of the international contest to design the airport was a team consisting of the British architect Norman Foster, the Mexican architect Fernando Romero, and the engineering firm Arup. After the announcement, Romero gave a brief speech. He lauded the figure of Foster, whom he described as “the best designer of airports in the world.” After enlisting the most important prizes that Foster had been awarded, he reminded the audience that he had designed the airport of Hong Kong on an artificial island that had been reclaimed from the sea (Romero 2014). After Romero, Foster took the stage and gave a general presentation on the project of the New Airport of Mexico City. He described his design as the result of an in-depth investigation in the conditions of the territory and the knowledge acquired in other projects such as the Hong Kong and Beijing airports. The shape and structure of Mexico City’s new airport would be previously unseen (Fig. 6.1). There would not be a conventional cover nor vertical walls or columns. It was to be, in his own words, “a sculpture that extends, that flies, a beautiful sculpture” (Foster 2014). However, there was something more important than architecture, Foster said: infrastructure. Without infrastructure cities and nations cannot exist, he went on. The quality of the streets, public spaces, bridges, means of transport are what define the quality of life and our identity. For this reason, he explained, investing in infrastructure “is what allows the formation of a society: it means betting on future generations” (Foster 2014). What Foster or his futuristic renderings did not say was that the new airport in Texcoco posed a territorial and environmental problem of enormous dimensions.

After President Peña Nieto’s announcement, the communities in the area resumed their protest. Machetes were again brandished on the street. Although this time their lands were not expropriated, they claimed that certain lands had been acquired by the government in an irregular manner and that the project would directly harm them. Ignacio del Valle, the leader of the Front of Peoples in Defense of the Land of San Salvador Atenco, declared: “We repudiate this project of death that directly affects our lands” (Redacción 2014). The protests, however, were not as successful as in 2001–2002. Construction began on the New Mexico City Airport

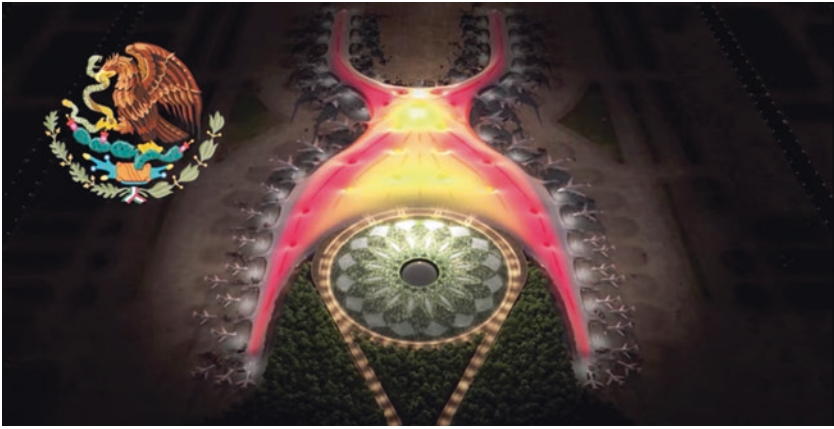


Fig. 6.1 Rendering of Foster and Romero's airport project. Screenshot from a promotional video produced by the Mexican government. *YouTube*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwsJnNd\\_\\_1I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwsJnNd__1I)

in September 2015, and with it started the production of a new kind of hinterland.

The ground began to be weeded and leveled. About 33 kilometers of perimeter fence were built. But the most significant work was to improve and consolidate the soil in order to start building the runways and platforms. Tons of *tezontle*, a reddish and porous volcanic stone, and basalt began to be transported on the muddy soil of what was the Lake of Texcoco. To compress the earth with enough weight to squeeze out the water, large pipes were installed on the ground, designed to function as giant straws through which the water could be expelled. Soil engineers devised a method to pump water out by laying alternative beds of *tezontle* and basalt. Basalt is heavier than *tezontle*, so the soil was compacted little by little and the water was slowly siphoned out. The idea was to create a firm ground so that, when the runways were built, they would not sink under the weight of the planes. More than 22 million cubic meters of *tezontle* and 14 million cubic meters of basalt were used to consolidate the soils. The material was extracted from the hills surrounding the land where the airport would be installed. This extraction generated cavities in the quarries of up to 100 meters in length.

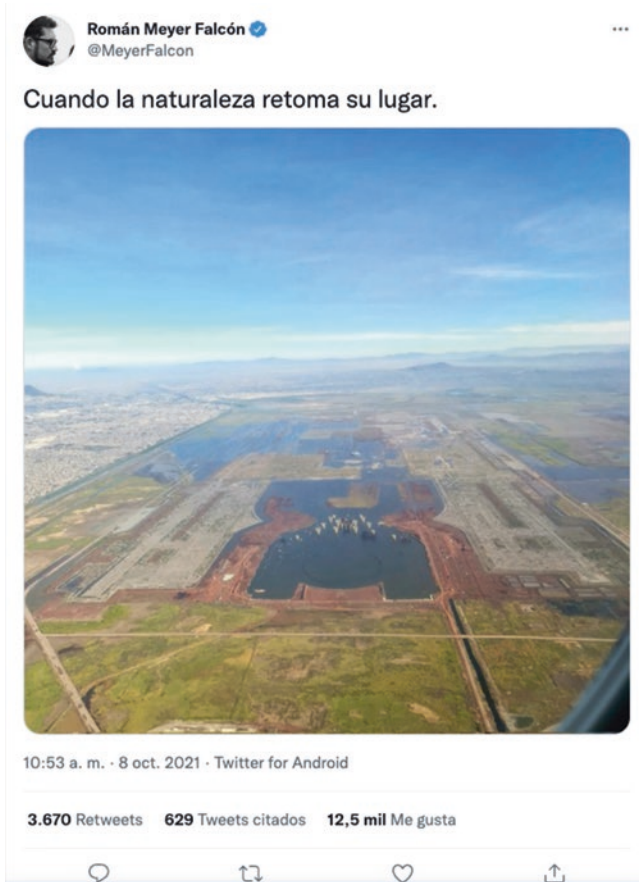
Like Foster's Chek Lap Kok airport, the New Mexico City Airport in Texcoco was a land reclamation project built on an artificial island. However, this time land was not being claimed from the sea, but from the lake. The millions of cubic meters of *tezontle* and basalt became an iteration of the old attempt to dry out and make Lake Texcoco productive. The aim was to solve the "Texcoco Problem": to transform the hinterland into a new, fruitful, and profitable space, *the* architectural emblem of global Mexico. The problem was that this project of a global Mexico literally stood on muddy and unstable ground.

The transformation of the Texcoco hinterland into the space of global Mexico involved the creation of a new hinterland. The terminal and the tracks designed by Foster and his team could only exist thanks to the illegal exploitation of *tezontle* and basalt, the extraction of which generated devastation in the communities that surrounded the airport. The debris in the air had triggered asthma, constant bleeding, and other illnesses. The noise of the machinery and the cargo trucks never stopped causing psychological damage. Their houses had been damaged and were in danger of collapsing. In addition, there were the environmental effects of felling trees and collapsing hills (Carabaña 2019).

Different specialists also insisted on the impact that the new airport would have on the non-human world. Particularly, it was argued that due to its construction approximately 200,000 birds, of about 250 endemic and migratory species, would stop coming to Lake Texcoco because their habitat would be destroyed with the new infrastructure and the airplanes would drive them away. The construction of the runways, to give only one example, had destroyed nesting sites in temporary ponds for species such as avocets, monjitas, Mexican ducks and snowy plovers, with the latter being a globally threatened species (Escalante and Alcántara 2018).

### ECOLOGICAL SPECULATIONS

In October 2021, the Minister of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development of the Andrés Manuel López Obrador government, tweeted a photograph with a short text: "When nature restores its place." It was a photograph taken from an airplane which showed the construction site of the Texcoco Airport partly inundated (Fig. 6.2). It had rained and you could see a huge X of water tracing the silhouette of the terminal designed by Foster, in the middle of a field completely painted red by the *tezontle*. Large structures loomed out of the water, which Foster had named *foniles*



**Fig. 6.2** Post on Twitter by Román Meyer Falcón, Minister of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development, 8 October 2021. [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com/MeyerFalcon)

(in reference to the word funnel). They were one of the central elements of his design and would serve to support the roof of the X-shaped terminal building, allowing for large openings, and helping ventilation, capturing rain and letting in natural light (Juárez 2018).

Ever since Fox's initial proposal in 2001, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) had spoken out against the airport in Texcoco (Larrosa Haro 2002). When he ran as a candidate for the 2018 presidential

elections, the cancellation of the construction of the New Mexico City Airport became one of his main campaign promises. After winning the presidential elections in July 2018, AMLO, as president-elect, organized a popular consultation throughout the country to make a decision on the future of the airport. The plebiscite lasted four days, from 25 to 28 October. The referendum asked, given the saturation of the existing Mexico City airport, which option was best for the country: rebuilding the current Mexico City and Toluca airports and building runways at the Military Air Base Santa Lucía or continue construction in Texcoco and stop using the current airport. The first option won. And so, in the first days of 2019, just a month after he became president, AMLO officially canceled the construction of what would become the New Mexico City International Airport. As one of its first big actions, his government repurchased the project's financial bonds and began negotiations to terminate existing contracts in advance.

Once the construction of the new airport in Texcoco was canceled, it was announced that an old idea would be taken up to remedy the air congestion (Ruíz Romero 2015, 270–271, 310–311): strengthen and modify airports that were relatively close to Mexico City and create a Metropolitan Airport System. The Santa Lucía Military Air Base, located in Zumpango (State of Mexico), 45 kilometers from the city, was expanded and modified to house a civil airport that was inaugurated in 2022. In addition, a third terminal would be built at the current Mexico City International Airport. Finally, the capacity of the Toluca airport (State of Mexico), some 40 kilometers from the city, would be increased.

Along with the cancellation came another significant announcement. The land where the construction of the New Airport designed by Foster and his team had been underway would be converted into an urban park: the Lake Texcoco Ecological Park. This project, which uses more than 4000 hectares where the airport was going to be built and adds another 8000, has as its main objective to carry out an ecological restoration of the area and generate spaces for public use. Directed by the architect Iñaki Echeverría, and officially described as an “act of historical justice,” it has three axes. The first is environmental protection and entails creating a legal figure that protects the place as an ecological restoration zone, as well as installing refuge areas for aquatic species. The second is the organization of various public activities and events (races, cycling, picnics, kites, open-air cinema, shows) in the fenced-in area where the airport was being built. The third is the creation of spaces for permanent use, including

biocultural reserve areas, nurseries, an educational pavilion, bodies of water, and a sports park (Jiménez and Echeverría 2020).

Could canceling the construction of the new airport and creating in its place an urban park, a conservation and recreational space, solve the Texcoco problem? Some claimed that it did not, and the members of the Front of Peoples in Defense of the Land of San Salvador Atenco, the coordinator of the towns #YoPrefieroElLago (“We prefer the lake”) and various activists and academics launched the #ManosALaCuenca (“Hands on the basin”) campaign. With regard to the canceling of the construction of the airport in Texcoco, they pointed out that it did not guarantee that the area would be ecologically and bio-culturally preserved, that they had not been acknowledged during the decision-making process, and that the park concealed the beginning of a process of urbanization and speculation in one of the few places still undeveloped in the area (Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra de San Salvador Atenco y Coordinadora de Pueblos #YoPrefieroElLago 2020a). They asked to be taken into account, to share their knowledge of the site, and to take advantage of past failures in order to avoid future disasters.

The movement insisted that if the government wanted to transform the area, it did not need an airport or a park, but a lake. They demanded that federal land be returned to the towns affected by the airport and that all mining, urban and dewatering projects should be canceled. Their proposal was to create a Community-managed Protected Natural Area. One of their communications read:

[...] the new government has an opportunity emanating from its popular mandate. We ask them: are they going to repeat the same model of the previous administrations? Are they going to ignore those who have defended this place? And especially: what is more important to them, life or money and speculation? (Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra de San Salvador Atenco y Coordinadora de Pueblos #YoPrefieroElLago 2020b)

The members of #ManosALaCuenca pointed out the old problem: an urban project was being generated with the aim of transforming the hinterland into a productive space, this time through an environmental and recreational project, but once again without consulting the inhabitants of the place. They also insisted that building facilities for sports activities and, in general terms human presence, would affect the bird inhabitants of Lake Texcoco. They pointed out the imminent danger of real estate

speculation that the well-intentioned urban ecological park could bring. Such speculation was putting them at risk to be displaced into a new hinterland—this time beyond the illegal *tezontle* mines, somewhere where they would not be seen.

In March 2022, the area was declared a natural protected area in the near future. Some *ejidatarios* protested against agricultural lands becoming part of the conservation area. As we write this text, the Lago de Texcoco Ecological Park is still under construction. It is not yet known if the project will undergo significant changes and, much less, what consequences it will bring. However, as the communities that inhabit the Lake Texcoco area who have been in resistance for more than a century stated: the dispute is between life and speculation.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the ways of interpreting the story told in this chapter has been a defining one for urban geography studies: the idea that the accumulation of wealth in cities generates dispossession on their margins. As cities grow, this dispossession is being transferred to new frontiers. If capitalist relations of production are not changed, the hinterland will be irretrievably displaced as an original sin that cannot be erased. This argument, which we can trace back to Friedrich Engels's book *The Housing Question* (1872), has been interpreted as a kind of natural law of urban development (Harvey 1972). The problem with this urban planning law is that, like the acts of the real estate speculators, it makes invisible the demands of the expropriated who inhabit the hinterland.

If we stop to think about it, throughout the long history that begins with the drying up of Lake Texcoco, the demands of the peasants have always been the same: to care for and cultivate their lands, in a way that depends on themselves without having an exterior value assigned to their way of life by others. In the different episodes that we have recounted, the state, investors, developers, and environmentalists have tried to convince these communities that this use is not viable. But the experience and affection they have for their lands tell them that it is. The problem of successive governments has been to deny those who inhabit the hinterland the right to make decisions about their own lands.

In the process of expansion of the hinterland, the reclaimed land resists rapid appropriation by economic interests. Today, Lake Texcoco continues to be a territory laden with saltpeter, unstable and watery, in which the



arguments of the city and the countryside come into conflict without finding a simple resolution. A genuine interstitial space, the lake and the surrounding lands resist univocal forms of appropriation. The only thing that is clear is that this complex territory, with its unique material conditions, has generated over time intimate forms of communality and attachment by the people who inhabit it.

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# Hinterlands of Extraction, Climate Change, and South African Energy Companies

*Sindi-Leigh McBride*

## INTRODUCTION: CECIL JOHN RHODES IN THE COMPANY GARDENS

In the tranquility of Cape Town's Company Gardens on a secondary axis of the Iziko South African Museum, a statue of Cecil John Rhodes has (for now) evaded both removal and decapitation.<sup>1</sup> The statue features a full body replica of Rhodes, his left hand raised and pointing north. Erected in 1908, the bronze of Rhodes's heat-crumpled three-piece suit has oxidized. The statue thus reminds passers-by of his legacy in shades of Verdigris, the natural patina formed by weathered copper, brass, or bronze that appears to the human eye as "a soft hue somewhere between green and blue ... a colour made from change" (Kelleher 2020). Besides the color, there is another striking detail. Carved on the granite block beneath Rhodes's feet is an inscription that puts the following words in his mouth:

<sup>1</sup>In 2016, however, there was an attempt to saw off the statue's leg with an angle grinder.

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S.-L. McBride (✉)  
Centre for African Studies, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland  
e-mail: [s.mcbride@unibas.ch](mailto:s.mcbride@unibas.ch)

“Your hinterland is there.” Bringing these elements together, the statue represents more than the imperial history of a mining magnate: it is also a reminder of “the colonial dream of climate control” (Mahony and Endfield 2018, 27), linking imperialism and climate change. Climate, after all, constitutes one of the world’s most successful imperial projects in its capacity to colonize the deepest recesses of the human mind—“whether determining wealth, war, or well-being, climate has long been called upon to do serious explanatory work” (Livingstone 2015, 937).

The importance of climate to imperial expansion is illustrated by the entanglement of the minerals revolution and colonial forestry in the Cape Colony around the time that Rhodes began his political career in South Africa. Brett Bennett and Fred Kruger detail how the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley during the 1870s “thrust forestry into the foreground of the rural economy” (2015, 29) and intensified the cultivation and extraction of timber on the coast. Less discussed is how this process was imbricated with the need to understand coastal climate to produce sufficient timber to be sent from the coast to the hinterland for use on the diamond and gold fields. Between 1876 and 1891 (Rhodes joined the Cape House of Assembly in 1877<sup>2</sup>), the Cape Agriculture Ministry shaped the future of tree planting and climate knowledge in the colony. State-sponsored scientific programs such as veterinary science and irrigation were motivated by the need to support both the colony’s growing population and ambitious economy, resulting in vastly different imperatives—from taming the climate to trying to “fit the tree to the climate”—guiding forestry policy. By the 1900s, foresters had accumulated significant empirical information on species and sites from experimental trials in the decades before. The imperative to plant forests of exotic trees successfully was at once a response to the demand for wood from the mines and a fixation on mastering the climate cost-effectively. In the process, Cape foresters gathered “detailed observations of rainfall patterns, temperature ranges, climatic cycles, and soil types of the colony” (Bennett and Kruger 2015, 49), and thus contributed to early climate science in the colony.

Meanwhile, in his dual capacity as politician and mining tycoon, Rhodes instituted formal and informal policies that facilitated apartheid and continental expansion. Panashe Chigumadzi (2021) summarizes this well when describing how the nineteenth century’s minerals revolution dispossessed

<sup>2</sup>“Cecil John Rhodes | South African History Online.” <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/cecil-john-rhodes>

Black people in southern Africa as gold became the foundation of the global economic system:

one of the world's most dramatic social and industrial transformations produced the dynastic wealth that made "Randlords" of white men like Cecil John Rhodes and the dispossession that made chibaro—slave labour—of the peoples of the last independent African polities. *Rhodes' feverish imperial dream was Africa's furious inferno.*

This chapter is concerned less with Rhodes than with the inferno identified by Chigumadzi and with how the concept of the hinterland might help think through the afterlives of imperial dreams. The statue is a starting point for exploring how the time-space of the hinterland—a chronotope entangled with colonial and other violent histories of exploitation and extraction—relates to contemporary realities of climate change on the continent. As shown by the intertwining of colonial forestry, climate, and extractive industry, hinterland thinking helps to expose how climate underlies the development of all imperialisms. It also demonstrates how imperialism may have started on coasts with the creation of port cities like Cape Town, but also advanced inland because of the demands of commercial interests and associated industry like the gold and diamond fields.

The first half of the chapter emphasizes the value of using the hinterland's *metaphorical* association with that which lies beyond the visible or known (instead of only its literal meaning of a peripheralized place) by reflecting on the COP26 United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference and the historical relationship between imperialism and climate change. The second half analyses *actual* hinterlands of extraction, focusing analysis on coal-fired power in South Africa, but also referencing other industries such as agriculture. The two approaches are intended as mutually reinforcing to point to the existence and legacy of both historic and enduring hinterlands.

## THE HINTERLAND OF COP26

To demonstrate the potential of using the hinterland concept metaphorically with respect to climate change, a reflection on COP26 is illustrative. Hosted in Glasgow, COP26 took place from 31 October to 12 November 2021 and was delivered across two sites: the [Scottish Events Campus](#) (the Blue Zone) and the [Glasgow Science Centre](#) (the Green Zone). The Blue

Zone was a UN-managed space, where delegates from 197 negotiating parties and observer organizations congregated. This Blue Zone was where the key negotiations between world leaders took place; only those accredited by the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) could access this space. Thus, the delegates negotiating the collective future of the planet—many of whom are either directly within the employ of fossil fuel companies or in that of government departments working with such companies—were tucked away in a highly securitized cordoned-off area. Brendan Montague (2021) describes the Blue Zone as “a military encampment” with towering fences, while the publicly accessible Green Zone was dominated by corporations like Unilever and Microsoft. According to the roster of registered attendees, corporate delegations were often listed as attending as part of the cohort of “non-governmental organizations” so that they could still participate in or observe the negotiations in this zone.<sup>3</sup>

The Green Zone was managed by the United Kingdom Government and offered a platform for the general public, civil society, academia, and others. As Swedish telecommunications equipment manufacturer Ericsson candidly stated on their blog, “Beyond the Blue Zone is the Green Zone ... where organizations that can afford it will have their own pavilion, exhibition, or event, to show what they’re doing about climate change” (Öhlander 2021). This emphasizes how even the Green Zone was dominated by corporate entities. The not-so-subtle message was that corporations are the solution to climate change, and that, while civil society was represented, they were “both *physically and metaphorically cast into the hinterland* in venues scattered across the living center of the city of Glasgow” (Montague 2021, emphasis added). This example shows how epistemologies and ontologies of hinterland can shed much-needed light on the bizarre reality of public exclusion and sponsorship by fossil fuel companies.

Richard Heede (2014) explains that the international legal framework established in 1992 to prevent “dangerous anthropogenic interference” with the climate system has focused attention on the role of the nation-state, suggesting a shift in perspective from states to corporate entities—both investor and state-owned companies. His analysis of the historic fossil

<sup>3</sup>For example, the delegation from Pepsi had four listed attendees under three different organizations: US sustainability non-profit Ceres, the International Chamber of Commerce, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Shendruk and Yanofsky 2021).

fuel and cement production records of 90 leading producers of oil, natural gas, coal, and cement between 1854 and 2010 reveal them to be “the primary sources of anthropogenic greenhouse gases that are driving and will continue to drive climate change” (Heede 2014, 238). Findings like this, together with the irony of power companies responsible for historical emissions bankrolling and dominating the climate conferences, demand a rethink of responsibility for climate change beyond the nation-state.

To return to Rhodes’s statue in the Company Gardens: putting scholarship on climate imperialism in conversation with post-apartheid corporate expansion from South Africa to the rest of the continent is an opportunity to investigate the climate change implications of what the popular media has referred to as the “‘South Africanisation’ of the African economy” (Daniel and Lutchman 2004). In the next section, the intertwined histories of climate and imperialism are discussed in relation to the notion of hermeneutic injustice, followed by a more specific focus on actual hinterlands of extraction by looking at two South African energy companies and their operations in Africa.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IMPERIALISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE: A HERMENEUTIC INJUSTICE?

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh states:

[i]n accounts of the Anthropocene, and of the present climate crisis, capitalism is very often the pivot on which the narrative turns. ... However, I believe that this narrative often overlooks an aspect of the Anthropocene that is of equal importance: empire and imperialism. (2016, 87)

Addressing this gap, Fabien Locher and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz show how the topic of climate was used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a matrix to “reflect upon people, objects, and processes” (Locher and Fressoz 2012, 598). Their genealogy of climate as a category of environmental and political action shaped by imperial agendas is further confirmed by Georgina Endfield and Martin Mahony’s survey of historical scholarship examining everyday practices of settlers and administrators, as they tried to make sense of the new climates in which they dwelled (Mahony and Endfield 2018, 2). This work of tracing the many ways in which empire was intimately bound up with ideas of climate—from the spread of European meteorological techniques to colonial settings to the

institutionalization of meteorology in the colonies as one of the first sciences—affirms Montesquieu’s observation that “the empire of the climate is the first, the most powerful of all empires” (quoted in Livingstone 2012, 91). Climate shaped colonial enterprises in material ways, as well as informing imperial ideologies and historical changes in conceptualizations of climate. This reveals climate to be an “exploitable hermeneutic resource” (Livingstone 2000, 9).

Of interest here is how this climate-imperialism history relates to contemporary climate change considerations, like the claim by the meteorologists Theodore G. Shepherd and Adam H. Sobel that it is difficult to think about climate change at the local scale. They describe how

cities established through colonialism have been largely sited on coasts, in defiance of threats from tropical cyclones and coastal flooding, indeed often on landfills. The localness of climate change is perhaps most salient in these vulnerable and exposed places. Yet climate science takes the scale of the global as normative and the local as accidental. It has thereby “detached knowledge from meaning” and enacts forms of what the philosopher Miranda Fricker has called “hermeneutic injustice.” (Shepherd and Sobel 2020, 7)

Fricker’s (2007) work on epistemic justice proposes two forms: testimonial injustice, which occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word (i.e. the police do not believe you because you are Black); and hermeneutic injustice, which is caused by a gap in collective hermeneutic or interpretive frameworks for understanding a particular phenomenon (i.e. you experience sexual harassment in a culture that does not have a critical concept for it). Elizabeth Allison (2015) explains that one way hermeneutic injustice occurs in climate change research is when the dominant research paradigm (ostensibly objective and driven by climate modeling) lacks an interpretive framework for studying and analyzing subjective responses to climate change. Discussing the spiritual significance of glaciers in an age of climate change, she uses the example of how the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change identifies the difficulties of including nonmarket impacts in the valuation of projected consequences of climate change, and how the absence of these hermeneutic frameworks means that most policy discussions exclude them:



Without appropriate conceptual tools for capturing the significance of non-market values, most research and policy responses have worked as if subjective responses are insignificant—if scientists can get the science right, then governments can develop the right policies, and industry can provide the right technology, allowing us to mitigate and adapt to climate change. (Allison 2015, 49)

I propose to think of historical continuities between climate, empire, and climate change as being riddled by similar epistemic gaps. This is especially true in climate change research on Africa, which is plagued by the streetlight effect. Also known as the drunkard's search, this is a type of observational bias that arises when researchers focus on particular questions, cases, and variables for reasons of convenience or data availability rather than broader relevance, policy import, or construct validity.

Cullen S. Hendrix (2017) investigates the extent to which the streetlight effect conditions the state of knowledge about climate change in Africa, finding evidence that scholarly attention is shaped not by African countries' physical exposure to climate effects or adaptive capacity, but rather by factors that affect the convenience or capacity to conduct research, such as language and political stability. This is where the concept of the hinterland might be a helpful addition to other interpretive frameworks. How might the hinterland contribute to addressing the epistemic gaps in climate change research in and about African countries as a result of colonial and imperial continuities? Is there a hinterland of climate knowledge? Can the hinterland provide the hermeneutic resources needed for thinking about the afterlives of imperialism as represented by the power of companies and corporations in contemporary climate politics? Does the hinterland point to research routes capable of redressing the hermeneutic injustice of imperialism and climate science as it relates to Africa? In an attempt to respond to these questions, the next section looks at South African corporate expansion through the lens of the hinterland.

## SOUTH AFRICAN CORPORATIONS IN THE HINTERLAND

Lesley Green (2015) looks to the moment when colonization commenced at the Cape in 1652 to demonstrate how the discovery of diamond-bearing rock in the northern Karoo in 1869 “propelled the Empire into inventing new aspects of the technosphere,” subsequently “giving humans who owned machines mastery over geological matter.” Bringing Rhodes back

into the picture, the profits from the sale of these diamonds “fed the formation of cities, corporations, and institutions in England and her Cape,” as Rhodes employed the personal fortune he amassed during the diamond rush (Green 2015). This imperial expansion led to the legal and social infrastructure that established race-based disenfranchisement, “sowing the bitter seeds of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid,” as well as to the aggressive pursuit of energy autonomy by the newly independent Republic of South Africa, led by an aggrieved Afrikaner minority (Green 2015). The legacy of this—coal-fired power stations in one of the highest per capita carbon emitters in the world—endures. The most recent assessment by the Climate Transparency Report, the world’s most comprehensive annual review of G20 countries’ climate action and their transition to a net-zero emissions economy, revealed that fossil fuels make up around 90% of South Africa’s energy mix, among the G20’s highest. Eighty-seven percent of the country’s electricity in 2020 was produced from coal (The Climate Transparency Report 2021).

While South Africa did not explicitly agree to phase out coal at COP26, it was one of 197 countries that committed to “phasing down” fossil fuel. South Africa’s pavilion in the Blue Zone was sponsored by coal giants Exxaro, Eskom, and Sasol (Barnett and Collett-White 2021). State-owned power utility Eskom and petrochemicals giant Sasol have been heavily criticized for their coal-dependent operations and found to be responsible for over half of all of the country’s emissions (Van Diemen 2021; Phillips and Bega 2021). Critical and popular attention to government policy and action is growing; three civil society organizations recently launched a constitutional lawsuit against the South African government, arguing that its energy policy, in particular plans to build new coal-fired power stations, are incompatible with the national constitution.<sup>4</sup> The lawsuit is backed by research by the University of Cape Town, showing that the coal plans are not compatible with South Africa meeting its climate commitments (Merven, Burton and Lehmann-Grube 2021). While this is an important action, given that South African taxpayers are essentially forced by government policy to fund fossil fuels through state subsidies given to both state-owned enterprises (like Eskom) and private companies (like Sasol), criticism is predominantly directed at the state rather than at what

<sup>4</sup> “Youth-Led #CancelCoal Climate Case Launched against Government’s Plans for New Coal-Fired Power | African Climate Alliance.” <https://africanclimatealliance.org/2021/11/17/youth-led-cancelcoal-climate-case-launched-against-governments-plans-for-new-coal-fired-power/>

criminologist Ronald Kramer (2020) calls “carbon criminals” like Eskom and Sasol. Furthermore, the activities of South African companies outside the country’s borders are less likely to attract the same public scrutiny.

Historically, “successive South African governments assumed a proprietorial and interventionist attitude towards the African hinterland” (Daniel et al. 2003, 368), with exports heavily skewed to the Southern African Development Community (SADC).<sup>5</sup> According to Gregory Mthembu-Salter (2013), referring to Rhodes’s “Your hinterland is there” statement:

Companies are being lured north by higher growth rates than South Africa’s own. By “your”, Rhodes had meant white people in general and the British state in particular. In that sense, Rhodes’s dream is dead, but the idea that Africa is South Africa’s hinterland lives on in South Africa, given new life since 1994 by the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

For many on the continent, South African post-apartheid expansion was perceived as parasitic and opportunistic, often resulting in profits being extracted from host country markets to South Africa or overseas. The “African Renaissance” heralded by the ANC government in the late 1990s and enthusiastically endorsed by northward-looking South African corporations was negatively viewed as “an ideological excuse for white business’ return to its former colonial-era stomping” (Miller et al. 2008, 5). While this widespread perception of South African domination over African countries playing host to the country’s corporate expansion does not fully capture the diversity of trade relations between South Africa and other African countries, research into this is a useful starting point for better understanding the continental implications of South Africa’s corporate expansion and status as the highest carbon emitter in Africa. For instance, Patrick Bond’s focus on South Africa in his investigation of the BRICS bloc (Brazil, India, China and South Africa) as “anti-imperialist” or “sub-imperialist,” that is, as playing “deputy sheriff duty for global corporation” in their respective regions (2013, 266), reveals much about post-apartheid corporate expansionism and contextualizes some of the climate change considerations thereof. Bond observes how South Africa’s formal entry into BRICS in 2012 was accompanied by pro-business

<sup>5</sup>The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC). 2021. South Africa Profile. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/zaf>

statements for deeper regional economic penetration and exhortations to change impressions of the country as a regional bully.

Yet it also produced tensions as

local elite interests conflicted most with those of the hinterland (as well as of most South Africans) when it came to climate management, given Pretoria's role, first in maintaining extremely high "emissions levels" on behalf of the country's "Minerals-energy complex", and, second, with respect to sabotaging global climate talks by destroying the Kyoto Protocol in Copenhagen in 2009 and again in Durban in 2011. (Bond 2013, 263)

Miller et al. (2008) note how the historical geography of capital accumulation in Southern Africa has placed South African capital, through its multinational corporations, at the center of regional accumulation processes, in keeping with discussions of how sub-imperialism manifests as a continuation of heavy investment in extractive industries at home, while simultaneously increasingly searching for investment opportunities in other markets. Specific to agriculture, Ruth Hall's (2012) study of major land acquisitions by South African farmers and agribusinesses elsewhere in Africa, and the processes through which these have occurred and are occurring, suggests that South African-based companies are acting as arteries of global capital, and in doing so precipitate "processes of accumulation by dispossession within their broader spheres of influence" (Böhm et al. 2012, 1629). This study is important for offering nuance to the history of South African post-apartheid business expansion on the continent, which Hall describes as "a web of interlocking strategies: diversification, building of political alliances, extension of value chains, sourcing of patronage, and the consolidation of a greater global market share" (2012, 827).

A brief consideration of the spheres of influence of South African energy companies illustrates the afterlives of climate imperialism. The well-known woes of Eskom, responsible for the bulk of South African emissions, dominates local news as the power utility fails to deliver electricity, plagued by a longstanding legacy of chronic mismanagement and rampant corruption. Less critical attention, however, is paid to the continental operations of Eskom Enterprises, a wholly owned subsidiary of Eskom, expected to serve as Eskom's vehicle to expand in Africa. Steven Greenberg (2009) details how Eskom Enterprises's forays into Africa included everything from transmission lines for magnesium mining in Congo Brazzaville and

the distribution and sale of natural gas in Mozambique to operation and maintenance of hydro stations in Uganda, and numerous subsidiaries with activities in Tunisia, Nigeria, Swaziland, Namibia, Mali, and more. Despite being superficially presented as offering a pan-African electricity grid and telecommunications infrastructure, closer analysis of Eskom Enterprises's continental relations reveals particular development patterns: privatization of state assets or outsourcing of public services to global corporations (Greenberg 2009, 92).

Other South African energy companies active or influential on the continent include Sasol, the world's biggest producer of petrol and diesel from coal, which recently sold its interests in Nigeria to US company Chevron (Steyn 2020), and Engen Petroleum, which is active across seven countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean Islands. Close consideration of other non-energy but emission-intensive companies from South Africa—for example, cement producer PPC Africa, which has operations in South Africa, Botswana, DRC, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe—is beyond the scope of this chapter, but important for future research.

### POWERPLAYS IN CLIMATE ACTION

In much the same way that Rhodes shaped both policy and commerce outcomes, energy companies in South Africa exert significant influence over climate policy. Britta Rennkamp (2019) examines the power relations, coalitions, and conflicts that drive and hinder institutional change in South African climate policy by analyzing discursive coalitions either favoring or opposing specific climate policy interventions. She finds that in the lead-up to the implementation of the Carbon Tax Act, which came into effect on 1 June 2019 and compels companies to pay for their contributions to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, Sasol, Eskom, and business associations like the Energy Intensive User Group (EIUG), which represents 31 firms which consume about half of the country's electricity, were unsurprisingly the strongest opponents. As the carbon tax directly threatened Sasol's coal-to-liquid operations, it led the opposition and wielded significantly more financial and human resources than the coalition proposing the tax—Sasol's climate change team counted seven full-time experts compared to a team of one full-time and one part-time position in charge of the carbon tax in the National Treasury. The company's power in this process was additionally underpinned by the fact that it has had a

representative on the South African government's delegation to the UNFCCC for years (Rennkamp 2019, 764). While the tax was ultimately passed, Sasol and its lobbies significantly delayed the process. South Africa's Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) was similarly delayed by a coalition against renewable energy led by Eskom and other actors interested in sustaining large electricity infrastructure (Rennkamp 2019, 764).

The two examples of Sasol's organized opposition to the carbon tax and Eskom's lack of commitment to the renewable energy program demonstrate the power of energy companies interested in maintaining both fossil-fueled business operations and a center-hinterland structure to capitalism. The implications of this can be seen in another recent conference: the inaugural Africa Energy Week, which took place between 9 and 12 November 2021 in Cape Town, one week after South Africa agreed to phase down coal at COP26. At the conference, which seeks to unite energy stakeholders on the continent and drive industry growth and development, South African Mineral Resources and Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe called on African nations to urgently form a united front to resist global pressure to rapidly abandon fossil fuels (Steyn 2021). Subsequently, minister after minister repeated that the region is not ready to shift from fossil fuel energy, a claim based perhaps on perceptions of Africa being a colonial hinterland, lagging behind industrialized former colonizers and economically forced to "bear the brunt for heavy polluters" (Zali 2021).

While former colonizers are certainly not without culpability, a return to the aforementioned research by Heede (2014) reminds us that developed countries are not the only heavy polluters, and that powerhouses like Eskom and Sasol also need to be held accountable. José Santiago Fernández-Vázquez (2021) offers a useful tool for analyzing how large corporations deal with climate change issues on their webpages in order to disassociate themselves from their image as environmentally harmful businesses. Employing his multimodal method of analyzing companies' levels of engagement with climate change reveals that Eskom's Sustainable Development webpage<sup>6</sup> offers no specific reference to climate change, only offering formal reports that need to be downloaded by users, signifying lackluster engagement with both climate change and

<sup>6</sup><https://www.eskom.co.za/about-eskom/sustainable-development/>

nonspecialized audiences. Conversely, Sasol's sustainability webpage<sup>7</sup> leads to a separate climate change webpage detailing a clear example of the compelling "smart growth reformer story" which "defends that capitalism and market solutions can stop climate change from becoming a catastrophe" (Fernández-Vázquez 2021, 2699). Visual analysis of images on the two sustainability websites following Vázquez's method of distinguishing between depictions of nature, technology, and people, moreover, reveals that on both sites a central role is given to technology, over both nature and people, with the exception of one repeated (and somewhat out of place) image of a young woman on Sasol's website.

## CONCLUSION

My brief consideration of the spheres of influence of two South African energy companies, Eskom and Sasol, has demonstrated some climate change considerations of post-apartheid expansion of South African corporations and illustrated the importance of new approaches to thinking through the afterlives of climate imperialism. The concept of hinterland was employed to expand existing interpretive frameworks for studying and analyzing climate change and aimed to put scholarship on climate colonialism in conversation with contemporary climate change considerations, specifically focused on two South African energy companies. The discussion of Sasol's organized opposition to the carbon tax and Eskom's lack of commitment to the renewable energy program demonstrated the power of energy companies, and exploratory analysis of their sustainability websites offered insights into the avoidance of climate change and greenwashing practices, both of which contribute to maintaining fossil-fueled business operations and a center-hinterland structure to capitalism.

The prominence of the Rhodes statue in the Company Gardens not only affirms the entanglements between climate, extractives, and climate change discussed in this chapter but also points to both historic and enduring hinterlands, and how these continue to be reaffirmed as hinterlands by the activities of the energy companies discussed. Much like the statue continues to turn green through oxidization, large energy companies like Sasol and Eskom attempt to ignore or greenwash their activities, while continuing to pollute in the less visible hinterlands scattered across the continent. Future research on historical continuities between climate,

<sup>7</sup><https://www.sasol.com/sustainability/climate-action>

empire, and climate change would benefit from closer attention to how these, and other, companies capitalize on the status of Africa as a hinterland and also create new hinterlands within the continent where extraction and pollution can go on largely unseen.

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PART II

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*Affectivities: Abandonment, Dreaming*



## CHAPTER 8

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# “Washed with Sun”: Landscaping South Africa’s Hinterlands

*Pamila Gupta*

### PRELUDE

Kazuo Ishiguro once made a statement that “writing is a hinterland between self and other.”<sup>1</sup> His observation enables us to consider the concept of the hinterland as an act of writing which is very much in keeping with my theme here—a portrait of two South African hinterland authors. It also points to the productive elasticity of thinking with the hinterland beyond its geographic meaning. Specifically, it serves as a reminder for the way in which the term “hinterland” is always caught between binary structures and cross-pollinations, with the contiguous folding of the urban into

<sup>1</sup>I thank Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon for sharing this turn of phrase by Ishiguro that he heard at Oxford during a Bard College Berlin Osun cross campus course and zoom lecture entitled “Writing Migration and Affective Journeys” on 11 March 2021 to students at Los Andes University in Bogota, Colombia.

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P. Gupta (✉)

Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State,  
Bloemfontein, South Africa  
e-mail: [GuptaP@ufs.ac.za](mailto:GuptaP@ufs.ac.za)

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the rural, and vice versa, the world over, suggesting that that which lies directly behind or between both physical and metaphoric hinterlands is not so easily demarcated.

## PART I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter takes up Jeremy Foster's evocative description of South Africa's landscape as one "washed with sun" (2008), that of the entwining of natural beauty (light, specifically) with political turmoil, to reflect on the shifting spatial thematics of two contemporary South African non-fiction writers and academics, Rob Nixon and Jacob Dlamini.<sup>2</sup> What happens when we view certain locations described in their respective works (a small desert town vs. a township) through the prism of hinterlands? Does this concept allow us to say something new about human/non-human relations perhaps?<sup>3</sup> With *Dreambirds* (1999), Nixon recalls the small ostrich farming town of Oudtshoorn in the Karoo desert, a place he visited often growing up in nearby Port Elizabeth. With *Native Nostalgia* (2009), Dlamini recounts fond memories of growing up in the township of Katshele outside Germiston, a 'nested' hinterland to Johannesburg.<sup>4</sup> I was drawn to Nixon and Dlamini precisely because they are both careful readers and writers of place, one where "observation, description, and interpretation," to evoke Jeremy Foster, are mediated through "situated experiences and imaginaries" (2008: 4) to say so much more about that which is felt growing up in South Africa.

In what follows, I want to firstly suggest that hinterland thinking opens up new understandings of those complex spaces caught between rural and urban, such as the towns and townships examined by Nixon and Dlamini.

<sup>2</sup> My chapter develops the South African strand from my keynote delivered (online) on 3 June 2021 at the Hinterlands: A Project in the Rural, Literary and Environmental Humanities workshop, entitled "'Washed with Sun': Hinterland Landscapes of India and South Africa" (Gupta 2021).

<sup>3</sup> I first came across and wrote about the concept of the hinterland in relation to Goa, India (Gupta 2018). Hinterland thinking shaped that work directly and led me to conceptualize a world of heritage and design in the hinterland. See Gupta (2022). Here I develop it further in relation to new work on South Africa.

<sup>4</sup> I find it helpful to position Germiston as a "nested" hinterland to nearby Johannesburg, a term Hanneke Stuit (2021) introduced during her keynote at the Hinterlands: A Project in the Rural, Literary and Environmental Humanities workshop.

The pairing of these two male writers (white and black, and of different generations), as each other’s hinterland in a sense, allows us to say something expansive about these earthy (and artificial, in the case of townships) geographies: as pivot points that hew deep pockets of globalization; as sites of capitalist extraction (Neel 2018); and lastly, as places for dreaming is my assertion here, hence my development of the term “hinterscapes” toward the end of the chapter. This is where hinterlands (as other) have an indelible role in landscaping childhood memories in the becoming of political identity. Secondly, I argue that we must understand the farm town and township as politically operating within the same time/space configuration of apartheid South Africa. Here, I reflect on the visual, plant and animal, sensorial and sonic in these representations of two distinctive hinterlands. Thirdly, I want to suggest that hinterland thinking helps us to see better the practice of writing itself as caught between (a reflective) self and other. Whereas Nixon and Dlamini write from landscaped memories of South Africa, but now reside in the US, I write from my own landscaped memories of the US (specifically the American suburbs of Washington, DC, a very different hinterland of extraction and dreaming both), and now reside in South Africa. In other words, it is self and other, male and female, South Africa and the US that we three writers are all involved in, a form of “entanglement” in Sarah Nuttall’s understanding (2009) that helps to engage South Africa’s ever-changing hinterland landscape from various perspectives. In this landscape “washed with sun,” I read the authors’ (past) works refracted through the lens of “the now” of present South Africa (Nuttall 2009: 20). Lastly, I dwell inside a photograph I took on a recent pandemic road trip through South Africa’s arid landscape in December 2020 to conclude my chapter and contemplate the productive role of hinterland art alongside writing, while returning to the concept of the hinterland, and its potential usages, connections, and framings.

## PART II: LANDSCAPING SOUTH AFRICA—OF FARM TOWNS AND TOWNSHIPS

I wondered what there was about the South African landscape that affected people who came in contact with it and (possibly) transformed those who lived in it permanently. (Foster 2008, 6)

I always miss the distinct light and lighting of South Africa when I am away; it is what compels me to return. I have increasingly become interested in writing about South Africa's landscape, a place that I have called home for the last 17 years. In some ways, Jeremy Foster's work helped me think about what I have felt, lived, experienced. It was fortuitous perhaps then that when I came across his work on the socio-nature of South Africa's landscapes, as entwining natural beauty with political turmoil, I had lived long enough in South Africa to be able to grasp what he was trying to articulate. I liked the idea of grounding my theory from, and in, the South (following Jean and John Comaroff 2012) while applying his evocative term and climatic ode "washed with sun" (the title of his 2008 book) to the idea of hinterlands, and two specific hinterland formations relevant to South African history, to see what it opens up analytically. For me, the idea of "washed with sun" references exactly the tension of politics and aesthetics inherent to the South African landscape (and perhaps all landscapes), including the role of affect, of atmospheres and elements (or rather the elemental), seasonal grammars of climate and nature, light and color in defining place. Equally important in conceptualizing hinterlands as landscapes is that of human, sensorial, plant, and animal relations, something that has been left out of Foster's analysis but that I want to include here.

One particularly lyrical passage of his caught my breath. He writes:

Traveling around South Africa when I was growing up, I noticed that certain districts displayed a distinct quality, and how in some instances, this took on an animistic quality best described as a "mood." ... Seemingly inhering in the experiential and... phenomenological qualities of the landscape, it resembled the character found in human individuals—infinately nuanced and hard to describe, yet always distinctive. As with people, so with these naively given sections of geography, some seemed to welcome one into the aura while others made one feel profoundly uncomfortable. (Foster 2008, 6)

In following sections, I will use Foster's framing of "washed with sun" to revisit the white ostrich farm town<sup>5</sup> and the black township that Nixon and Dlamini have powerfully written about in their memoirs, that

<sup>5</sup> Stuit's (2020) discussion of the overdetermined symbolic space of the farm in South Africa is useful for thinking about the farm town, which services the farm and functions always in relation to the farm's rurality.

thematically are of self and place. I want to explore what happens when we refract these two locations through the prism of the hinterland, and see them as "washed with sun," in the hope that they will offer a potential way of thinking with and writing about hinterlands in relation to South Africa's changing geographies of rural and urban. This is also always a political project, one of refining our sensibilities and rhythms of place and time, past, present and future, and giving equal agency to human and non-human (including land, plant, animal) actors and relations.

*Rob Nixon: of prickly pears and aloes, feathers and fantasies*

The stretch of South Africa where I grew up boasts a century-old tradition of ostrich ranching. The giant birds were as integral to my boyhood landscape as hogs to any Iowa child or lambs to a Welsh one. I grew up on the edge of the Karoo, a huge scrub desert whose name derives from a San or Bushman word meaning Big Thirst ... In this desert world, the ostrich has been an object of reverie for generations, a glamorous creature inspiring elaborate dreams. (Nixon 1999, 5)

In my reading of Nixon's South African memoir *Dream Birds: The Strange History of the Ostrich in Fashion, Food, and Fortune* (1999), I draw upon his childhood memories of frequent family trips to Oudtshoorn, a westerly drive from Port Elizabeth, where he grew up. He writes how these car rides were a "a major boyhood adventure," for there was "something about the place" that was "full of giant beards, feathers and fantasies of Parisian fashion and cabaret" (1999, 6–7). Here, I want to think through his description of an earlier apartheid time and space as washed with the sun and bright blue sky of the Karoo desert, and involving succulents such as prickly pears and aloes, alongside ostriches and Nixon's own fertile imagination. I interpret his text through the lens of the hinterland to first show how white settler colonial towns located directly inward from the South African coastal shoreline like Oudtshoorn operated historically as pockets of pivot globalizations, as producing in this case a thriving industry of ostrich ranching that supplied Europe between the late 1800s and early 1900s with trendsetting fashions.

Specifically, Nixon's memoir showcases how "far" hinterland (Neel 2018, 17–18) farm towns like Oudtshoorn (characteristically rural and sites of capitalist extraction) became unexpected "promised lands," sites that historically absorbed fleeing migrants, in this case Eastern European



Jews who had beached on South Africa's shores, escaping the pogroms of Lithuania. It is yet another form of "entanglement" (Nuttall 2009) wherein a peripheral European trauma feeds into the fashions of its metropolitan centers by way of a refuge offered by South Africa's hinterlands for this Jewish diaspora. It was this group of hopeful immigrants who made small fortunes as ostrich barons, alongside other barons of Afrikaner, English, and Scottish descent, all living in "feather palaces" built from the proceeds of the plumes, which "mixed the wildest excesses of Ottoman, Victorian, Greek and Gothic architecture" (Nixon 1999, 5). Here, Nixon supplies the astonishing figure that by 1913, 1 million ostriches were being bred for the business, becoming "ounce by ounce, more precious than gold" (1999, 5). He recalls how "this Jerusalem of Africa became my imaginative oasis, allowing me a whiff of mystery through the coquetry of feathers" (1999, 6).

As well, the Oudtshoorn that Nixon writes about shows the potential of framing historic hinterlands as contemporary "failed cities," following Neel's numerous examples from the US Rust Belt (2018, 114); that is, small towns tied to one particular industry that sometimes aspire for too much and cannot get rid of their rural ties (in this case, Oudtshoorn's association with ostrich ranching), thus losing out in an attempt to become urban centers, and quietly receding into oblivion, their rich histories often forgotten. As Nixon recounts: "South Africa's hinterland abounded in such towns" (1999, 6). In other words, Nixon's elegiac writings on this once "global epicenter of everything ostrich" (1999, 5) help revive certain hinterland places within South Africa's landscaped memory, as contemporary hollowed places that are not given ample "space on the side of the road," along similar lines to the work of Kathleen Stewart (1996) on the now abandoned coal mining small towns of West Virginia. They tend to be left out of the South African narrative (or get reduced to one-stop tourist towns that rely solely on representing their glorified pasts as heritage) in the socio-cultural focus on the strictly urban or strictly rural, that which is on the road itself.<sup>6</sup>

Next, I rely on Nixon's writings to showcase human/non-human relations as abounding in the hinterland, as integral to defining and writing

<sup>6</sup> Here, I am playing with Stewart's powerfully dense and textured passages on forgotten West Virginia cultural poetics in an "Other" America (1996). As well, I am counter-positioning Stewart's "space on the side of the road" with the significance of the "road" as discussed in Stuit's keynote (2021).

about South Africa's landscape as "washed with sun." The hinterland is a site where politics and beauty are messy, and where the land, people, and animals—as residents and neighbors—are entwined to the extent that people are anthropomorphized by that which is non-human, and vice versa. At one point, Nixon writes: "because the Karoo was so brutally exposed, self-revelation could be costly. I noticed that not just with the creatures, but with the people too. They didn't talk much, were slow to open up. To draw attention to yourself was to ask for trouble, even the plants knew that" (1999, 54). Perhaps here we can think of these desert succulents, including their characteristic hardness, resilience, and instinct to survive as equally knowing, agentive, and reflective beings as the humans that co-inhabited the harsh landscape.

Lastly, I cite one passage from Nixon that says so much more about South Africa from the perspective of a young boy on the cusp of knowing, who intuits something is wrong with the place he calls home, a "place of tarnished magic and an as yet unspecified unease" (1999, 7):

At night, before I drifted into sleep, I had migration dreams in which I turned into a bird. But the birds around me were dreaming of turning into bushes, and the chameleons of turning into twigs. The plants too, were dreaming downwards, living enviously among stones. Looking at all the life forms all around me, I became fascinated by disguise. Trusting your eyes didn't do you much good in a place where camouflage went this deep. So long before I understood South Africa's stony politics, the Karoo taught me that things weren't always what they seemed. (1999, 55)

It is significant that the downward mobility and survival instinct to camouflage and become Other (on the part of animals, plants, and humans equally, a form of natural selection) that Nixon was surrounded by and dreamt of in the Karoo desert would become the site of his political consciousness, his way of situating South Africa's "stony" landscape and politics, and himself as a bird about to migrate in direct contrast to the flightless and cumbersome ostrich who is stuck (much like apartheid), and (as the saying and myth goes) has no choice but to bury its stubborn head in the deep sands of South Africa. Perhaps *Dreambirds* is a hinterland story foretold (of extraction and dreaming, both), one that would coalesce itself much later into Nixon's academic writings, including those focused on the "slow violence" of environmental degradation and its dire consequences the world over (2011). In a recent reflective return to the beaches of his

South African childhood (2021), Nixon writes: “That tidal scene—and others like it—turned me into a reader who parses literature and landscapes for who is present, who is missing, for the forced removals, physical and imaginative, from the permitted view; a reader alive to who precisely (in the cropped photo, the selective story, the seemingly seamless landscape) has been driven off the beach” (2021). It is in this passage that Nixon presages as his hinterland Jacob Dlamini, to whom I now turn.

*Jacob Dlamini: of fragments and flowers,  
rats and radio waves*

What follows are fragments, shards of memory through which I examine indirectly what it means to be nostalgic for a past generally considered to have been a dark chapter in South Africa’s history. I use fragments drawn randomly from the past to look at my childhood in Katlehong as a lived experience. (Dlamini 2009, 22)

Here, I want to contrast Nixon’s experience of growing up white in South Africa with that of Dlamini, growing up black in South Africa, one generation later than Nixon and on the cusp of its liberation. I will suggest that in his memoir *Native Nostalgia* (2009), Dlamini frames township life in Katlehong in important ways that free it from the all-encompassing burden of apartheid, as something else, as having a history, as enabling a life fully lived, as shaping his own reflective grown-up political self. He writes that his book is best understood as a “gathering of fragments of memory, souvenirs of the imagination” rather than as a memoir or cultural biography of Katlehong, even as it contains elements of both (Dlamini 2009, 62). He asserts that though he grew up under apartheid’s shadow, life was so much more than that. This is an important point that shows townships as having moments of beauty and political turmoil side by side, and as “washed with [the] sun” of everyday life, of children playing together, of a thriving intergenerational community, and of traveling to nearby Germiston, which historically was a pivot point in South Africa’s story of globalization and included a well-established large black urban community dating back to the early 1900s (Dlamini 2009, 62).

Just as I reframed the ostrich farm town as a “far” hinterland following Neel in the previous section, I do the same with the township, thinking about its location behind and beside city life, a form we could call a “near” hinterland, part of the “foothills descending from the summit of the

megacity” and suburban in character and feel (Neel 2018, 18). Dlamini’s recounting of a childhood spent under apartheid is an experience and a recalling that is neither a “lament” nor a “diatribe” against the state that placed his family there: “that is to say, one should never take the standard description of townships as poor to mean that township life was poor” (2009, 63). His is an important intervention that suggests the need to re-examine the place of townships within South Africa’s apartheid landscape, not as simply blurred into the urban or forgotten by the wayside (or in the between) in the search for black rural authenticity, but rather as a distinct landscape unto itself. Hinterland thinking empowers us to do so, and to think expansively. In other words, Katlehong, meaning “place of success” in *Sesotho* (Moiloa 2019, 35),<sup>7</sup> is multiple sites: a black peri-urban center with close ties to nearby historically white and black Germiston (Dlamini 2009, 62); a suburban hinterland (including its associated “aspirant qualities” and “politics of resistance”) (Neel 2018, 19) to equally close white Johannesburg; an apartheid geography, in theory a “scientific” township (2009, 43) where racial capitalism carved spaces to dump black people, and restrict access to white spaces; and finally, a microcosm of larger South Africa, past and present. It is all these qualities that help situate the township as a site of extraction and dreaming both, particularly for one of its native sons.

In one powerful passage, Dlamini asserts the importance of making the black township the sole subject and object of his memoir. There is no scurrying away from the township’s awkward past as an artificial space; rather, he takes it head on, forcing the reader to contend with his childhood *in that place in that time* which most South Africans would rather forget as still existing, given its apartheid birth:

If we fought to make all of South Africa a home to all South Africans, where then do townships belong? Are they in a different country? Do townships not occupy the same space-time configuration as the rest of South Africa? This book will have succeeded if it helps the reader come to a new sense of townships and their place in the historical, political and cultural geography of South Africa. It is only by understanding that geography that we can understand why blacks would remember their past under apartheid with fondness. There is no other way. (2009, 163)

<sup>7</sup>I would not have learned of these smaller important details save for *Nice* (issue no 3, 2019) dedicated to Katlehong. Thanks to Melanie Boehi, who thoughtfully kept aside for me a copy of this magazine and art journal.

First, Dlamini gives Katlehong its proper due as a living breathing black space with its own specific history, one that its residents grew up learning about and taking pride in. It is a place enabled by its “multiple connections to elsewhere” (Dlamini 2009, 62) and shared qualities (with other townships) of “sociability, hybridity and everyday informality” (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008, 13). In other words, the hinterland of his growing up was a very real demarcated area on a map, carved out by apartheid officials on “dolomitic ground” that is part of Johannesburg’s East Rand troubled mining topography (Moilola 2019, 37).

Second, Dlamini gives agency to Katlehong’s residents (human, plant, and animal, equally) in shaping the contours of this hinterland landscape, one that includes vibrant neighborhoods and small acts of care with attention to aesthetic beauty and pride in ownership. He writes:

I have only to think back to the township streets on which I grew up. Where an outsider might have noticed nothing but dreary uniformity, I would have seen that some houses regularly wore fresh paint while others did not, that some gardens boasted marigolds, red roses and euphorbias while others did not. I would have seen, too that while most houses in our street had only Kikuyu grass, one neighbor in particular had the kind of grass some people insisted was similar to that laid at Wimbledon. (Dlamini 2009, 121)

It is attention to such details as freshly painted houses and colorful flower beds that recast Katlehong’s “washed with sun” light and enliven the township life of Dlamini’s childhood. Even the much-reviled rat is pointed out as having a defining role in the community. This sometime symbol of apartheid was also the object of numerous pest control campaign for some, a family pet for another resident, while for still others (including Dlamini), it was the target for practicing the popular sport of rat hunting (2009, 68). In other words, Dlamini grew up in a place filled with friends, family, flowers, and rats that included rich social gatherings, a place forged and defined by “bonds of reciprocity and mutual obligations” (2009, 13) between human, land, plant, and animal.

Third, Dlamini inserts the important role of the sensory and sonic in our understanding of the township as a hinterland landscape, including the way radio shaped his own political formation. It is less about “relay[ing] the auditory experience of listening to the radio” than about highlighting its greater than subaltern role in subverting the government’s propaganda, including its ability to awaken “a political consciousness that saw me adopt

a politics at odds with the political gradualism and religious conservatism of my mother" (Dlamini 2009, 22); it directly shaped Dlamini's own black sense of self.

Dlamini goes on to suggest that radio functioned as an important media and medium for a growing political consciousness amongst many black South African township residents. In a telling passage that says so much about the human capacity to endure, he writes:

In a political time and space that was coded in racial terms, with severe limits imposed on black mobility, black people could move through radio in ways that the apartheid state could not curtail ... Sure, apartheid censors could limit what one listened to, they could try to dictate what made the news. But they could not determine how the listening public received the propaganda. They could not tell blacks how to listen. (Dlamini 2009, 31–32)

Dlamini's writings are a political project, one that forces us to look at townships (including their past, present, and future iterations) more closely as "near" hinterlands, both "of the city and not of the city" (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008, 13), rather than wish these artificial geographies away, a token of South Africa's disturbing past that is best forgotten. He writes: "I take it as a given that township natives can and do have fond memories of the places in which they were born and grew up" (Dlamini 2009, 152). This early work on township life by Dlamini would provide a productive frame for later writings on Kruger National Park (*Safari Nation*), revealing its "hidden history" (2020, 3) as another hinterland space in formation, and in relation to both its animal and human inhabitants, who resided, worked, and sometimes crossed through its difficult landscape in an attempt to improve their livelihoods.

Perhaps we can go one step further and reflect for a moment on all South Africa's native sons, both black and white, by way of its "washed with sun" effect. Thus, just as the Nixon's ability to traverse the South African landscape and political consciousness was enabled by the car and family drives to Oudtshoorn, Dlamini's was empowered by small neighborly acts of care and moments of beauty alongside traveling radio waves to Katlehong. As well, we could set up a parallel between "far" and "near" hinterlands, comparing the Karoo, the ostrich, and the camouflage of Nixon's desert world to the one of social gatherings, colorful flower beds, rats, and the radio that filled out Dlamini's township lifestyle.

## PART III: ENTANGLED HINTERSCAPES

Growing up in South Africa, connections between landscape and identity always seemed, quite simply given. My own fascination with the country's landscape long predated any reflexive understanding of the political and cultural values that courses through them, and this understanding does not capture the texture and depth of the connection. (Foster 2008, 5)

Both Dlamini and Nixon are wrestling with the South African landscapes of their childhood; both are hinting at hinterlands, using boyhood reflections on growing up as the basis for writing about self and other, and about the indelible markers of landscape and identity in the complex entanglement of politics and aesthetics, extraction and dreaming. Interestingly, each focuses on one beloved object: for Nixon, it is the ostrich, and for Dlamini, it is the radio; each becomes a personalized focal point and medium for political consciousness amidst the hinterland's "washed with sun" affect. This is a point that very much reverberates with the writings of Foster, interestingly a South African who has also ended up in the US writing from that vantage point on the interiority of self and with a focus on the landscape of his South African childhood. Perhaps that is why I chose his writings as a framing mechanism, for they echo what I am trying to grasp by juxtaposing Nixon's and Dlamini's powerful and lyrical impressionistic passages on South Africa's complex hinterlands. In other words, I would argue this is exactly what Nixon and Dlamini are grappling with through the act of writing—description, memory, childhood consciousness of political wrongness, and interpretation as a form of looking back upon one's life, its moments of introspection, of interiority. The two authors are each other's hinterland in some sense. The framing of self by each makes clear and without doubt the present absence of the other, not only in terms of South Africa's apartheid-ridden political landscape, including racial and generational differences, but also with regard to the specter of racial capitalism and how it functioned differently in the far and near hinterlands showcased here.

And here I must insert my own ways of seeing South Africa's landscapes into a larger understanding of what I am calling its "hinterscapes."<sup>8</sup> As

<sup>8</sup> Here I am relying on Arjun Appadurai's (1991) idea of the five "scapes" or flows of globalization—ethnoscapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes, and mediascapes—to develop that of "hinterscapes" as complex spaces caught between urban and rural, and deeply imbedded in capitalism and dreaming both.

Foster writes: "one cannot argue that landscape representation is grounded in the specifics of lived experience and cultural specificity without acknowledging one's own" (2008, 5). It is my own childhood, of growing up in an American non-place suburban hinterland of Washington, DC (which could almost be anywhere in the US) that Neel interprets so perfectly—and where the connotation of "middle class white prosperity" is not a misnomer (2018, 18). It is etched in my mind as the site of my own political formation, a form of "wokeness" that slowly grew in the face of non-descript bland suburban nothingness and being surrounded with not enough difference, while very much feeling my own as the daughter of Indian immigrants caught up in the American dream(scape). It is my wondrous relationship to South Africa's other-worldly landscape, its attendant beauty and natural light awash with politics that have shaped my own writing and grasping of this place I now call home. Here I return to a form of entanglement as Sarah Nuttall describes it: "Entanglement, as I use the term here, is intended ... to draw into our analyses critical attention to those sites and spaces in which what was once thought of as separate—identities, spaces, and histories—come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways" (2009, 20).

Perhaps it is a worthy point of reflection to mention that while both Nixon and Dlamini have moved to the US (and, interestingly, are disciplinary neighbors at Princeton University) for their professional careers, this is a journey in the opposite direction to my own, wherein I grew up and studied in the US but have chosen to live in South Africa as an academic and writer. South Africa's "washed with sun" affect endures, including its distinct light, blue open skies, plants—here my much-loved protea flower comes to mind—and its wide animal repertoires, including not only ostriches and rats. Meanwhile, the remnants of South Africa's fading ostrich industry are still seen in the brightly colored feather dusters for sale on the roadside in and around Johannesburg's white Northern suburbs, while its black townships endure as suburban hinterlands to city life, both Joburg and Germiston. The tensions between a purported post-apartheid racial inclusivity and endemic apartheid are still palpably there in both sites, even as the joys and difficulties, beauty, light, and political turmoil of everyday sociality continue with remarkable resilience. It is the small farm towns (like Oudtshoorn) and townships (like Katlehong or K1 as it is now popularly called [Moiloa 2019, 35]) scattered across South Africa's hinter-scape that very much occupy a difficult present of extraction and abandonment, but also care. Here, I lay bare my politics in asserting that they



can only be seen this way, against the idea of the hinterlands of South Africa today as simply “emptying” out that Jonny Steinberg writes about, or as interchanges for the rural in the move to the urban (2007, 325). Rather, thinking from the hinterland is a collective effort, one that stands in for a larger political project (built on promise and failure both) but that also recognizes these spaces as specific historical places unto themselves.

#### PART IV: BY WAY OF CONCLUSION, PHOTOGRAPHING AN UPSIDE-DOWN MANNEQUIN

It still seems that the South African landscape somehow communicates in an unusually direct and wordless way. (Foster 2008, 6)

I would like to end my reflections here by turning to a photograph taken on the roadside—to give it ample space following Stewart (1996)—in December 2020. It was the first time that my family left Johannesburg for elsewhere during the global pandemic and we chose driving as the way to get to our destination of Cape Town. It was on our return journey home after stops in the city center and the locked down eerily empty beaches of Plettenberg Bay that we came across this upside-down anatomically female mannequin plonked down a minor road off the main N2 highway, its location very much in South Africa’s hinterland heartland (Fig. 8.1).<sup>9</sup> The photographed scene left an impression on me that lingered, as capturing my experience and “mood” (to return to Foster 2008, 6) of the “washed with sun” South African landscape, including the arid colors of the desert, rusts and browns, the deep blue sky, and the bespoke earthy cracked dryness which foretells a future of repeated Anthropogenic water shortages and periods of drought. Was the mannequin perhaps “dreaming downwards” in a way reminiscent of Rob Nixon’s Karoo desert world? (1999, 55). Her figuration somehow gestured to me as summing up the moment, the feel of pandemic life, as topsy-turvy, as comical relief, even as some might interpret the image as excluding blackness from within hinterland studies or as poking fun at poor rural whites.

I interpreted this photograph differently in the midst of a remarkable year filled with tragedy and surrounded by death. It felt like perhaps South

<sup>9</sup> Stuit’s keynote (2021) with its focus on the “road” in relation to hinterland thinking is an important intervention that helped me think about roadways and maps in relation to South Africa’s landscape.



**Fig. 8.1** Image taken by Pamila Gupta

Africa’s hinterlands could be places of insight for neglected sites ready for critique and relational comparison<sup>10</sup>; for reading self and other; for seeing deeply historic human, land, plant, and animal, and sensorial connections and entanglements; and for gathering spots for a range of source materials that includes non-fiction writing, photography, and other mediums as forms of the expressive. Such experimental hinterlands awash with intense

<sup>10</sup> Here I take up Esther Peeren’s invaluable insights on the rural as a site of neglected sustained critique, urging us to do the same with “hinterland” (2019).

sun, light, and color may offer a way forward to hope for more inclusive futures, and a source of humor to think from and with, across not only South Africa but the world.

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## Swamp Things: The Wetland Roots of American Authoritarianism

*Maarten Zwiers*

“Drain the swamp.” These words were a mantra of Donald J. Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. For Trump and his followers, the swamp represented the political world inside the Beltway of Washington, DC. It is an effective statement, because Washington is located in an actual swamp, on the banks of the Potomac River. During the Reagan years, “drain the swamp” had already become a popular expression among Republicans in particular, indicating their presumed desire to get rid of political corruption in the country’s capital, while simultaneously declaring their physical and ideological distance from it. They pictured themselves as the representatives of true Americanism associated with the rural heartland of the United States. Similarly, Trump’s allies spoke about “swamp monsters” in their descriptions of officials associated with the political establishment. Through such discourse, the swamp and its monstrous inhabitants

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M. Zwiers (✉)

Faculty of Arts/History and American Studies, University of Groningen,  
Groningen, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [m.zwiers@rug.nl](mailto:m.zwiers@rug.nl)

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emerged as synonyms for the political culture of the federal government and its bureaucracy, in particular liberal and “elitist” Democrats.

Although conservatives in the US have latched on to the “drain the swamp” metaphor to denounce their opponents, their own politics are actually rooted in the swampy hinterlands of the Deep South. These origins can be traced back to the antebellum period, when slavery dominated society in the southern states. Instead of romantic notions of nature, voiced by northern transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and depicted by the Hudson River School, white southern intellectuals often had a completely different idea of their natural surroundings, typified by William Gilmore Simms’s sinister 1853 poem “The Edge of the Swamp.” For southern authors like Simms, nature was not an idyllic Arcadia, but a boggy dystopia that could only be brought under control through the racialized labor regime of the plantation (Castille 1990, 487); swamps in the American tropics were considered obnoxious obstacles that “compromised the order and productivity of imperial ventures, from explorations to plantations,” Monique Allewaert argues (2013, 33).

But the swamps of the South were not the only incubators of US right-wing politics. In his book *Hinterland: America’s New Landscape of Class and Conflict*, Phil A. Neel devotes an entire chapter to the mobilization of reactionary paramilitary groups in (what he calls) the far hinterland of the United States. Instead of the South, he concentrates on the rural Northwest and arid desert states like Arizona. In these regions, Far-Right organizations such as the Oath Keepers have formed parallel governing structures that offer services no longer provided by official administrative institutions, as neoliberal politics and austerity measures have undermined public funding of these services. So-called Patriot groups see the far hinterland in the West and Northwest as fertile ground to organize a right-wing rebellion against the federal government (Neel 2020, 23–59). Neel indeed offers an effective study of current-day Far-Right organizing in these desolate rural areas, yet foregoes a more historical examination of projects with similar ideologies, located in the southern hinterlands, that were much more successful in offering a template for reactionary politics in the United States.

In contrast with the West, the South has often been relegated to the margins of US culture, an outlier in the traditional American success story. In 1917, Journalist H. L. Mencken famously described the area as the “Sahara of the Bozart ... a stupendous region of worn-out farms, shoddy

cities and paralyzed cerebrums” (1977, 157). Slavery, defeat in war, segregation, and rural poverty were some of the more prominent features that set the South apart from the rest of the United States. But in the last few decades, a number of scholars have ventured to deconstruct this “myth of southern exceptionalism” and the South’s characterization as un-American. In her recent investigation of the southern states, for instance, historian Imani Perry places the South at the center of U.S. nation-building, exemplified by the subtitle of her book: a journey below the Mason-Dixon to explore *the soul of a nation*.<sup>1</sup> “The consequence of the projection of national sins, and specifically racism, onto one region is a mis-narration of history and American identity,” she writes, and the “consequence of truncating the South and relegating it to a backwards corner is a misapprehension of its power in American history” (Perry 2022, xix). For Perry, studying the South and its hinterlands, in particular “how it moves the rest of the country about,” exposes the ways US capitalism functions (2022, xix).

What follows is an analysis of the entanglement between oil drilling and white supremacist politics in the Jim Crow South, with a specific focus on the Louisiana hinterlands. This Deep South state was notorious for its entrenched corruption and semi-dictatorial political culture, especially during the reign of Governor Huey “the Kingfish” Long (1893–1935). One of Long’s allies was Leander “Judge” Perez, who governed Plaquemines Parish as a segregationist strongman from the 1920s until the late 1960s. Located in the hinterlands of the port city of New Orleans and bordering the Gulf of Mexico, about ninety percent of Plaquemines is swamp (Jeansonne 1995, 1). A strong masculinist desire for white control characterized Perez’s regime, which materialized in the form of autocratic leadership that safeguarded white supremacy. After the discovery of oil in the parish, Perez created a stable source of income to keep his watery empire afloat. Under his rule, the wetlands of Plaquemines mutated into a breeding ground for an American form of authoritarianism that was based on creating order in a marshland that was perceived as chaotic, with detrimental consequences for the natural environment and its vulnerable inhabitants, both human and nonhuman (Horowitz 2020, 22).

<sup>1</sup> The Mason-Dixon is a demarcation line that separates the North from the South.

Such a desire to bring the swamp under control already appeared in the colonial era, when the wetlands south of New Orleans operated as a site of resistance against enslavers. During the late eighteenth century, when Louisiana was a Spanish colony, maroons controlled the marshy hinterland territory called *Terre Gaillarde*. Spanish officials complained about the inaccessible and secluded nature of the area; Governor Esteban Miró bemoaned how one “had to wade through reeds in chest-high water” in order to even get there (Diouf 2014, 163). Imperial agents like Miró imagined tropical swamps as “Africanized spaces [that] pulled colonials into a hum of life and decay that compromised efforts to produce state, economic, and scientific order” (Allewaert 2013, 34), but what the colonial authorities described as a noxious fenland that had to be drained of its unruly inhabitants served as a safe haven for those trying to escape and challenge the oppression and exploitation of the plantation. Efforts to “drain the swamp” were therefore multi-layered actions, with political, economic, environmental, and racial implications. In the hinterlands of Plaquemines Parish, these interrelated meanings of “draining the swamp” took form in the politics of Leander Perez.

### THE POLITICS OF HINTERLAND EXTRACTION

In a biography of Perez, reporter James Conaway described the Plaquemines hinterlands as an isolated area that had “little in common with the rest of the territorial United States ... a semitropical, near-primordial world of cottonwood and palmetto, sawgrass, wild cane, and cypress, floating above oil, sulphur [sic], and natural gas deposits of almost incredible abundance, subject to floods, high winds, and a sun of African intensity” (1973, 10). Yet this “near-primordial world,” like the rest of the US, has persistently been subject to the ebb and flow of colonialism and capitalism. French-speaking Cajuns, *Isleños* from the Canary Islands, and African Americans were some of the groups that made up the diverse population of Plaquemines, and they reflected the different imperial regimes that controlled the area: France, Spain, and finally the United States. Despite its remoteness (at least from a metropolitan perspective), global trade shaped the economy of the parish: plantations, citrus farms, the seafood industry, and oil and gas firms were export-oriented businesses whose profits depended on oceanic connections and the fluctuations of the world



market. With the arrival of the petroleum companies and sulfur mining in the 1920s and 1930s, Plaquemines turned into a more industrialized space, thus reconfiguring the rural character of its wetland environment.

After World War II, demand for cheap oil and gas began to increase dramatically in the United States. Suburbanization and the specific consumer culture that came with it, in combination with a global quest for natural resources to beat the Soviet Union and make the world “safe for democracy,” led to a rapid expansion of oil and gas drilling (Mitchell 2013, 121–122; Theriot 2014, 5–6). During the 1940s, experts in Louisiana already recognized a change in attitude by the oil companies toward the state’s gas reserves. “Until very recently natural gas was looked upon by the petroleum industry as a necessary evil and for the most part ignored and avoided,” state geologist John Huner and chief petroleum engineer F.V. Carter declared (Carter and Huner n.d.). But the times were changing; according to Huner and Carter, gas was “rapidly developing vast potentialities as a raw material for a huge chemical industry.” They recommended “an orderly and systematic” program to regulate the conservation and management of Louisiana’s gas resources that would “promote a reasonable state of cooperation” between government officials and industry representatives (Carter and Huner n.d.). For effective resource extraction, the messy wetlands needed to be brought under control.

By the time Carter and Huner’s (n.d.) report came out, the petroleum business had already established a firm foothold in Louisiana and altered the state’s economy, which used to be dominated by plantation agriculture. Before the discovery of oil in Plaquemines, working-class residents of the parish primarily lived off trapping, fishing, and hunting. The marshlands were full of fish, shrimp, crabs, alligators, and fur-bearing animals such as muskrats, otters, and raccoons. They were also rich in the type of minerals energy companies were eager to mine. Besides the nascent chemical industry in Louisiana, fast-growing cities in the Northeast such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York hungered after natural gas. This increased demand for gas during the 1950s made the construction of pipelines connecting the hinterlands of the South with northern metropolises profitable.

Leander Perez was a central figure in the Plaquemines oil and gas business. The Perezes were one of the oldest Catholic families in the parish. Leander’s father, Roselius “Fice” Perez, owned two plantations, where he grew sugarcane and rice. At the end of the nineteenth century, Fice Perez

was actively involved in overthrowing Republican rule in Plaquemines, which culminated in the reinstitution of “home rule” by white supremacist Democrats (Jeansonne 1995, 2–3). Leander was born in 1891 and became an infamous defender of segregation in his adult life; journalist Robert Sherrill called him “Dixie’s loudest racial hawk, screeching from the damp, impregnable thickets of Plaquemines” (1968, 9). As the political boss of the parish, the oil companies could not circumvent him. Perez was not always easy to negotiate with. He prided himself on providing for his constituents and forced oilmen to hire locals if they wanted to construct pipelines or drill in the parish. His politics were a combination of racialized paternalism and “good old boy” networking, which meant that transactions happened in the backrooms through informal conversations (Theriot 2014, 52).

White citizens appreciated Perez’s racist leadership and what it did for them. “Thanks to the Judge, every man in Plaquemines Parish can be a king if he wants to,” a motel owner told James Conaway (1973, 154). Local civil rights attorney Joe Defly used different words to describe the political culture of the parish, however: “I consider it to be an absolute dictatorship, the closest thing that you can find to it in this country” (Bernstein 1980). An extractive, for-profit logic guided the activities of the oil business and other white-owned companies in the parish that tried to exploit Black labor. This was for instance visible in the seafood industry, which was another important economic sector in Plaquemines. Like plantation agriculture, the oystering business transformed into a large-scale and more mechanized enterprise during the postwar period. Perez made sure to put whites in charge of the big boats, with Black oystercatchers working for them, getting paid by the sack. In order to escape this “share-cropping on the water,” Black residents of the parish eventually acquired their own little skiffs and collect oysters with smaller dredges, creating an independent economic space for themselves and an eco-friendlier method of harvesting shellfish (Barra 2019, 118–122).

Civil rights activists considered Louisiana dangerous territory, even in comparison to other notoriously racist and violent Deep South states like neighboring Mississippi (Markowitz and Rosner 2013, 242). Within this oppressive climate, Plaquemines was ground zero; according to civil rights historian Adam Fairclough, it was “the most repressive parish” in the state and Leander Perez “the most powerful ultrasegregationist in Louisiana” (1995, 327). Perez threatened to use an eighteenth-century Spanish fort surrounded by snake-infested swamps and marshland as a prison for civil

rights workers. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) thought Plaquemines was not “the kind of place you go into on a whim ... Negroes in the parish are very secretive. They don’t know who to trust, so they trust no one” (qtd. in Conaway 1973, 153).

Local Black activists set up the Underground Right to Vote Movement (URVM), a covert network that drew its inspiration from the Underground Railroad, an abolitionist alliance that helped runaways escape from the South during the antebellum era. Like the Underground Railroad, the Plaquemines movement had “conductors” who set up “stations” throughout the parish where they could meet with civil rights workers, often under the cover of darkness. The conductors also gave education clinics that prepared Black residents to pass the discriminatory tests put in place to disenfranchise African Americans. In addition to these secret activities, the URVM confronted the Jim Crow system directly, for instance through drives to register Black voters at the Plaquemines courthouse in Pointe à la Hache. Although groups from outside the parish like CORE offered valuable assistance, local organizing through the Underground Movement was a critical component of the effort to undermine Leander Perez, ultimately drawing the attention of the U.S. Civil Rights Division (Edwards 2017, 104–116, 135; Van Meter 2020, 175).

Perez’s hinterland regime was toxic in multiple ways: it not only ensured white supremacy through explicit racist practices and codes, but also through environmentally destructive activities that filled the coffers of his political machine. Large-scale oystering and especially the petroleum business transformed the ecology of the parish, turning it into a semi-industrialized landscape that was more vulnerable to disasters like hurricanes, because natural wetland barriers had disappeared. By draining the swamp of Plaquemines, oil companies such as Standard Oil and Shell directly subsidized the strongman politics of Leander Perez.

His reign did not go unchallenged, however. Grassroots civil rights groups including the URVM formed a covert network to mobilize people in the African American communities of the parish, while Black fishermen were able to circumvent the white-dominated oystering industry (Edwards 2017, 104, 187–190). They used the hinterland ecology of Plaquemines as a revolutionary environment to subvert the Jim Crow regulations that defined them as second-class citizens, like other oppositional bodies such as the maroons of Terre Gaillarde or the demonstrators who mobilized in Ferguson, Missouri, after the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown. Neel typifies Ferguson as an example of “the underfunded near-hinterland

of sprawling suburbia,” a once-affluent space whose “lack of surveillance, its decentralization, the ease with which rioters could move between street, forest, and fenced-in yard” made it difficult for law enforcement to control (2020, 135, 141). Although their tactics, circumstances, and surroundings differed, these various collectives of hinterland insurgents that fought white supremacy all managed to form sites of rebellion in oppressive climates.

### OILING THE JIM CROW MACHINE, MAINSTREAMING THE HINTERLAND

Absolute control was central to the political model introduced by Perez in Plaquemines. He desired control over its natural environment, its inhabitants, and its economy, all for his own benefit, although his friend, Louisiana Congressman F. Edward Hébert, preferred to call the Judge’s leadership a benevolent despotism that provided for the people in the parish. “This country needs more like him,” Hébert added, “from the top to the bottom” (qtd. in Conaway 1973, 5). Perez’s autocratic rule in the deltaic hinterlands of the Mississippi River may have been extreme even for Louisiana standards, but its main tendencies found their way to a broader audience through several venues, which will be examined in this part of the chapter. The mainstreaming of Perez’s politics could happen because its most prominent features—racialized authoritarianism, corruption, and an obsession with oil—were in fact representative of the overall political culture of Louisiana. Louisiana’s economy “is closer akin to the Arab sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf,” *New Yorker* correspondent A. J. Liebling observed in 1961, adding: “Oil gets into politics, and politicians, making money in office, get into oil. The state slithers around in it” (Liebling 1970, 70–71). Segregationists actually saw oil revenues as the financial basis for the perpetuation of Jim Crow apartheid.

By the late 1940s and 1950s, the defense of segregation became increasingly tied up with control over oil and gas reserves located in the so-called tidelands. Tidelands are mineral-rich coastline areas with the potential of yielding huge profits through drilling. Both the federal government and Jim Crow states along the Gulf Coast claimed ownership over them, resulting in prolonged legal battles that went all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court (Miller 1997, 208–215). Withholding federal supervision over the tidelands was an important objective of the States’ Rights

Democratic Party, a renegade faction of Jim Crow Democrats who participated as an independent slate in the 1948 presidential race to defeat incumbent Harry Truman and his civil rights agenda. Because the States' Rights Democrats had their strongest base of support in the South, they were soon labeled Dixiecrats.<sup>2</sup> Their position on tidelands control explains the involvement of high-profile oilmen such as Texas industrialist Hugh Roy Cullen in the Dixiecrat Party (Frederickson 2001, 168–169; Horowitz 2020, 42). The oil companies thought it was easier to deal with officials at the local and state levels than with the federal government, while southern segregationists wanted to use oil money coming out of the tidelands to finance their bipartite social system (Conaway 1973, 83–84; Sherrill 1968, 10).

Perez played an important role in the 1948 campaign of the Dixiecrats. For him, the Dixiecrat effort was a useful conduit to lift his extractive hinterland politics to the national stage. Historian Kari Frederickson writes that the “real power behind the states’ rights movement in Louisiana was Leander Perez, the swaggering political boss of mineral-rich Plaquemines Parish” (2001, 115). The Dixiecrats failed to make a decisive impact on the outcome of the election and many returned to the Democratic Party after the 1948 campaign. A group of hardcore states’ righters (including Perez) continued to believe in the Dixiecrat cause after Truman’s victory, however. Some of them were even hoping to “absorb the Republican Party” and anticipated financial support from oil companies to fund their activities. “Chief donor is the oil lobby, which wants States’ rights-minded politicians in power so the rich tidelands oil can be restored to the States,” the *Washington Post* reported in the spring of 1949 (Washington Post 1949).

During his long political career, Perez occupied various positions of power, including legal counsel to the state of Louisiana. In that function, Perez initially masterminded Louisiana’s fight with the federal government about control of the tidelands. Like the defense of segregation, the claim southern states made on the tidelands was based on states’ rights ideology, which emphasizes the sovereignty of the states in dealing with matters not directly delegated to the federal government by the U.S. Constitution (Horowitz 2020, 39). In a 1951 address before the

<sup>2</sup> Dixie is a nickname for the US South, in particular the eleven southern plantation states that seceded from the Union in 1861 to form the Confederate States of America, an explicit attempt to safeguard slavery.

American Shore and Beach Preservation Association and the Southern States Coastal Erosion Control Association in Mobile, Alabama, Perez criticized the Supreme Court for ruling in favor of the federal government, extending Washington's jurisdiction over submerged lands. The "communistic" Court decisions were an expansion of "New Deal-Fair Deal ideologies without evidence" that had "paralyzed further exploration and development work for mineral production in our maritime belt," Perez fumed (Perez 1951, 3–4). A year later, Perez testified before a subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, which held hearings in New Orleans about the tidelands. In a detailed historical exposé, he tried to explain how Louisiana had received its vast aquatic possessions "by heritage from our forefathers" (US House of Representatives 1951, 226). These links with history—with forefathers and Founding Fathers—were an important element of segregationist doctrine, because they gave it legitimacy in the face of ideologies and ideas that were deemed foreign and new, such as communism and racial integration.

Other members of Louisiana's white power structure voiced similar messages, despite factional conflicts among the political elite about the right approach to defend Jim Crow and keep Louisiana in control of the tidelands. In 1958, for example, State Attorney General Jack Gremillion professed his complete commitment to segregation in a speech at a gathering of Shreveport's Rotary Club: "With all the talent and energy I possess, I have fought to preserve segregation, [as] it offers the only alternative to racial strife" (1958, 9–10). Gremillion did not just talk about segregation, however. He also gave the Shreveport Rotarians an update about the ongoing tidelands dispute with the federal government and he pointed out how important protection of the oil industry was for the socioeconomic well-being of Louisiana. "The present recession in the industry has demonstrated how closely the oil economy and the welfare of the State is connected," Gremillion explained. "We must guard our oil resources on [the] one hand and properly develop them on the other" (Gremillion 1958, 11–12).

A year later, in an address at the American Petroleum Institute (API) in Houma, Louisiana, Gremillion again emphasized how the federal refusal to let Louisiana exploit offshore oilfields was the direct cause for the state's "economy trending downwards, school-building dollars disappearing, purchasing power dwindling" (1959). Yet Gremillion did not despair: the conflict over tidelands control had been "a long fight [but] we are

confident we will win it. When we will win is the multi-million dollar question now” (1959, underlining in original). State-controlled drilling would provide the financial buffer necessary to secure Louisiana’s institutions (including segregation) for the future.

After his election to attorney general in 1956, Gremillion provoked the ire of Perez when he decided not to involve the Plaquemines strongman as legal counsel in the tidelands cases and ignore his advice. Perez’s rather outlandish behavior inside and outside the courtroom harmed Louisiana’s interests, Gremillion thought. The Judge did not take it lightly. “Perez would intimidate me, and attempt to intimidate me everywhere he possibly could,” Gremillion recalled. “He’d just, he declaimed me as inferior, he declaimed me as a nincompoop, of course a lot of people began to realize that there was some truth in what I was saying, and they begin to realize that Perez wasn’t nothing [sic] but a dictator” (Hebert 1996, 20).

By distancing himself from Perez, Gremillion attempted to give the segregationist desire of tidelands control an air of respectability. But the difference was in degree, not substance; although Gremillion’s political style may have been less brazen than Perez’s explicit racism, his more toned-down attitude toward the defense of Jim Crow and the interconnected issue of tidelands control was nothing more than a calculated effort to keep Louisiana’s white supremacist socioeconomic system intact, to the detriment of Black Louisianans and the state’s vulnerable wetland ecosystem. Perez’s hinterland authoritarianism, then, was not a contained phenomenon limited to the marshlands of southern Louisiana, but an ideology shared by the state’s business and political elite, albeit in a somewhat diluted form.

### THE HINTERLAND AS HARBINGER

What if the hinterland is a harbinger of things to come? The fusion of white supremacist attitudes and the destruction of nature through extractive industries continues to affect the political culture of the Bayou State until this day. In April 2021, Danny McCormick, a Republican state representative from Oil City whose anti-Semitic social media posts drew criticism from organizations like the Anti-Defamation League, proposed to turn Louisiana into a “fossil fuel sanctuary state,” protecting the petroleum industry against federal law (Baurick 2021; Karlin 2020). Such ideas demonstrate that Perez’s hinterland ideology lives on, not just in Louisiana, but also in US conservatism more broadly. For many years, the Republican

Party attempted to keep on a mask of respectability in its defense of traditional values. Beneath that mask however, the hinterland lurked, exposing itself with the surprise victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primaries and that year's presidential campaign. During his time in the White House, Trump enacted an agenda and practiced a political style that followed the Perez blueprint: he bullied and intimidated opponents inside and outside his own party, engaged in gaslighting and conspiracy thinking, fostered corruption, and catered to white supremacists and the fossil fuel industry. His attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election exposed the disrespect of Trump's strongman regime for the mechanisms of democracy.

How did the Republican Party transform into a natural habitat for the authoritarian principles espoused by Perez? In his book *Carbon Democracy*, political theorist Timothy Mitchell explains how oil production, in contrast with the coal industry during the nineteenth century, is not conducive to democratic mobilization and labor activism. "Oil production often grew rapidly, in regions remote from large populations, to serve distant users in places already industrialised with coal," Mitchell writes. "Unlike the movement of coal, the flow of oil could not readily be assembled into a machine that enabled large numbers of people to exercise novel forms of political power" (2013, 36–39). Like the oil from the hinterlands of Plaquemines found its way to other parts of the country, its authoritarian politics eventually became part of Republican Party doctrine. After the 1948 Dixiecrat campaign, Perez supported Republican Dwight Eisenhower during the 1950s, because of Eisenhower's initial support for state control over offshore oil drilling (Jeansonne 1995, 193–195). The Judge was at first also very enthusiastic about US Senator Barry Goldwater, the reactionary firebrand from Arizona who revamped the Republican Party after surprisingly capturing its presidential nomination in 1964. "If I read Goldwater right, he is a product of the wide open spaces," Perez said. "He has strength. He is a good American, dedicated to Constitutional government" (qtd. in Conaway 1973, 141). Four years later, Perez threw his support behind another kindred spirit, both ideologically and regionally: Governor George Wallace of Alabama, the segregationist rabble-rouser who did surprisingly well in the 1968 presidential campaign as a third-party candidate.

Perez's endorsement of Goldwater linked the swamps of Plaquemines with the desert of the Southwest and the Sunbelt suburbs. "Landlocked, isolated, a rural state still in the process of growth and development from the raw frontier, Arizona is essentially self-centered," journalist Fred



J. Cook described Goldwater's home state in 1964 (54). Like Louisiana, Arizona formed a fecund ecosystem for right-wing extremism to take root. "This is a society that, not unnaturally, expresses itself in the fanatical voice of the Radical Right—and, in its innocence, considers the raucous tones of fanaticism the essence of sweet reason" (Cook 1964, 55). The Goldwater campaign set the Republican Party on a course that was more in line with Perez's states' rights ideology, eventually culminating in the rise of Trump (Zwiers 2019, 1, 10–11). As the owner of Mar-A-Lago ("Sea-to-Lake") in Palm Beach, Florida and the Trump Tower in Manhattan, Trump quite literally connected the swampy hinterlands of the South with the "palatial urban cores" Neel writes about—the centers of global metropolises like New York that are home to FIRE (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate) industries, law firms, and marketing companies (2020, 9–10).

On 6 January 2021, a large contingent of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the 2020 election results. The same Far-Right organizations that mobilized in the far hinterland were in the vanguard of the siege. However, these groups (Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Three Percenters) merely served as the shock troops of a right-wing political class whose momentum had been gathering for decades. Its agenda closely resembled the toxic authoritarianism Perez exercised in the Plaquemines wetlands. Yet, as this chapter has shown, the hinterland's politics are not unitary: despite the near-totalitarian nature of the Judge's rule in the parish, grassroots opposition groups found ways to mobilize there and contribute to the downfall of the Perez oligarchy (Fairclough 1995, 465–466). Even within such an oppressive climate, antiracist agents of change managed to carve out spaces for themselves and at times succeeded in reconfiguring the political ecology of the hinterland.

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## Ambivalence and Resistance in Contemporary Imaginations of US Capitalist Hinterlands

*Tjalling Valdés Olmos*

The first chapter of geographer Phil A. Neel's *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (2018) starts with a recounting of the author's experience as a day laborer for the US Bureau of Land Management in Winnemucca, a small mining town in northwestern Nevada. He is there in the wake of the global financial crisis, in 2011, the same year in which Chloé Zhao's film *Nomadland* (2020) takes off in Empire, a collapsed Nevadan mining town that lies a three-hour drive west of Winnemucca. Despite their shared envisioning of the rural US West as a space marked by capitalist ruin—and perhaps because of their specific media and genres—Zhao's *Nomadland* and Neel's *Hinterland* propose quite different answers to questions concerning how to respond to the continuous crisis capitalism produces in the rural hinterland, what this hinterland's futures might look like, and who is seen to have a (political) stake in it.

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T. Valdés Olmos (✉)

Literary and Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam,  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [t.r.valdesolmos@uva.nl](mailto:t.r.valdesolmos@uva.nl)

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In the first section of this chapter, I provide a close reading of Neel's analysis of what he terms the "far hinterland," investigating the futures envisioned for the rural US West through his anarcho-Marxist perspective. Paying attention to the manners in which the rural-urban binary continues to haunt Neel's political (and moral) distinction between the "near" and "far" hinterland, I probe the illegibility this binary produces in terms of thinking about resistance to capitalism in more ambivalent ways. I expand on this question in the second section of my chapter through a close reading of *Nomadland*, where I trace the manners in which the film presents resistance through a more intimate understanding of the interwoven structures of capitalism, heteronormativity, and settler colonialism. But I also point out how, through its esthetic and narrative embedding in the genres of the road movie and the western, *Nomadland* remains endemically invested in settler colonial registers, invoking (affective) patterns of movement and visibility that "cast nature as other and, through the gaze of *terra nullius*, [represent] indigenous peoples as non-existent" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 6). Finally—taking into account how my objects of analysis remain endemically invested in settler colonialism and render indigenous peoples invisible—I push the question of what it would mean to learn from and unlearn with Indigenous American epistemologies and imaginations as a move toward the unsettlement of settler colonialism-cum-capitalism.

### VACATING THE FAR HINTERLAND OF POLITICAL POTENTIAL

Whereas the US West at the center of *Hinterland* and *Nomadland* has long been constructed through the grammars of settler colonialism as frontier—a wilderness turned into a "region of plunder, discovery, raw resources, taming, classification, and racist adventure" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 3)—the hinterland evokes a different, but also colonially informed, understanding of this area. From its inception in the German language (*hinter* "behind") and subsequent translation by George C. Chisholm in the 1888 *Handbook of Commercial Geography*, hinterland is defined as the backcountry of a commercial port or coastal settlement. More contemporary and common understandings of the hinterland define it as "a region lying beyond major metropolitan or cultural centers" (Merriam-Webster 2021) or as "an area lying beyond what is visible or known" (Oxford Dictionary 2021). Where the frontier evokes an unknown wilderness that

lies *in front of* the settler's movement toward progress, the hinterland invokes a behind that serves to uphold an expanding urbanized center.

Neel's study expands on the historical notion of the hinterland as a backcountry connected to ports or centers of capital agglomeration. Tracing the manner in which non-urban and peri-urban areas in the US are shaped politically and economically through the contemporary crises that global capitalism produces, Neel posits that the hinterland often acts as an essential "subsidiary [zone] for global capital" and nearby cities, and as such he understands these areas as "fully subsumed into world capitalism" (2018, 17). Of specific interest to me is his distinction between the "far" and "near" hinterland. The "far hinterland," of which Neel makes Nevada and the far West prime examples, is predominantly characterized by its rurality and acts as a "disavowed" and "distributed" space for "factory farms, for massive logistics complexes, for power generation, and for the extraction of resources from forests, deserts, and seas" (2018, 17). The "near hinterland" on the other hand "encompasses the foothills descending from the summit of the megacity" or "the exurb bordering newly impoverished, diverse inner-ring suburbs where immigrants settle in large numbers alongside those forced out of the urban core by skyrocketing rents" (Neel 2018, 17, 57). Neel's conceptualization of the hinterland is particularly generative in understanding how such areas—normatively seen as unimportant to the structure of capitalism—function as infrastructural sites of systemic extraction and dispossession that are part and parcel to the reproduction of global capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, *Hinterland's* distinction between the far and near hinterland remains informed by a more traditional bifurcation between the urban and rural. It presents what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls an "extractive view" (2017, 5) that renders the land solely visible as a space that provides resources and commodities for (urban) centers of global capital. Consider the following quote from Neel:

[The far hinterland is a terrain] in which ruined mountain hamlets, desert trailer parks, [and] cookie-cutter cornfields ... are united by an uncanny feeling of similarity—there are really only so many ways to kill a place. Aside from the informality and illegality of their employment profiles and the tendency to rely on productive or extractive industries, [the far hinterland is]

<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Neel's work resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of Marx's "urbanist teleology" (2018, 265).

also united by a certain feeling of slowing time, days stretched long and empty by unemployment, hollowed mills and factories pieced apart by the concrete-wrenching roots of grass and shrubbery. ... This sort of slowness gets to you, sinking in your body and wrapping itself like molasses around your bones. The longer you stay, the harder it becomes to reach the velocity to escape. (2018, 78)

This quote is indicative of how *Hinterland* values the rural—as a homogeneous space which has been by and large given up on as being able to foster some type of life worth saving. The rural is represented here as dying, ruined, and decrepit. Neel's description of the far hinterland affectively performs a feeling of exhaustion and resignation, and spatiotemporally constructs this space as a stagnant wasteland. In line with contemporary Anthropocentric approaches, capitalism in the far hinterland is represented as “totalizing in its destructive effects” (Gómez-Barris 2017, 4), which makes it a space with no future that one preferably leaves behind.

The vacating of the rural far hinterland as a space of life, of resistance, and of other-world-making anticipates Neel's preferential treatment of the “near hinterland,” a peri-urban location, as the space from which more viable forms of resistance to capitalism are materialized. Neel contends that “the near hinterland will likely be the central theater in the coming class war, the most concise summation of which is simply the fact that large populations of people who have been made surplus to the economy live and work along its integral corridors” (2018, 145). So although Neel does make the rural far hinterland visible as a node in the infrastructure of global capitalism, his analysis seems to re-inscribe the (peri-)urban as the space where the violence of capitalism hits harder, making it more suitable for the formulation and practice of resistance. The rural-urban binary here is reshaped, but not rejected. Consider also the formal structure of *Hinterland*: the first two chapters, with their focus more steadfastly on the rural far hinterland of the US West, are geared toward providing an (infra) structural analysis of capitalism in these areas, but do not provide much insight into what forms and modes of resistance have and are emerging from the rural (with the exception of the far and militant right). Potentially worthwhile forms of political resistance on the left are the focus of the latter two chapters, which concentrate on the exurbs.

In addition, *Hinterland*'s anarcho-Marxist approach is only able to understand full-blown class conflict and violent proletarian uprising as legitimate and possibly successful answers to the current system of



capitalist domination. When Neel raises the potential for some forms of resistance, including ones that do not look like riots or wars, emerging in the far hinterland he considers these from the same nihilistic and fatalistic perspective as his general assessment of life in such spaces:

When some fragment of the communal does find some space to congeal in the world's wastelands and factory floors—maybe in the midst of a riot, in the heat of a war, in the cold lonely life led in high steppes and deep mountain valleys not yet fully subsumed by crisis and capital—this fragment is ultimately found, pieced apart, drained of its intensity until it also can be thrown into that same dead, world-rending dance. (2018, 47)

Rather than understanding these “fragments of the communal” as operating outside of capitalism, we might consider them as part of the system, as a “glitch,” which Lauren Berlant defines as “an interruption within transition,” and a “revelation of an infrastructural failure” (2016, 393). The failure or erasure of such a glitch does not mean that it loses its capacity to be read as a generative interruption; in fact, as Berlant poses, it is precisely by staying with the revelation or imaginaries such failures and “hiccups” (2016, 393) provide that opportunities arise to envision forms of sociality and being that are non-reproductive of capitalism. Such failures, *both ordinary failures and spectacular failures*, thus have the potential to inform “counternormative political struggles” (Berlant 2016, 393). And so, in the next section I want to linger on the resistive potential of “the cold lonely life led in high steppes and deep mountain valleys” through a reading of *Nomadland*. What happens if we read the far hinterland of the US West as a space where “heterogeneous forms of living” (Gómez-Barris 2017, 4) exist as forms of ambivalent resistance that generate alternative imaginations of and for the world?

### NOMADLAND: RESISTANCE, AMBIVALENCE, AND SETTLER COLONIAL DESIRE

*Nomadland*, similar to Neel, invokes the rural US West as a ruinous space in which both communities and the environment are subjected to the unforgiving and volatile power of global capitalism and US neoliberalism. Zhao's award-sweeping film—based on Jessica Bruder's 2017 investigative nonfiction bestseller *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*—follows a sixty-year-old widow, Fern (Frances McDormand),

choosing to rebuild an itinerant life in the rural US West in the wake of the 2008 economic crash. The film shows Fern as part of a community of migrant laborers (vandwellers) made up largely of older white Americans, as she travels through the various nodes of the far hinterland capitalist infrastructure. Fern sorts packages in an Amazon distribution center in Nevada, cleans toilets and services tourists on a camping ground in the Badlands, works at a beetroot harvesting site in Nebraska, takes up a job as a waitress at a truck stop diner in South Dakota, and helps out in a souvenir shop somewhere along a desert highway.

The plot, however, centers not merely on Fern's precarious life as an itinerant seasonal worker. *Nomadland* begins with the following words superimposed on a black background: "On January 31, 2011, due to a reduced demand for sheetrock, US Gypsum shut down its plant in Empire, Nevada, after 88 years. By July, the Empire zipcode, 89405, was discontinued." As the text fades, the black screen becomes the inside of a storage unit door that is being rolled up by Fern. She takes out some of her possessions and loads them into a small white van. While going through the objects that used to make her house a home, Fern encounters a jacket that belonged to her late husband. She grabs it and then nostalgically hugs it, taking in its smell. Displaced from the private property of her former house, the items reinforce a sense of alienation from the promises of normativity that neoliberal capitalism upholds. While Fern continues to load stuff into her van, a wide shot situates her and the storage unit in front of a backdrop featuring the former gypsum mine. Viewers see this extractive fort in its ruinous state, standing on the horizon of a bleak, somber, wintry landscape. The opening scene thus weaves together different scenes and senses of loss: the disappearance of a capitalist extractive industrial site that offered stable labor and income, the loss of a husband and community that sustained heteronormative forms of kinship, and the loss of private property that provided rootedness and safety. Fern's departure from this scene of compounded loss forms the start of some sort of quest and her mode of transport embeds the film in the genre of the road movie.

Whereas many earlier US road movies can be recognized by a motif of aimless travel, where the journey seems to be "charged with rebellion against a choking industrialized stability" (Laderman 2002, 8), *Nomadland* starts with a scene showing the fantasy of American industrialized stability as having been shattered. As film scholar David Laderman notes, "the tone [of road movies] suggest[s] a movement *toward* something" (2002, 20), whether that is an unencumbered and individualistic life on the road where

the grasps of capitalism and modernity seem weaker, or a movement toward the (re)attainment of some sort of status quo. Ignacio M. Sánchez-Prado further identifies the theme of restoration and/or redemption as an anticipated goal of the genre (2016, 58). *Nomadland*'s evocation of the road movie, then, induces an expectation of a quest that will restore some sort of normativity, and thus stability, to make up for the interwoven loss that Fern has experienced.

But the film refuses the movement of discovery and restoration that the road movie generically promises. For one, Fern is reluctant to reinvest in the fantasy of the "good life" (Berlant 2011) that heteronormativity and property offer. With her van, she traverses various states in the West, making stopovers at sites of labor, all the while befriending fellow itinerant workers. One of these, Linda May, encourages Fern to make a visit to an annual gathering for vandwellers in Quartzsite, Arizona. There, Fern has a short encounter with Dave (David Strathairn), who makes clear he is romantically interested in her. Fern is depicted as somewhat reluctant to reciprocate Dave's feelings. At first, it seems this is because she is still coping with the loss of her husband. As the film progresses, Fern seems to give in to Dave's advances and eventually joins him at his son's idyllic property in Northern California for Thanksgiving. Fern apprehensively participates in a lavish dinner, engages in pleasantries with Dave's family and friends, feeds the horses and chickens, and takes care of Dave's newborn grandchild. However, when she observes Dave playing piano with his son, her facial expression is flat. Not invoking joy, nor an overabundant sense of sadness or nostalgia, the domestic scene of happy heteronormativity seems to leave Fern rather cold. Attempting to sleep in the king-size bed of the guestroom, she decides against it and goes to sleep in her van instead. At dawn, she re-enters the house and walks through it one last time, as if trying to find a feeling that would spur an attachment to this scene of normativity, but ends up leaving Dave, the idyllic domestic space, and California. The continuity and safety promised by heteronormative kinship and property no longer seem to give Fern a "sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (Berlant 2011, 24).

The film's generic anticipation of (re)discovering happiness through the restoration of some sort of normativity is thus truncated. Fern's departure from California is also significant in that the endpoint of the American road movie and western is so often located in this state either as an idyllic fertile space (as opposed to the deserts and plains of the far West) or as holding out the possibility of further progress and wealth in its

cosmopolitan metropolises. Fern, instead, takes to the road again, where she first returns as a seasonal worker at the Amazon distribution center and subsequently makes her way back to the vandweller gathering in Quartzsite before finally arriving back in Empire, Nevada. In this movement, the film seems to invoke the cyclical temporality associated with traditional imaginations of the rural idyll (Bakhtin 1996, 225), but it crucially elides the notion of the rural as a pre-modern and isolated space in its incessant visualization of Fern's movement along the infrastructural nodes of global capitalism charted by Neel.

When Fern reappears in Empire, she first clears out her storage unit, telling the friend who is taking over her belongings, "No, I'm not going to miss any of it." She is then seen walking toward her former workplace, the gypsum mine, still lying amidst the bleak and snowy plains. She wanders its empty halls and wipes gathered dust off a meeting table. A shot follows of a dusty coffee mug with "Happy Birthday! From USG [United States Gypsum]" printed on it. In the background, Fern's trembling breath is audible. A close-up of her face reveals her crying, clearly pained by the memories and the fact that she is, in some sense, saying goodbye. By having Fern return to the initial scene of loss, the film presents an ambivalent relation vis-à-vis a capitalist space of extractive industry, conjuring it as an object of belonging from which the hinterland subject might fail to completely disinvest. The mine is then no longer just a symbol of the ruins of capitalism, nor does it merely signify an institution that offers a sense of stability and income. The mug and Fern's tears also make it legible as a space bearing the reminder of ordinary forms and events of failed sociality and community that give meaning to resistance despite their embedding within exploitative structures of capitalism. In this sense the fatalistic affect associated with the hinterland as a site of totalizing capitalist ruin is challenged.

Concurrently, the film also attempts to disrupt the "affective economies" (Ahmed 2004) of this region as settler frontier. A montage of single, still shots follow the previous scene, again depicting Empire as a snowed in, desolate town emptied of life. The viewer then trails Fern from behind as she walks up a residential street toward her former house. She enters and nostalgically wanders—as she did in the Californian property—through the former domestic spaces of the living room, the bedroom, and eventually the kitchen (Fig. 10.1). There, she looks through the rear window into the landscape of Nevada, observing its barren, wintery, and bleak plains. This contrasts with how Fern described her former house and its



Fig. 10.1 Fern in her former home. Screenshots from *Nomadland*

surroundings in the earlier Thanksgiving scene in California. Asked by Dave’s daughter-in-law what her house in Empire was like, Fern answered: “Nothing special. Just a company tract house... Actually, it was special. We were right on the edge of town. And our backyard looks out at this huge open space. It was just desert, desert, desert, all the way to the mountains. There was nothing in our way.” This fond and hopeful recollection of her backyard view stands in stark contrast to the present scene of decay she observes from the backdoor upon her return to Empire. In this instance, the film stages a dialogue with the cultural canon of the western that has previously popularized and mythologized the landscape observed from Fern’s backdoor as frontier.

Zhao and cinematographer Joshua James Richards speak with these earlier imaginations of the region through directly referencing the seminal John Ford western classic *The Searchers* (1956). At the start of *The Searchers*, Martha Edwards (Dorothy Jordan) looks out from her porch into the sunlit expanse of the desert (Fig. 10.2). A hopeful expectancy can be read in her expression as she sees Ethan Edwards—played by the iconic embodiment of Hollywood western masculinity, John Wayne—appear and approach the house. The arrival of the cowboy in the western generally

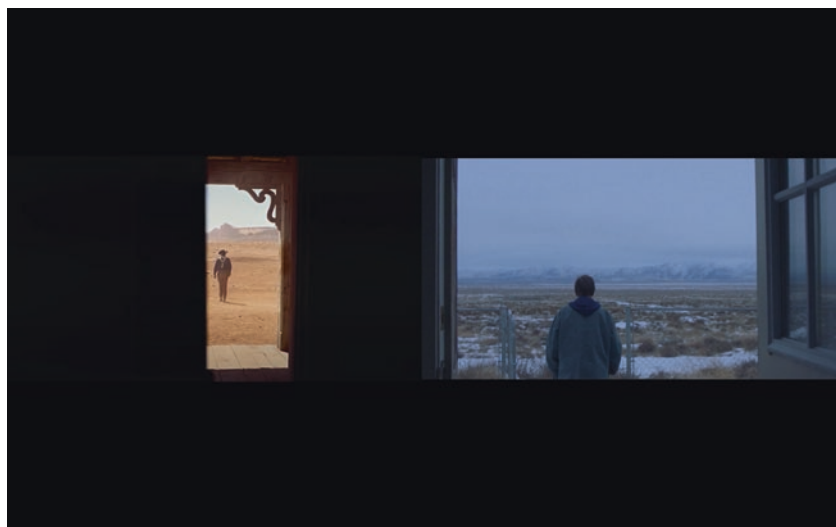


**Fig. 10.2** Martha Edwards and Fern looking into the landscape of the US West. Screenshots from *The Searchers* and *Nomadland*

indicates the start of a spectacular quest in which protecting and/or restoring domestic property on the frontier from the danger of Indigenous Americans and an encroaching wilderness is the central theme. That frontier property, represented as the ranch or farmstead and almost always exclusively inhabited by the white heteropatriarchal family unit, symbolizes on a micropolitical level an idealized vision for the nation (Eagle 2017). In *Nomadland*, a close-up similarly frames Fern's face looking into the distance from the back porch, her trembling breath once again audible. Fern's expression crucially does not map a hopeful expectation onto the landscape. She does not anticipate the arrival of a rugged masculine individual to restore the property and a semblance of white domestic heteronormativity. Fern's tract house was never hers to begin with; her settlement of this space was always already precarious, precisely because the possibility of this settlement is tied up with global capitalism's foundational logic of extraction, dispossession, and dislocation. The scene whispers what Kathleen Stewart, in her discussion of everyday cultural poetics in derelict Appalachian towns and coal camps, calls "an audible lamentation," that "trembles in expectation" (1996, 93). Standing on that

spectral threshold between property and wilderness, Fern's face hardens momentarily before showing a small smile, turning that trembling expectation into a timid realization that she no longer perceives a desert of opportunity—a frontier with nothing in the way—but a space that reverberates with disintegrating promises.

In the following shot, *Nomadland* explicitly references the closing images of *The Searchers* (Fig. 10.3). After eradicating the threat of indigenous presence and restoring the white heterofamilial space of domestic property, Ethan Edwards turns away from the ranch and walks into the endless and transcendental sprawl of the western landscape. The door of the ranch closes behind him. In this way, *The Searchers* ensures the safeguarding of the white family and nation, while Ethan/John Wayne is immortalized as the rugged free individual and righteous colonial subject who continues his journey toward endless American expansion and progress. In *Nomadland*, Fern also walks away from her former property. The landscape, however, is encumbered by a heavy layer of clouds that foreclose visions of transcendence associated with settler colonial teleology. The backdoor stays open, and as the shot widens, the viewer sees Fern exit



**Fig. 10.3** Ethan Edwards and Fern walking away from, respectively, the secured ranch and the lost home. Screenshots from *The Searchers* and *Nomadland*

the frame from the left. Fern leaves behind the mining town, the domestic property, and the landscape as a scene of desire she has become disenchanted with. Nevertheless, *Nomadland* does not—as opposed to Neel’s *Hinterland*—enshrine the rural far hinterland as a space resigned to death. Disenchantment is clearly not resignation; rather, it is a moment of shifting desire. In the next shot, we see Fern’s van driving, once again, down a highway through the bleak and overcast landscape of the West, implying that she is riding toward her next gig in the infrastructure of this capitalist wasteland. Refusing to move along the straight lines of salvific or fatalistic catharsis, *Nomadland* offers its viewers a slightly more “queer face”: an “episode of relearning” (Berlant 2016, 399, 412) that opens up new affective pathways to imagine life in the far hinterland of capitalist ruin.

What is interesting about Zhao’s film is that it proposes a register and grammar by which one might start to envision the US West as a hinterland determinately haunted by the afterlives of the frontier. When linked to Zhao’s earlier films, *Songs My Brother Taught Me* (2015) and *The Rider* (2018), which deal centrally with Indigenous American subjects and spaces, *Nomadland* is able to question somewhat the gendered and sexualized dynamics of settler colonialism that co-constitute capitalist reproduction and the desire for property and progress (Rifkin 2014). However, while I note a partial “waning of genre” (Berlant 2011, 6) of the US West as settler frontier or ruined hinterland, *Nomadland* also remains invested in the road movie’s and the western’s generic valuation of mobility and movement as boundless freedom and rugged individualism. The centralization of Fern’s tenacity vis-à-vis the obstacles (i.e. labor and living conditions) she encounters on her journey construct her as akin to the forementioned strenuous figures at the center of the popular literary and filmic canon of the western frontier: the pioneer and the cowboy. *Nomadland* more explicitly draws on these tropes when Fern’s sister Dolly (Melissa Smith) observes: “what the nomads are doing is not that different from what pioneers did. I think Fern is part of an American tradition.”

The film differs sharply from both Neel’s Marxist approach, as well as Bruder’s investigative book, in the sense that it actively avoids a critical visualization of the exploitative labor conditions that companies like Amazon enforce in order to prevent workers from unionizing and tackling the systemic failures that affect them on a daily basis (Crispin 2021; Myles 2021). While the film might thus facilitate an imagination of more ambivalent ways of living and resisting amidst capitalist ruin, reiterating Fern within this idealized image of white strenuous subjectivity individualizes



and romanticizes the structural dynamics of capitalist crisis. Moreover, the film obfuscates how capitalism affects differently racialized rural subjects across the hinterland and fails to recognize that certain forms of (ambivalent) resistance might be more available to some than to others.<sup>2</sup>

In envisioning the non-urban US West, race and indigeneity remain secondary not only to *Nomadland* but also to *Hinterland*. Given the historical co-constitution of capitalism with settler colonialism, I find it particularly harmful to ignore the fact that indigeneity constitutes the “differentiated material foundation from which modernity itself emerged and is sustained” (Shvartzberg Carrió 2020). Imagine then that around and between Empire and Winnemucca spreads a different infrastructure, one that remains marginal, spectral, and erased in the imaginations of both texts, but that can be and has been mapped. Imagine an infrastructure that was violently established as both frontier and hinterland in the name of settler colonialism-cum-capitalism, the nodes of which nevertheless contain past and present realities of Indigenous self-reliant communal survival and world-making, what Gerald Vizenor defines as “survivance” (1999). Across Nevada, the Western Shoshone, the Northern and Southern Paiute, and the Washoe continue to shape Indigenous nationhood, subjectivity, sociality, and culture in ways that, as Kahn-awake Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson poses, “may be antagonistic to the encompassing frame of the state, [and] may be simply unintelligible to the western and/or imperial ear” (quoted in Byrd 2011, xx). Contemporary Native artists from the Great Basin, like Western Shoshone artist Jack Malotte, historically and presently critique the ongoing violence of settler colonialism-cum-capitalism and imagine other worlds possible, worlds in which it is clear that indigenous subjects are visible, are present, and have an actual stake in challenging and changing the hinterland as space where the historical nexus of colonialism and capitalism continues to violently reproduce.

*Nomadland*’s and *Hinterland*’s erasure and displacement of Indigenous American presence remains, meaning that they evade a crucial remapping of infrastructures of resistance and living through and with Indigenous epistemologies. As Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd posits, in their reflection on how key thinkers in critical theory circumvent sustained interrogations

<sup>2</sup>The film, for example, neglects to incorporate Bruder’s recognition that the reason the vandwelling community is able to move around relatively unencumbered is that it is predominantly composed of white people, who are not subjected to structural practices of anti-black surveillance and violence on the road (2017, 180).

of indigeneity, “not being prepared to disrupt the logics of settler colonialism necessary for the *terra nullius* through which to wander, the entire system either freezes or reboots” (2011, 17). Both texts at the center of my chapter do not perform the work of an active learning and unlearning with knowledges, imaginations, and forms of sociality that Indigenous Americans have employed since before being confronted with settler colonialism. An epistemological repositioning that considers Native people as theorists and producers of knowledge is essential in the ongoing project of unsettling and reorienting the seductive and extractive settler colonial view of the non-urban US West as hinterland or frontier—as *terra nullius* ready for extraction and parceling into property.

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## CHAPTER 11

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# An Arc Beyond *Stasis*: Activism in the Hinterland-facing Fictions of Alex La Guma and Zoë Wicomb

*Andrew van der Vlies*

In *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972), the fourth novel by exiled South African writer, journalist, and liberation activist Alex La Guma (1925–1985), a character called Beatie Adams, an implicitly “Coloured” nanny to a white child,<sup>1</sup> finds herself in the Company Gardens in central

<sup>1</sup>“Coloured,” in the South African (British) spelling, denoted a particular racial classification for a diverse group of people that included, inter alia, autochthonous Khoisan peoples (not Bantu / Black African), slaves from the Indian Ocean rim, deracinated white settlers, and mixed-race or biracial people. Much politics has attended its lowercase or uppercase usage; see for example Zoë Wicomb’s sustained use of the word uncapitalized to reflect its continued use for communal self-identification, as distinct from the capitalized classificatory term whose convoluted legal definitions one of the protagonists in her novel *Playing in the Light* reads about in the National Library in Cape Town (2006, 120–122).

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A. van der Vlies (✉)  
University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA, Australia

University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa  
e-mail: [andrew.vandervlies@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:andrew.vandervlies@adelaide.edu.au)

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Cape Town, near the 1908 bronze statue of Cecil John Rhodes that stands there (8). Sindi-Leigh McBride's discussion of the inscription on this statue's granite base—"Your hinterland is there"—in her presentation at the colloquium from which this volume arises, reminded me of La Guma's novel's engagement with this landmark, and with these words ascribed to the former Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, mastermind of the colonization of Mashonaland and Matabeleland, and architect of the expansion of British rule over all of Southern Africa.<sup>2</sup> For Beatie Adams, Rhodes's statue's raised left hand is not "pointing north" to Cairo, tracing the route of the Cape-to-Mediterranean railway of imperial fantasy (as the inscription implies), but instead "toward the segregated lavatories: Yonder lies your hinterland," Beatie thinks, with amusement (12).

La Guma, who had recently begun two decades of exile when *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* was published and would never again see his home city, slightly misremembers the inscription, substituting *yonder* for *there*, *lies* for *is*. The errors suggest a greater sense of spatial remove, as well as a dislocation that registers temporally. The former effect emphasizes apartheid's segregationist policies, indexing the stasis in which South Africans consigned to the actual hinterlands, both near and far (in Phil Neel's definitions [2018b, 17–18]), of apartheid's spatial engineering—as well as to the metaphorical hinterlands of apartheid's developmental logic—long felt themselves trapped.<sup>3</sup> The latter effect implies belatedness through its old-fashioned formulation, while the phrase "yonder lies" also suggests a promise that might or might not be honored—just as in "lies" we might intuit multiple political falsehoods. Reading stasis affirmatively, as this chapter will attempt to do, might allow one to read this multivalent *lying yonder* as reassessing any assumption that a hinterland's stasis is either wholly negative or a permanent state; the slantwise misquotation elevates the critique implicit in Beatie's bemusement, whether intentionally or not. In La Guma's hands, Rhodes's imperial overreach is reduced to bathos, its

<sup>2</sup>The hinterland as "beyond" or "back" country bears an imperial or extractive-capitalist descriptive intention, suggesting not only spatial remove but temporal difference: belatedness, backwardness, stasis, an association that is implied by the geological sense in which the word has been used as synonym for one body in relation to another (*hinterland* to *foreland*): that which has shifted (away), or not yet shifted (toward). See the *Oxford English Dictionary* etymologies and list of historical usages ("hinterland, n." 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Those finding themselves in the hinterland, Neel suggests, are subject to an "inclusive-exclusion": "the commonality that comes from being increasingly surplus to the economy, though also paradoxically integral to it" (2018b, 13).

end the petty apartheid regulation of separate amenities, rather than anything edifying or lasting.

Immediately after musing on Rhodes's statue, Beatie picks up a newspaper and encounters a report about a murder in a rural town: a white woman has been charged with poisoning her husband:

Suddenly Beatie Adams remembered a country station, milk cans, a sheep pen, a coloured man in a railway cap sweeping the platform as her train pulled slowly past, carrying her towards the city, years ago. Surely, she thought, it couldn't be *that* place. [...] Beatie Adams wondered how people could be so nasty as to go about murdering each other. (13)

She cannot fathom such nastiness: this, she thinks, “was not a world included in a succession of servants’ rooms” (13), spaces that are themselves metaphorically hinterlands within a zone of suburban propriety penetrated neither by such happenings nor news of such events (see Jansen 2019). Suburbs are (near) hinterlands, too, Neel reminds us (2018a, 33), and both these and those further removed, recalled in Beatie’s memory of her origins, are cast as unsettling, known *and* defamiliarized spaces, in which nothing happens but from which violence is never far removed.<sup>4</sup> The term “hinterland” has a figurative usage, after all, connoting the unconscious or repressed,<sup>5</sup> and repression—whether socio-political (which is to say material) or psychological (on the part of those repressed or complicit in repression, however conscious)—inevitably marks engagements with the hinterland in South African letters as an overdetermined spatio-temporal continuum, whether understood as a *chronotope* with Bakhtin (1990), or a *heterotopia* with Foucault (1984). What, after all, are J. M. Coetzee’s *Dusklands* (1974) but historical and psychological hinterlands connecting the Cape settler-colonial adventure in the eighteenth-century with US neo-imperialism in Vietnam in the early 1970s? The hinterland is a space, too, in which the claims of Black South Africans to the land must be confronted, as in Nadine Gordimer’s *The*

<sup>4</sup>Suburbs, Neel writes, “most often act as a near hinterland, where visible industry ... accretes just outside the sightline of the wealthy urbanite”; conversely (and concomitantly), “exurban and rural areas compose a far hinterland,” one saturated with extraction, production, and much violence (2018a, 33).

<sup>5</sup>See, as examples of historical usage: “Unexplored territories full of mystery and danger in the hinterland of their own minds” (1919); “We are mostly unexplored hinterland” (D. H. Lawrence, about 1930) (“hinterland, n.”).

*Conservationist* (1974), published in the same year as *Dusklands*. One might go back further, to Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), or earlier still to the 1820s poetry of Scottish immigrant Thomas Pringle, for similarly rich and fraught representations of the non-metropolitan, rural, and peripheral, and their alternative affective-temporal structures.

La Guma's interest in the social and political marginalization of characters classified by apartheid legislation as "Coloured" is in some ways a precursor to similar concerns in the early work of another writer for whom hinterlands serve as multiply suggestive spaces. Beatie Adams, indeed, shares a story of arrival in the city not unlike that of Frieda Shenton, the protagonist of Zoë Wicomb's debut 1987 linked-story volume (or composite novel) *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987). Wicomb's book's title alludes to the conceit that one always knows where one is in Cape Town because of Table Mountain's presence at the city's heart, but it is peripheral spaces that interest this author more: the segregated university college for Coloured students that Frieda attends, a mere "clearing in the bush" according to the title of the chapter in which it features; the segregated Cape Flats suburb where Frieda visits friends on a return trip from her new life in Britain; and, further afield, the dusty northern Cape settlement from which, like Beatie, she first arrived on a train to the city, and which she revisits with her mother in the book's final story or chapter, "A Trip to the Gifberge." In this final story (or chapter), Wicomb's protagonist learns that one might know where one is in Cape Town, but it is only in the hinterland that one has access to a connection with place that is neither circumscribed nor has its significance prescribed by apartheid or whiteness.

Wicomb has long been—and remains—interested in the hinterlands of the Western, Northern, and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa. From the earliest to her most recent book, these spaces serve repeatedly to index alternative temporalities, affective investments, and even language(s) left behind by protagonists who only ever partially succeed in leaving the provinces—and the past—behind. La Guma's early fiction, by contrast, has an almost obsessive interest in urban (or urban-peripheral) experience: *A Walk in the Night* (1962) follows a cast of characters in inner-city Cape Town's ill-fated District Six over the course of a single day; *And a Threefold Cord* (1964) is set in a Cape Flats shantytown at the mercy of rain and fire; and *The Stone Country* (1967) substitutes a prison yard—Roeland Street gaol, at the very heart of Cape Town—not just for the city but the whole

country, implicitly rendered a prison by apartheid. It is only in the last two novels, *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* and *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979), that La Guma ventures into what one might convincingly describe as the hinterlands—from whence Beatie Adams has come, and which are rendered deeply unfamiliar in the pages of the newspaper she reads in the shadow of Cecil Rhodes's "hinterland" statue in the Company Gardens. Wicomb's Frieda Shenton is, like Beatie, a reader, though one also on her way to becoming a writer; "A Trip to the Gifberge" concludes with a reference to her recently published stories.<sup>6</sup>

In the remarks that follow, I begin to ask what might be gleaned from putting work by these two writers, a generation apart, both classed by the apartheid regime as Coloured, both exiles, into productive conversation around the concept of the hinterland. What is revealed by considering (in brief) those fictions by each that chart most convincingly—I contend—the journey of a protagonist from political naïveté to engaged activism (though necessarily of very different kinds)? What kind of work is done in and through the affective-temporal conditions explored in these works in relation to the hinterland (in particular), and how might they help us revalue the stasis typically associated with such spaces?

\* \* \*

Stasis involves waiting, a word with a noteworthy critical history in South Africa. We encounter it in the title of Coetzee's 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and in his speech on the acceptance of the CNA Prize for which he declared South Africa to be "in the provinces of history" (1981)—perhaps also in its *hinterlands*. We might also think about Vincent Crapanzano's *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, a work of social anthropology (first published in 1985) that considered the discontents of the condition in which apartheid-era whites (in his study site, in the Cape Winelands) hoped for something, anything, to happen, but were simultaneously paralyzed by such hope (1986, 43–47).<sup>7</sup> In my 2017 monograph *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing*, I consider a selection of contemporary writers in whose work we see a range of engagements with the condition of waiting experienced as stasis, structured less by hope than by disappointment. In this affective-temporal state, I argue,

<sup>6</sup> See Van der Vlies (2013) further.

<sup>7</sup> On religion in particular, see Crapanzano (1986, 70, 99, 219–233).



we might apprehend both a temporal description (a missed appointment with history, with the promise of the transition), and an affective one (dysphoric states marked by varieties of bad feeling). Among the thinkers who provided the tools for my analysis in that book,<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin are perhaps most useful for a consideration of La Guma and Wicomb's hinterland-focused fictions.<sup>9</sup>

Agamben reminds us that, in its original usage in Classical Greece, *stasis* named a condition of civil war. The uprising understood by the Greeks in this way is also a standing still, he points out, a standing firm, linked (*stasis*, from *histemi*) to an act of standing upright as if to speak a certain truth, to take a stand, to look to the future: "*stasimos* is the point in the tragedy when the chorus stands still and speaks" (Agamben 2015, 10). If politics is "a field of forces whose extremes are the *oikos* and the *polis*," the household and the city, Agamben continues, then "between them, civil war marks the threshold through which the unpolitical is politicised and the political is 'economised' [...]" (2015, 16–17).<sup>10</sup> Politics moves into the household under these conditions; "the *oikos* is politicised"—questions of life (as opposed to the "good life") move into the public realm—and the

<sup>8</sup> Besides Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Sianne Ngai, the work of anthropologist of the Caribbean David Scott was especially helpful, both *Omens of Adversity* (2014), a fascinating engagement with the aftermath of the failure of the revolution in Scott's native Grenada, and *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004), a reassessment of C. L. R. James's work on Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution. Susan Buck-Morss has had fascinating things to say about Hegel on Haiti, first in an intervention in *Critical Inquiry* in 2000, and then in a response to reactions to that essay; both essays appear in the edition cited here (2009). Hegel surely hovers in the background of any discussion of hinterlands like some disappointed angel of history.

<sup>9</sup> In *Present Imperfect*, I read two debut novels by Masande Ntshanga and Songesive Mahlangu in order better to understand what I take to be their attempts to name and recuperate the quotidian as political, to identify and begin to imagine a response to the eclipsing of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus* in (post-) postapartheid South Africa. Both novels involve far and near hinterlands, in Neel's use of those terms (2018a, 33).

<sup>10</sup> Agamben's larger project in the text is to suggest that we need a *theory* of civil war. He restricts himself to two moments in Western political thought—the idea of civil strife in Greek city-states; Hobbes's *Leviathan*—that "represent the two faces, so to speak, of a single political paradigm, which manifests itself, on the one hand, through the assertion of the necessity of civil war, and on the other, through the assertion of the necessity of its exclusion." Agamben's contribution is to suggest that these twin impulses (necessity of, necessity to exclude) "maintain a secret solidarity between them" (2015, 3).

*polis* is “economised” (Agamben 2015, 12).<sup>11</sup> This sounds very much, I observe, like Wendy Brown’s description, after Foucault, of the chief characteristics of neoliberalism, which economizes the private sphere and privatizes politics: *homo oeconomicus* moves into the realm of politics and *homo politicus* into the home (2015, 49–62).<sup>12</sup> Neoliberalism thrives, in other words, on a version of civil strife that is experienced affectively by individual subjects as impasse, *stasis* experienced as stasis. But if these conditions pertain in post-apartheid South Africa, in particular in the wake of the Mbeki presidency, they help us to understand the peculiar nature of impasse felt under the conditions of late-apartheid, too—a state of impasse characterized by brutal police-state repression, paranoia about government informants, a lack of any sense of forward movement, and a form of horizontal or lateral violence (in a Fanonian sense) that might be understood as undeclared civil war.<sup>13</sup>

La Guma is South African literature’s key example of a writer whose works’ closely observed naturalism serves a progressive political purpose, charting the growth of political consciousness among ordinary people from communities that apartheid labeled “Coloured” or “black.”<sup>14</sup> *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* traces a short period in the life of an activist called Beukes as he distributes posters for an illegal protest gathering. Over the course of a very long day, he encounters a range of ordinary Capetonians with varying degrees of obliviousness to the politics of the moment, or whose involvement in the struggle is constrained by their willed ignorance or a desire to avoid (as is the case for Nelly, the wife of Beukes’s friend Arthur Bennett) “any bladdy trouble” (20). Another acquaintance, Tommy, is even further from taking up arms:

For Tommy reality, life, could be shut out by the blare of dance-bands and the voices of crooners. From this cocoon he emerged only to find the means of subsistence, food and drink. Politics meant nothing to him. He found it easier to live under the regime than to oppose it. (53)

<sup>11</sup> Agamben concludes thus: “*in the system of Greek politics civil war functions as a threshold of politicisation and depoliticisation, through which the house is exceeded in the city and the city is depoliticised in the family*” (2015, 12; emphasis in original).

<sup>12</sup> See Van der Vlies (2017, 162–171).

<sup>13</sup> See Fanon (2021), especially the chapter “Concerning Violence.”

<sup>14</sup> For a survey, including of the reception of La Guma’s work, see Van der Vlies (2003).

La Guma's careful depiction of the material conditions of dire poverty and brutal restriction to which white South Africa constrains its racial Other is in service of a readerly implication in making meaning, in recognizing the structural nature of oppression, and in apprehending what characters in various states of ignorance or denial are not able fully to appreciate themselves. In an early assessment of La Guma's oeuvre to date, Coetzee described this as a form of Lukácsian critical realism (1971, 6–10). Three years later he argued that they were in fact *not* examples of this form because they too often displayed stasis: the characters only imperfectly perceive the ideological nature of their reality and take only tentative steps (if any) to challenge their oppressors; this stasis therefore belonged to the naturalistic novel, Coetzee argued (1992, 352).

In *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, however, despite passages of extended description (in the mode of naturalism; La Guma as the Zola of District Six),<sup>15</sup> we see a character actively engaged in resistance organizing and standing ready (standing up in the mode of Agamben's gloss on *stasis*, *stasimos*) to take up arms. "There's no point in talking violence if you can't put it into effect," Beukes realizes (89–90). This process of converting stasis into something active is linked to a valorization of the hinterland that is dismissed as a false promise—or the reality only of separate toilet facilities—in the scene in the Company Gardens discussed above. Beatie is one of the many characters trapped in a condition of stasis whom Beukes must attempt to nudge toward political maturity (repoliticizing the *polis*—and drawing attention to the always-already structurally subordinated and hence politicized *oikos*, too). Remarking on her nanny duties, Beukes tells Beatie: "We all good enough to be servants. Because we're black they think we good enough just to change their nappies" (11). Beatie responds: "That's life, isn't it?" but Beukes replies: "There are things people can do" (11). He leaves her soon after, and Beatie opens the newspaper to read about the hinterland murderess, a story revisited throughout the day in several other papers. It even begins to take on allegorical significance as we learn that the accused has poisoned her husband by adding "a little bit of the white powder which contained arsenic to his coffee" ("she would put the deadly white powder in the cup first and then pour in the steaming

<sup>15</sup> "A slum hung on the edge of the city suburbs like dirty plaster, cracking and crumbling away, yet unwilling to fall apart. There were ruined and broken lines of gimcrack cottages where the main suburb ended and then winding and broken lines of dwellings with rusting walls and sagging roofs held down with stones or baling wire" (La Guma 1972, 142).

coffee”) (62). Whiteness here poisons the black base. “In a side column” on the newspaper page on which Beukes sees this account, he reads about “the Minister of Police [announcing]: ‘The Republic is facing a new wave of guerrilla incursions on its northern borders ... African nationalist infiltrators are stirring up the local population’” (62). Here, then, is another “poison” that might counteract the already-poisoned white republic.<sup>16</sup>

Beukes, meanwhile, walks through the Company Gardens toward the natural history museum that sits at its center. Here, too, is an unenlightened potential comrade, also likely Coloured, who sits reading a newspaper “behind the glass of a cubicle” and is implicitly trapped in a form of stasis like that of the museum’s exhibits: “stuffed animals, the monkey foetus in a glass jar, and the crushed flea behind a magnifying glass” (14). Beukes thinks immediately about the plaster-cast San figures in the museum’s “anthropological section”: “Bushmen” who “had hunted with bows and tiny arrows behind glass; red-yellow dwarfs with peppercorn hair and beady eyes.” Significantly, we read, “Beukes had thought sentimentally that they were the first to fight” (14). Here the city-dwelling, not-yet-radicalized subject of apartheid repression is contrasted with what these historical hinterland-dwelling progenitors represent: resistance. Beukes’s understanding of his task, one might say, is to reactivate the energies of revolt latent in the far hinterlands and insert them—in the persons of newly recruited cadres—into the near hinterlands of Cape Town’s suburbs.

We continue to follow Beukes as he attempts to distribute leaflets advertising a peaceful resistance campaign (87, 97), but the day ends with his being shot by police as a crackdown begins. The novel concludes with a shift from Cape Town’s dilapidated “Coloured and Black settlements” (63)—and indeed its manicured white suburbs—toward an embrace of the hinterlands and an implied commitment to armed resistance that will be taken further in *Time of the Butcherbird*, which features a central act of rural land dispossession and an act of violence against whites by a Black guerrilla fighter.<sup>17</sup> Beukes is last seen waving recruits to the armed wing of the liberation movement off into the bush *en route* to the border. Notably, *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* bears a dedication to real-life freedom fighters “Basil February and others killed in action, Zimbabwe, 1967” (v).

<sup>16</sup> See also La Guma (1972, 112, 163).

<sup>17</sup> There is no space here to elaborate on the potential use of Neel’s construction of the “Ultra” as a figure of revolt, which might be productive in readings of apartheid-era resistance writing; see Neel (2018b, 151–156) and Welsh (2019, 392) further.

While a separate strand of the novel features flashbacks to the childhood and young manhood of a fictional equivalent, Elias Tekwane, and his torture and death at the hands of security policemen, the novel holds open in this final scene and its dedication a revalorization of the hinterland not as sleepy rural station-sidings (per Beatie Adams), but site of future resistance (per the San, “the first to fight” [14], and February) and political (and personal) actualization.

We see a similar trajectory, with differences, in the movement *back* to the hinterlands as site for the reclamation of energies previously regarded as static or backward, in Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, published only a couple of years after La Guma’s death (in Havana, Cuba). A longer version of this chapter might trace in greater detail the process by which Wicomb’s protagonist Frieda must learn to read the potential that persists in those (far) hinterland spaces to fulfill her destiny as writer (see Van der Vlies 2013, 12–17; Neel 2018a, 33). Each chapter (or story) indeed shows us Frieda figuring out her relationship to signs and stories in response to which she must negotiate an ethical position. In “A Clearing in the Bush,” we see her feeling that she has “betrayed” a character about whom she is writing an English essay (56). In “Behind the Bougainvillea,” her reading is not literal, unlike the girls she sees reading a “photo-story” in the static space of a hinterland doctor’s waiting room (110), but metaphorical: she must read between the lines to understand that her love interest, Henry, is an ANC activist (119). In “A Fair Exchange,” Frieda learns to listen intently to the story of another—here a farm laborer coded as closely descended from autochthonous Khoisan people—in order to learn how to apprehend her own (the exchange, significantly, involves her handing over her spectacles in return for Skitterboud’s story). Finally, in “A Trip to the Gifberge,” Frieda’s mother implores her not to conform to the expectations of white readers (even if she is also appalled at the impropriety of her writing about herself). Only then, having embraced her status as activist hinterland amanuensis (a role, one might argue, reprised with a difference in each Wicomb book to follow), can Frieda overcome her stasis and become a writer.

Crucially, it is in what Neel would cast as the “far hinterland” (2018a, 33), then, that Wicomb’s writer-protagonist appears to find the potential to assert herself as writer, though it might be more accurate to say on the far fringes of the far hinterland if we understand the latter as “devoted to particularly messy or violent industries—agriculture, mining,” and others (Neel 2018a, 33). Indeed, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* begins with a

white official coming to inspect a gypsum mine that is the mainstay of Frieda's family's town, and in "A Fair Exchange" and "A Trip to the Gifberge" we see the intrusive and appropriative operations of white stock farming. It is only up in the mountain, in indigenous flora (the famed *fynbos*), that Frieda is admonished to break free from apartheid-administered metaphorical hinterland subjectivity. When she objects to her mother's desire to take home a protea bush, Mrs. Shenton insists her daughter is mistaken in subscribing to an alien (and alienating) semiotic system (proteas being both exemplary *fynbos* specimens *and* crucially also the floral symbol of apartheid South Africa). "And then you can hoist the South African flag and sing" the national anthem, Frieda responds, sarcastically, to which Hannah Shenton replies:

Don't be silly; it's not the same thing at all. You who're so clever ought to know that proteas belong to the veld. Only fools and cowards would hand them over to the Boers. Those who put their stamp on things may see it in their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it. (Wicomb 1987, 181)

Here the very materiality of the far hinterland offers itself as antidote to stasis.<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

Agamben's helpful reminder about the energies encoded in the etymology of *stasis* is at this point usefully set alongside another theoretical flashlight, if you will, provided by a thinker who offers another way of reanimating energies not always glimpsed in stasis. Walter Benjamin's idiosyncratic historical-materialist project was predicated on reanimating past moments of liberatory or revolutionary potential and utopian hope. *The Arcades Project* and other writing on history (not least his famous theses "On the Concept of History") use a range of metaphors to explain this task: a "leap in the open air of history" to blast "out of [its] continuum" (2006, 395) a "constellation saturated with tensions" (396); to reimagine the "homogenous, empty time" (395) of officially sanctioned histories (those authored

<sup>18</sup> Something similar can be seen in "A Fair Exchange," in which Skitterboud's wife names her child "Blom," flower, after "the Namaqua daisy that breaks out of the stones washed white by winter rain"; "[j]ust Blom, plain flower a name that no one could take away from her" (Wicomb 1987, 133).

by apartheid ideologues, for instance) as a quasi-mystical “now-time” (*Jetztzeit*), full of potential. It is tempting to read the glass cases and dioramas in the South African Museum in Cape Town’s Company Gardens that feature in *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* as allegories of the “empty time,” and the hinterlands from which those first resistance fighters, the “Bushmen,” came, as allegory for the *Jetztzeit* that freedom-fighters, like some embodiment of Benjamin’s (fighting) historical-materialist, will reanimate. “[T]he relation of the present to the past is purely temporal,” Benjamin wrote in *The Arcades Project*, but “the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [...]” (1999, 462–463). Is it too much to read in the final moments of La Guma’s novel something like this process of recovery, turning empty time into *Jetztzeit*, the stasis of restricted life under a repressive regime into revolutionary now-time? Beukes stands in the yard and watches the van leave, “then turned back to where the children had gathered in the sunlit yard” (La Guma 1972, 181).

As in the earlier novels *A Walk in the Night* and *And a Threefold Cord*, children here suggest the future, though one for which a fight will have to be mounted. La Guma would not live to see the realization of a New South Africa suggested in that closing scene, though his novels offer perhaps the most consistently engaged (and engaging) example of writing that emerged in South Africa out of a dialectics that matched extreme literariness, as Coetzee recognized (1992, 358; see also Van der Vlies 2007, 124–125), with a commitment to produce what Fanon would doubtless have endorsed as the embodiment of a fighting literature. La Guma, and Wicomb after him, revalues stasis as potential, and in the work of both writers the geography of such revaluation is sketched in a trajectory that appears to follow an arc, ironically traced by Rhodes’s outstretched arm, from city center to a hinterland that might indeed become, for the marginalized viewer prepared to take it, “yours.” That the arc is redrawn differently, however, in each writer’s work (and differently in different works by each), might suggest less an unequivocal directional imperative—from near to far hinterland, from rural area to city—in whichever direction, than an oscillation that is recalibrated according to the exigencies of the moment, that of writing *and* of the activism that seemed necessary *in* that moment, one that arcs toward a reactivation of the potential that lies waiting in the hinterland, whether near or far.

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## “Reservoirs of the Subconscious of a People”: The Local, National, and Global Resonances of a Lost Hinterland

*Kate Woodward*

Rural space in Wales is always political. Historically framed as the “Welsh green desert,” a wild, unpeopled, empty space, the hinterland of mid Wales has been a crucible of colliding debates around protecting cultural identity on the one hand, and the need to provide essential natural resources for urban development on the other (Cliffe 1860; Griffiths 2014). Claims about the emptiness and barrenness of this hinterland have repeatedly been used to justify state exploitation of the landscapes’ resources. This has led to land acquisition, the displacement of people, the creation of reservoirs, afforestation, and the establishment of military

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The poet R. S. Thomas wrote the poem “Reservoirs” soon after the opening of Llyn Celyn and Llyn Clywedog. Its opening lines are “There are places in Wales I don’t go: / Reservoirs that are the subconscious / Of a people” (1968, 26).

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K. Woodward (✉)  
Aberystwyth University, Wales, UK  
e-mail: [klw@aber.ac.uk](mailto:klw@aber.ac.uk)

training zones, and has potency in recent debates around rewilding in the Cambrian Mountains. This chapter will look at the ways in which recent screen fictions such as *Pen Talar* (2010), *Yr Ymadawiad* (The Passing, 2015), and *Patagonia* (2010) suggest that hinterlands, in this context, can stand for the national, but also that we might perceive articulations of global processes in the act of flooding a localized space, and a rippling out of resonances with other hinterlands across the globe.

Wales has a notorious reputation for being a wet country. According to the Meteorological Office, Wales is one of the wettest parts of the United Kingdom, with some areas experiencing 270 wet days a year. The topography of Wales influences the Welsh climate. Being situated on the west coast, surrounded on three sides by seas, alongside three mountain ranges—Snowdonia in the north, the Cambrian mountains which run from north to south, and the Brecon Beacon in the south east—results in a jetstream rising swiftly from the sea into the hills. The air cools rapidly as it ascends, leading to moisture dropping as rain. Water, therefore, is a constant presence in Wales, falling from the sky, flowing down the mountains and hills through its rivers, and returning to the seas. It is a frequent topic of daily conversation and the butt of several jokes. However, the material behaviors of water also result in threat; its innate ability to submerge and repossess land leads to the transforming of the landscape and the endangering of human life. Many areas of Wales, be they coastlines or lakes, are associated with vivid mythic stories around the power and threat of water. The most famous example is the myth of the kingdom of Cantre'r Gwaelod, sometimes called the Welsh Atlantis, purported to be located in Cardigan Bay. Drowned by rising seas after a drunken gatekeeper fell asleep and failed to close the flood gates, it has been suggested that the origins of the myth are in the folk-memory of a post-glacial rise in sea levels, which is reinforced by elements of the local landscape, namely a petrified forest and causeways (Whitehead et al. 2007, 75). There are numerous mythological and historical narratives that detail how water's material ability to reclaim land are numerous and that illustrate the impact of water on the physical and cultural landscape of Wales.

### WALES AS A GEOGRAPHIC HINTERLAND

The flooding of Capel Celyn village in 1965 is arguably the most dramatic hydropolitical event in the history of the United Kingdom, and it continues to hold a central place in the Welsh consciousness over half a century

later (Griffiths 2014). Despite mass (although not universal) objection, the Tryweryn River was dammed, flooding Capel Celyn village and surrounding farmland to make way for a reservoir, Llyn Celyn, to service Liverpool and the Wirral. The village was one of the last Welsh-speaking areas in Wales, and the flooding resulted in the displacement of 48 people, while 12 houses and farms, the post office, the school, and a chapel with cemetery were all lost.

Stephen Daniels has noted that “particular landscapes achieve the status of national icons” (1993, 5). Rural landscapes are often considered the “real” and “authentic” essence of the nation, and they are an integral part of the nationalist narrative in Wales, resulting in the relationship between culture and land, and people and place being highly politicized (Gruffudd 1995, 150; Bohata 2004, 81).

Tryweryn was not the first requisition of rural Welsh land by the Ministry of Defence and English cities for the benefit of their inhabitants, nor indeed was it the first instance of flooding Welsh valleys or exploiting Welsh water resources. In the late nineteenth century, the industrial growth of towns and cities such as Birmingham and the Liverpool area fueled a need for new sources of healthy water supplies and led to an appropriation of Welsh water resources (Whitehead et al. 2007, 70). To this end, in the 1880s, the village of Llanwddyn, north Wales, was flooded to create Llyn Efyrynwy, while the Elan Valley Reservoirs in mid Wales were completed in 1906 (Griffiths 2014, 451). Other land acquisitions caused tensions. In 1936, following an announcement that a training school for bombing was to be established on the Llŷn Peninsula, in the heart of the rural Welsh-speaking community, and on a historical site, the buildings were set on fire by Saunders Lewis, D. J. Williams and Lewis Valentine, who were later sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs. At the beginning of the Second World War, the War Office acquired approximately 16,000 hectares of land on the Epynt Mountains in the Brecon Beacons for military training, controversially requisitioning 54 homes and evicting 400 people—including 50 farmers—who were displaced from their community and from the land on which many had worked for generations (Davies 2007, 574). For Saunders Lewis, the Government of England was “devouring Wales” and for the Reverend J. Dyfnallt Morgan this was “nothing less than an attempt to destroy our nationality” (Hughes 1998, 95, 98). Furthermore, the impact on the geography of the Welsh language was significant, with the boundary of Welsh-speaking Wales now forcefully remapped 15 kilometers westwards

(Davies 2007, 574). Since the requisitioning of Epynt, further reservoirs have been created—Claerwen as an addition to the Elan Valley dams in 1952, and Clywedog in 1967, to quench the increasing thirst of Birmingham and the West Midlands.

The areas targeted for extractive capitalism, the ones most easily requisitioned by the governments, and which had the potential to derive the most economic advantage were, by their very nature, sparsely populated, Welsh-speaking rural areas (Bohata 2004). The numerous examples of extractive capitalism and land loss cast mid Wales as a “blind spot ... [a] blank canvas,” an undiscovered and unknown place (Jones et al. 2020, 236). In 1975, Raymond Williams recalled

a young bureaucrat ... describing rural mid-Wales as a “wilderness area”, for the outdoor relief of English cities. He never understood why I was so unso-  
cially angry. ... [H]ere was he... looking on a map at rural Wales: at fields  
and hills soaked with labour, at the living places of farming families, and not  
even seeing them, seeing only a site for his wilderness. (2003b, 6–7)

More recently, in the pre-publicity for the Ceredigion based series *Hinterland / Y Gwyll* (Fiction Factory for S4C and BBC Cymru Wales, 2013–2016) the producers referred to the area as “a part of the UK that is untapped and undiscovered ... It’s a part of Wales that has not been photographed, a sort of last place in Europe that people don’t know much about—a hinterland rich in history and myth” (Moss 2013). Other areas of Wales have been cast as playgrounds, with post-industrial regeneration on a number of historical industrial sites, including the coal mining valleys of south Wales and the slate quarries of the north. Various tourism initiatives have led to the construction of enormous zip wires being built on historical sites such as the Tower Colliery, the Penrhyn Quarry, and the slate mines of Blaenau Ffestiniog; all of which used to yield significant natural resources to be shipped from Wales. In other rural communities, land is framed by rewilding debates as empty, ruined, unproductive, and unpeopled, a “sheepwrecked” wilderness ripe for restoration (Monbiot 2014, 153).

In his compelling study *Hinterland: America’s New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (2018), Phil A. Neel argues that the key sites of the global economy are not post-industrial cities but rather hinterland areas—rural and semi-rural regions where extractive industries, like mining, and important supply-chain infrastructure are located. The hinterland is an area that

does not map easily onto the widely accepted conceptualization of the rural / urban dichotomy. Indeed, the hinterland is not rural in any conventional sense, but rather a “disavowed, distributed core” where resources continue to be extracted and developed (Neel 2018, 17). He draws attention to the unifying underlying dynamics which allows us to recalibrate the conventional way of seeing Capel Celyn—as a rural, agricultural, peripheral community—and reconceive it as a space intimately connected, by the destination of the journey of its water, to the city of Liverpool and its historical and contemporary global connections. Indeed, when Neel writes of rural regions being “simply abandoned, becoming wastelands for global production. At best they can hope to be transformed into recreation zones, military and prison complexes, or massive sites for primary production—swaths of countryside converted to mines, oil fields, or farms, or simply flooded to make way for reservoirs and hydropower projects serving the cities” (2018, 17), he could be talking of the Welsh experience since the mid twentieth century.

### CAPEL CELYN AS DROWNED POSTCOLONIAL HAUNTED HINTERLAND

Since the flooding of Capel Celyn, there has been a deluge of creative and artistic responses which could be characterized as hinterland art and film, which form a visual response to the effect of loss. Among others, the paintings of Claudia Williams, the sculpture of John Meirion Morris, and the installations of Tim Davies have responded powerfully to the drownings, as have musical and performance pieces. *Dŵr* (Water) by Huw Jones, the first single released by Sain Records in 1969, was a protest song about the drowning, and numerous songs by artists as diverse as the Manic Street Preachers, Omaloma, and Y Ffug have referenced it. The history has been the subject of a play, *Porth y Byddar* (2007) by Manon Eames, staged by Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, novels by Martin Davies and Lloyd Jones, as well as screen fictions. The latter have utilized the history of this drowned hinterland in diverse ways; as aesthetic, as genre, and, I will demonstrate, as a means of identifying contemporary global processes in the historical act of flooding of a localized space.

*Pen Talar* (Fiction Factory for S4C, 2010) is a historical television serial with its nine episodes punctuated by key events in the political and social history of Wales from 1962 to 2010. It presents a history of Wales through

the emotional lives of its characters, Defi Lewis, his sister Siân, and best friend Doug. Branded as the “Welsh *Heimat*” and taking inspiration from *Our Friends in the North*, it demonstrates the historical serial’s ability “to balance and address the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ within one complex narrative trajectory” (Creeber 2004, 14). Its central concern is the development of, and subsequent disillusionment with, the so-called nationalist political project (Jones and Woodward 2011, 236).

The drowning of Capel Celyn provides a historical and political context for the Lewis family, but it also provides rich visual imagery. In the first episode, set in 1962–1963, ten-year-old Defi (Sam Davies) dwells on a newspaper headline claiming that, following the drowning of Tryweryn, the Clywedog Valley is being targeted as a reservoir. In the next scene, he is shown in the bath from above, his whole body submerged beneath the water as he holds his breath tightly. Lorraine (Lisa Marged), the object of his schoolboy crush, eerily bathes in a white dress in a pool of water in the woods. Later, the rain lashes over Defi as he discovers her lying and bleeding in the woods following an illegal abortion, a consequence of being groomed and abused by the local chapel minister. Lorraine dies in Defi’s arms, and this event not only haunts him throughout his life, but the watery imagery is central to both the aesthetics and narrative of the series, with rain signifying life-changing events in Defi’s life, providing an intertwining of the personal and the political. After tracing a version of Welsh history over 50 years, *Pen Talar* returns, in the final episode, to the woods, demonstrating the importance of the drowning of Capel Celyn to Defi’s life journey and political awakening. Furthermore it elevates the drowning of a small hinterland to a milestone event in the history of the development of Wales by portraying it as a catalyst that changed the course of a nation, and led ultimately to devolution and the establishment of the National Assembly of Wales (now known as Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament).

As *Pen Talar* demonstrates, the drowning of Capel Celyn was seen by nationalists at the time as a colonization of Welsh land, and an attack on the Welsh language. Post-devolution, there has been renewed and increased attention to the extent to which the relationship was colonial, leading to some heated debate, predominantly between historians who claim such a notion is “little more than self-indulgent and potentially offensive” and theorists who claim that the concept is useful as a means of illuminating relations of power, resistance, and complicity between different sites (C. Williams 2005, 10; Bohata 2004). Indeed, the postcolonial

idea that Britishness is an ideology was posited by J. R. Jones in 1966, and in 1975 Michael Hechter referred to the "Celtic fringe" as being an "internal colony" of the UK (Jones 1966; Hechter 1975). Later, in 1979, Raymond Williams called Wales "a post-colonial culture" and spoke of the oppression of the Welsh by the English (quoted in D. Williams 2003a, xxx).

In Gareth Bryn's film *Yr Ymadawiad* (The Passing, 2015), Capel Celyn is cast as a haunted, lost, postcolonial landscape. Through its utilization of the material behaviors of water and a located haunting by ghosts that are specific and placed, *Yr Ymadawiad* plunges below the still waters of Capel Celyn and conceives what could lie beneath and beyond what is visible (Heholt 2016, 7; Luckhurst 2007).

Michael F. O'Riley notes, when discussing the use of the concept of haunting for the postcolonial imagination, that "postcolonial theory has relied, to a great extent, upon the idea of haunting in order to bring awareness of colonial history to the present" (2007, 1). Billed as a horror film, the hauntedness of *Yr Ymadawiad* is not immediately apparent. What is undeniable is the sound of pouring rain, while Stanley (Mark Lewis-Jones) stands at the bottom of a well, painstakingly filling a bucket with mud before hoisting it to the top. For the first five minutes, there is no dialogue; rather, Stanley's life and his routines are presented to the viewer. The rain pours incessantly against the windows of the old house in which he lives alone. He lights a fire and planes a piece of wood to the sound of a gramophone. He looks at a photo album of black and white photographs in the light of an oil lamp. Eggs are collected from his chickens, are boiled and eaten, and he continues to dig, fill, and pull mud from the well in the lashing rain. Then he hears the horn of a car sound out continually and, walking toward the sound, locates a young couple, Sara (Annes Elwy) and Iwan (Dyfan Dwyfor), their car crashed into the river. As Stanley carries the injured Sara to the house, the rain continues to pour.

There are subtle suggestions that this sodden place is a liminal space full of traces and remnants. The landscape seems timeless and the relationship between human and water is foregrounded. Sara is haunted by nightmares and panic attacks revolving around drowning. An old wooden Noah's ark toy lies on the floor. Sara sees fleeting visions of a young boy and after finding a photograph of two boys in a photo album, Stanley's story is revealed, and the ghostly presence explained. It is Alun, Stanley's brother who drowned in the river. Stanley explains, in Welsh:



My parents aren't dead. They left. Men came, told them they had to go. ...  
 This is where Alun and me were born, I couldn't leave him here on his own.  
 Three days they looked for me. Policemen calling and screaming....

The fact that this uncanny, drenched, time-locked world is the drowned village of Capel Celyn lying beneath the surface of the lake is not revealed until the closing seconds of the film. When, in the bath, Sara sees the boy fleetingly for the third time he disappears, but his wet footprints remain. This is a trigger for the film to visually foreground the material behaviors of water as it cascades through the ceilings and gushes along the floors, while Stanley stands eerily in front of the fire, holding Alun's hand. Sara, drenched, races from the house and runs through the landscape, intercut rapidly with images of her beneath water. Suddenly, there is a change of pace and *mise-en-scène*. There is a lake bathed in sunshine, and Sara emerges from it. In this final sequence, temporal and spatial boundaries are dissolved as the narrative travels from Llyn Celyn, the reservoir of the present day, to a reimagined Capel Celyn of the past. Spatially, it shows what lies beyond, and beneath the visible reservoir. As Ruth Heholt says: "Boundaries, border and spaces themselves dissolve in fluid recognition as that which haunts, moves in *and* out—here *and* there, in-between *and* nowhere. The boundaries between ghost, place and those who witness or experience the haunting are deconstructed, only to be re-constructed anew by affect" (2016, 6). The ghosts here, Alun, but Stanley too, are caught in-between; they are "the definition of in-betweenness, are caught in-between the liminal space of here and not-here" (Heholt 2016, 8). Through these hauntings, and this dissolving of temporal and spatial boundaries, Capel Celyn is cast as a postcolonial hinterland.

The final shot demonstrates the power of water to shape both social and physical landscapes, and highlights the complex relationship between water and people. Sara, emerging from the present-day reservoir, and the ghostly Stanley, lying beneath its luminous surface, emphasize both the materiality of water and its extant political agency. Its inherent materiality, its ability to flood and submerge land, and to obscure what lies beneath, enables water to be a powerful political weapon the resultant trauma of which is depicted in *Yr Ymadawiad*.

## THE WALES / PATAGONIA EXILED HINTERLAND

*Patagonia* (Marc Evans, 2010) is a transnational film that has two disconnected narratives of two journeys crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Cerys (Marta Lubos), a partially sighted elderly Argentine woman, travels from Patagonia to Wales accompanied by her young neighbor Alejandro (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart) in a quest to find the farm where her mother grew up. A young, troubled Welsh couple, Rhys (Matthew Gravelle) and Gwen, are traveling in the opposite direction as Rhys, a photographer, works on his dream commission to photograph the Welsh chapels in the Patagonian Desert. The film's premise is based upon the historical relationship that has existed between Wales and Patagonia since 1865, when the *Mimosa* set sail from Liverpool for Argentina carrying 163 Welsh men, women, and children, fleeing the low wages of the coalmines and the poverty of their hill farms. This was a nationalistic migration with a cultural agenda, and from Liverpool, known as the British Empire's "second city" (Wilkes-Heeg 2003, 43). The migrants had been promised fertile land to farm where they could create a new homeland, be free to speak their own language, and prosper. Two months later, the Welsh came ashore in Patagonia, a territory inhabited only by small tribes of the nomadic Tehuelche people; they faced a barren, inhospitable desert, and endured many years of hardship. Eventually, aided by the Tehuelche, they founded a community on the banks of the Chubut River. This Welsh settlement and the Welsh language survives there to this day.

Following their arrival in Wales, Cerys and Alejandro travel the length of the country to visit three farms of the same name as the farm of her ancestors, Nant y Briallu (Stream of Primroses). Cerys quickly dismisses the first two, claiming, despite her poor sight, that "she will know" when she arrives at the correct farm. Alejandro discovers that the farm was in fact drowned in 1965, as part of the flooding of the village of Capel Celyn. As Wil (John Ogwen), a local man, vividly recalls bodies being exhumed from the village graveyard to be reburied close by, Cerys walks among the moss-covered gravestones, tracing the names of her ancestors with her fingers. The erasure of place, as it is presented here, is keenly associated with the postcolonial concept of exile, which "involves the idea of a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin" (Ashcroft et al. 2007, 75). George Lamming talks of exiles like Cerys feeling "a sense of exile by our inadequacy and our irrelevance of function in a society whose past we can't alter, and whose future is

always beyond us" (1995, 12). An unbridgeable distance lies between Cerys and Nant Briallu, since there is no possibility of return to the place of her ancestors, which has effectively ceased to exist. In this film, the drowning of Capel Celyn is instilled with an importance that goes beyond Wales, as the effects of the drowning are seen as having rippled outwards, gaining transnational significance. Cerys's mother and her unborn child were exiled from Wales to Patagonia due to Cerys's very existence. As an elderly woman, she is exiled once again, and dies alone far from Patagonia, on the shore of Llyn Celyn in proximity to a native place to which she cannot return (Said 1993, 407).

The film's linking of Wales and Patagonia raises questions about the historical Welsh presence there, which in Welsh is known as "Y Wladfa"—The Colony. It could be argued that the Welsh migrants colonized Patagonia from a colonized position, which in some ways challenges colonial and postcolonial orthodoxies. *Patagonia* is not interested in addressing difficult questions about the establishment of the Welsh colony. Rather, it explores the fact that Wales and Patagonia are both hinterlands of global powers and hierarchies, existing within the political frameworks of Britain and Argentina. This tension is represented by Martin (Rhys Parry Jones), an Argentine Falklands veteran. A tempestuous snooker match between him and Rhys turns into a re-enactment of the Falklands war, with a drunk and unhinged Martin declaring "I was there" before firing make-believe shots at Rhys with his snooker cue. He attempts to steal Rhys's photography equipment, as if trying to deny him the traditional Welsh "tourist gaze" of the Patagonia of chapels and tearooms, and forces him to confront a darker Welsh and Argentine history. Later, Martin reveals the war's destructive effect on him, saying to him in Welsh, "I would have killed you, you know. No, not last night. The Falklands, during the war. Maybe you would have killed me. Maybe you did."

For Rhys, the war is a piece of history—"I don't even remember that war. I was nine years old at the time"—but for Martin, the war will continue to define him. He is the embodiment of the grim history of the Malvinas conflict, which was a particularly difficult episode for Patagonia's Welsh descendants such as Martin, with Welsh speakers among British and Argentine troops, and for the Welsh Guards, who suffered significant loss of life in the conflict (BBC Wales 2012). While Cerys searches futilely for her drowned, ancestral home, schizophrenic Martin is fated to travel forever, the bitter irony being that the war destroyed for him the very concept of home and homeland. From a Welsh point of view, not only was

there no acknowledgment of the "Welsh dimension" in the Malvinas conflict, but the British victory elevated Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to great heights, for which Wales's heavy industries and societies would pay a significant price. In this way, the film underlines how what Lucy Taylor (2018) would call Wales's and Patagonia's "peripheral position in global politics" has the potential to offer an alternative way of thinking about global issues of loss of land and displacement by acknowledging the ambiguous affinity between such places.

As this chapter demonstrates, Welsh hinterlands in Wales and elsewhere have provided screen fictions with aesthetic, genre, and opportunities to question extant binaries and colonial / postcolonial orthodoxies by seeing the location as a hinterland which connects with other histories of land loss. In Wales, the Llyn Celyn reservoir continues to be a potent symbol. In July 2021, it was the location for protests against second homes in Wales, with hundreds of protestors lining the damn responding to the fact that almost half the homes sold in the Dwyfor-Meirionydd area in 2020–2021 were to be used as second homes, leading to concerns about the future of Welsh as a language of the community. Similarly, the words "Cofiwch Dryweryn" (Remember Tryweryn) have been used in the context of bitter debates around rewilding in the Cambrian Mountains.

Two words painted white on a red background have been visible to passers by on the main road between Aberystwyth and Llanrhystud since 1963, "Cofiwch Dryweryn," a plea to remember the drowning. Vandalized in 2019, a group of young people ventured out at night to repaint it. This act of defiance and of restoration resulted in a phenomenon of almost 150 murals bearing the two words appearing all over Wales and beyond. These hastily painted slogans demonstrates that in the case of Capel Celyn and Wales, the experience of the hinterland is firmly rooted in the national consciousness.

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## Biophilia in the Hinterland: Symbiotic Affects in *Robinson in Ruins*

Catherine Lord

### INTRODUCTION: NONHUMANS IN THE HINTERLAND

Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) is the third work in the trilogy which began with *London* (1994) and was followed by *Robinson in Space* (1997). As is the case in the first two instalments, *Robinson in Ruins* is a feature-length film essay presenting a fictional protagonist, the politically radical Robinson. At the beginning of the final film in the trilogy, Robinson has been released from Edgcott open prison; the reason for his being detained is never revealed, but one might suspect it is because of his political activism. In Keiller's film, apart from his research into England's landscapes, which involves a radical critique of different modes of capitalism, Robinson's radicalism also results in a rejection of daily capitalism: eschewing home ownership, he is homeless, squats and begs, sustaining himself on his savings. In this respect, Robinson "walks" his radically political "talk." His film project is devoted to the long history of class and capitalist

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C. Lord (✉)

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

e-mail: [c.m.lord@uva.nl](mailto:c.m.lord@uva.nl)

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struggle “on the island on which he is shipwrecked,” like Defoe’s famous protagonist, after whom he is named.

Robinson is also a stand-in for Keiller, and therefore a representative of political filmmaking. As Mark Fisher (2010) explains, the radical drive of *Robinson in Ruins* focuses on the history of “antagonism and martyrdom” on the part of people struggling against feudalism and capitalism. To study this history, Robinson engages in a “wandering,” which begins on “22 January 2008” (according to the last of the five intertitles which introduce the film). This date also marks the beginning of the global financial crisis, which Robinson researches with particular attention for its impact in the hinterland of London.

In his *Hinterland*, geographer Phil A. Neel (2018) elaborates a critique of capitalism around the distinction between the “near” and “far hinterland.” This distinction is indispensable for an analysis of Keiller’s film. While Neel’s case studies are China and the United States, his definition of the “far hinterland” is apposite for the landscapes which Robinson films. Unlike those which are “near” and which are “largely suburban,” the far hinterland is “rural” or “quasi-rural” (Neel 2018, 18, 16). As Neel points out, far hinterlands comprise “disaster industries” (2018, 17). In Keiller’s film, Robinson moves through backwaters featuring ruined industries of old car manufacturers, post-industrial wastelands, and disused military sites, stretching from Silchester to Greenham Common. He explores edge places beyond the city’s rural outskirts, between abandoned nuclear bases, but also the active industries comprising gas and oil storage centers. Notably, his camera will discover two disused cement mines, one in the Ridgeway area, and the other close to the ruins of Hampton Gay, on the far side of the Cherwell. Varying from Neel’s model, the very British hinterland of *Robinson in Ruins* includes not just post-industrial wastelands, for example the cement mines, but also the historical ruins of churches and sixteenth-century estates, such as those of Hampton Gay. Keiller’s film, moreover, reveals a hinterland rich in flowers, fences, and gas markers: a nonhuman world of both organic and inorganic entities. This affirms Hanneke Stuit’s (2021) point that the notion of a hinterland does not “de-limit itself to particular places.” On the one hand, she notes, the hinterland exposes places of “ruination and decay,” but on the other hand it can also move from industry into wilderness (Stuit 2021).

In this chapter, I contend that Keiller’s film produces its own theories of the far hinterland by having Robinson use a series of static shots to focus on the nonhuman world, while keeping the accounts of human



history and the climate crisis within the narrative of the voice-over. Landscape painting and photography are traditionally human-centered. Keiller's radical move consists of treating landscape photography as that which privileges the nonhuman, both organic and inorganic, while keeping the human present through the voice-over, spoken by actress Vanessa Redgrave. Her narrative focuses on the protagonist Robinson, whom we never see in the flesh as he is purportedly wielding the camera. Toward the end of the film, Redgrave explains that she and her late "lover," who remains unnamed, worked with Robinson's research findings in the past. She will now use his nineteen film cans and a notebook to establish a post-2010 "Regional Center," named after Robinson, which has the goal of "economic reconstruction." This information gives a political legitimacy to Robinson's work, which, as I will explain, includes the vision of forming an intentional community with a socialist agenda. Keiller invites the spectator to consider how the far hinterland can become a space through/in which to question, to repurpose, or even to dismantle regimes of late capitalism. Key to the film's re-consideration of different capitalisms, as they emerged in different centuries, is the significant attention paid to the nonhuman world.

Some critics have pointed to *Robinson in Ruins*' examination of nonhuman/human co-operation. Fisher (2010) sees this examination proceeding through Robinson's attraction to microbiologist Lynn Margulis's work on biophilia, which she defines as the "love of life and living systems" (1998). Robinson is inspired by Margulis's rejection of what Redgrave terms the "capitalist, cost-benefit, and competitive interpretations" of Darwinian evolution. Rather, Margulis espouses the "co-operative strategies" that exist between different organisms (Fisher 2010). Paul Dave registers the film's exploration of the "human/nonhuman alliance," but he still leans toward treating it as a metaphor for "the identity and political potential of the working class" (2011, 22). For Robinson, exploring "co-operative" strategies involves filming the history of socio-economic inequalities, while drawing attention to human dependencies on the non-human world.

My analysis moves beyond current scholarship on the film to explore how Keiller's theory of the far hinterland interlaces the narratives of underpaid workers, the poor, and the land. In what follows, I will explore this theory through its nonhuman and human landscapes, doing so in three sections. In the first, I introduce *Xanthoria Parienta*, or lichens, as non-human players representative of Keiller's class and climate politics. The

second section explores how the film's cinematography and narration investigate biophilia as a set of symbiotic connections between flowers and Gas Pipeline Storage System (GPSS) markers. In the third, the romantic-looking ruins of Hampton Gay, its nearby satellite dishes and a cement mine will be analyzed through Jobb Arnold's concept of "land affects" (2018), as it hinges on Sara Ahmed's work on "affective economies" (2004). Both Arnold and Ahmed aid me in exploring how what I term "symbiotic affects" circulate between different sites from different historical epochs, and between human and nonhuman beings in the far hinterland.

### MARGINAL IN PLAIN SIGHT: LICHENS AT THE EDGE

Robinson's wanderings have a certain spontaneity. It is as though his roaming follows an affective flow which lures him into unknown edge places and backwaters. Indeed, the first *OED* definition of "hinterland" refers to the "backcountry" or the "fringe areas of a town or city," particularly behind a river. Robinson roams in the vicinity of the river Cherwell, a tributary of the Thames. The roads, diversions, pockets of fields, and historical ruins around Newbury comprise overlapping spaces tucked away along quiet roadways which wander off the beaten track. This is an intersection between the outskirts of metropolitan areas, along the liminal space of the near hinterland (suburban areas), and pointing to the far hinterland of rural, agricultural spaces (to recall Neel). At one such threshold, the Kennington roundabout, Robinson finds a road sign which gives directions to leave the bypass (Fig. 13.1a). One is the A34 to Newbury, a place historically central to Robinson's Speenhamland research, which Redgrave narrates as the camera takes ever closer shots of the road sign and the lichens who live on it.

As we contemplate the sign, Redgrave reports that Robinson has been "enlisted" by these "non-human intelligences" to "preserve the possibility of life's survival on the planet." The "non-human intelligences" are the lichens who live a "marginal" and "hidden" existence on road signs. This aspect of being hidden and marginal mimics certain far hinterland spaces, such as disused quarries or clusters of flowers along slip roads, hidden away between fields and power-grids. The lichens, then, can be regarded as representatives of the nonhuman world, nestled in hinterland spaces, hiding in plain sight. By "enlisting" Robinson and his eco-political project of landscape photography, the lichens draw attention to the nonhuman world and the dependency of the human world upon it.



**Fig. 13.1** Road sign to Newbury (a); Lichens on road sign to Newbury (b); Greenham Common (c); GPSS marker with yellow top (d). Screenshots from *Robinson in Ruins*

One crucial theme running through the film is the threat of global warming. Redgrave quotes Robinson's reading of the famous sentences from Frederic Jameson's *The Seeds of Time*: "it seems to be easier for us to imagine today the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the break-down of late capitalism." Over the course of the film, Redgrave delivers three reports about the climate crisis, all indicating that excess uses of carbon dioxide will have devastating consequences for life on earth. Following Jameson's quote, turning the tide requires finding alternatives to late capitalism. The lichens point Robinson in the direction of Newbury, which witnessed the 1795 Settlement Act, legislation addressing the exploitation of local workers.

Filmed in a variety of long-take close ups, the group of lichens growing around the word Newbury can be read as signifiers for Redgrave's account of the events leading up to the Settlement Act. She explains that Robinson has discovered how systems of early capitalism developed through the displacement of "settled agricultural workers" from their rural homes so that they could work elsewhere. Redgrave details how, in 1795, a group of magistrates at the Pelican Inn, Speenhamland, in the area of Newbury, produced an amendment to the Settlement Act, which aimed to "prevent

the removal of poor persons until they were to become chargeable.” This would ensure workers received a minimum wage to be set in line with sharply rising bread prices. As Redgrave shares this information, the camera makes a very tight close-up of the lichens, revealing them in all their yellow and leafy glory (Fig. 13.1b). I read the cluster of resilient lichens as a signifier for the resilience of an early version of social regulation against the brutal effects of capitalism.

Like the displaced workers of 1795, Robinson roams down little-traveled roads. Therefore, the lichens are signifiers not just of key, political events but of the hinterland spaces in which these events were actually lived and suffered. Keiller’s landscapes focus on ruins, wastelands, and edge places. Some have been repurposed, like the RAF base at Brize Norton. Others have been left to freeze in time, like the disused cement mine and its surrounding area in the vicinity of Hampton Gay’s ruined village. Others yet have been opened to the commons, which, while accessible to those who might wander, are under the ownership of a combination of heritage societies and local councils. This signals how nonhuman spaces intersecting with derelict spaces in the hinterland are not free from some mode of human ownership.

Another example of this, which is oddly hiding in plain sight, can be found at Greenham Common. Once a US air-force base for nuclear missiles, it was finally de-commissioned in 1991. The base is surrounded by very high fences and is filmed from a distance in wide shot. Keiller’s camera does not cross the fences. It is as though there is something slightly menacing which still hangs around the military buildings in the form of a lingering atmosphere of danger and secrecy. The sloping walls of the large edifices give the impression of ruined bunkers which, in their green, grassy coatings, were designed as a piece of camouflage in that they appear to be miniature hills (Fig. 13.1c). The narrator provides no information as to whether these cleverly camouflaged buildings were aircraft-hangers or nuclear weapons storage facilities.

In Neel’s sense of the far hinterland, the abandoned air-base at Greenham Common is what late capitalism has left behind: ruins from the military-industrial-complex. One shot reveals a rusty US army water pipe in a field of grazing cows. Redgrave reports that, once decommissioned by the Ministry of Defense, the surrounding fields were purchased for one pound sterling by the local council. Thus, while the cows and water pipe mark out a space open to the commons, they are still under ownership. In the far hinterland, humans are symbiotically linked to history, to local

councils, to the governments of nation states, to global investment in the fossil fuels that powers nations, to late capitalism, and to the nonhuman world. Such human dependency is brought to the surface through Keiller's filmic exposure of late capitalism's edge places, its resilient ruins and persistent lichens.

### BIOPHILIA IN THE FAR HINTERLAND: FLOWERS AND GPSS MARKERS

Symbiosis as a concept comes into its own through the film's cinematic techniques of eliciting spectatorial biophilia. In *Robinson in Ruins*, there are numerous scenes featuring a range of different flowers, from the yellows of cowslips and large leaf *lantana*, to the distinctive red of a *papaver* and wild teasels. The yellow and red colors of the flowers correspond to the yellow and red of two GPSS markers, one with a yellow top (Fig. 13.1d) and the other with a red one. These different members of the nonhuman world, that is the flowers (organic) and the markers (inorganic), are bound together cinematographically by the fact that they are both paid the serious attention of very long takes, lasting three to four minutes. The dwelling camera draws the spectator's biophilia toward these organic and inorganic matters, revealing how both flowers and markers—the latter literally marking the fossil fuel pipelines of gas and oil in the ground below—live interdependently. Close to one marker is a cluster of pyramidal orchids along a roadway circuiting one of the oil depots. In the far hinterland, flowers and markers are not just close neighbors. Markers and road signs can even mimic flowers. The red of the GPSS marker and the buds of the *papaver* resemble the reds of metal signs warning intruders to keep out of gas and oil depots. These signs and their wire fences are late capitalism's "gatekeepers" and are also given the attention of long takes. Fences remind spectators that the enclosed spaces are in the ownership of the UK government or have been repurposed by global companies. All of these nonhuman entities are filmed to become the focus of the spectator's biophilia. However, as this hinterland is still under a late capitalist regime, to what extent can a biophilic response help us to re-think that regime?

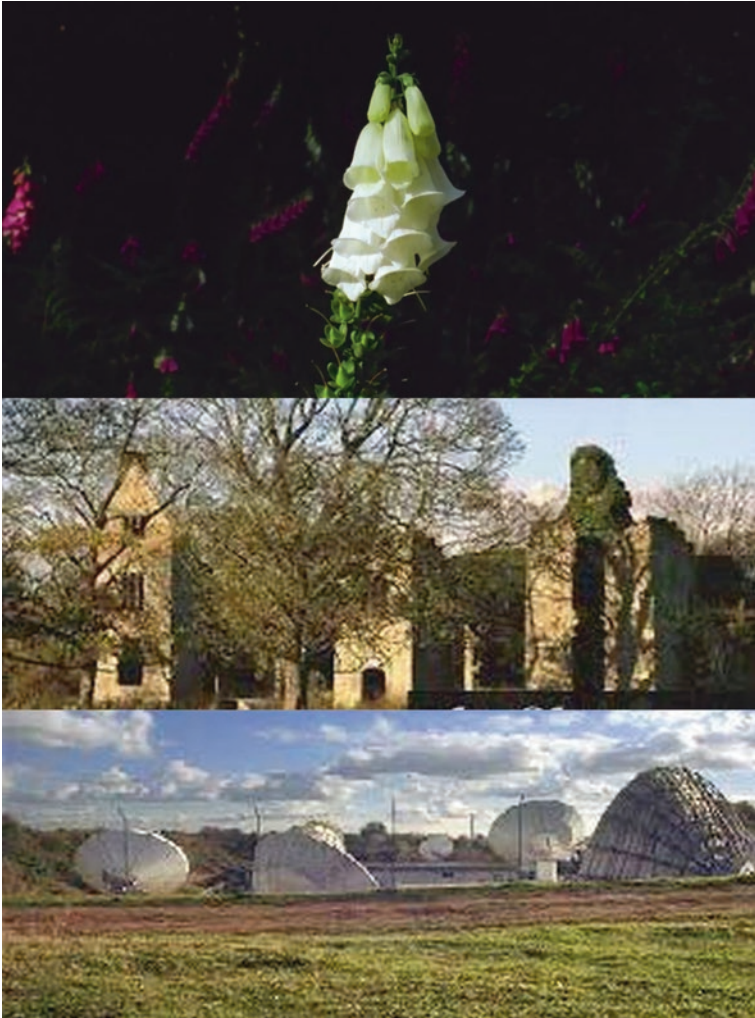
Perhaps there are two answers to this. Firstly, the film provides a dire warning about the climate crisis, which is driven by capitalism. What is noteworthy is that the film uses biophilia as a method of drawing the spectator in, while also furnishing the spectator with the scientific facts about

a future apocalypse. As the camera settles on the red berries of the *arum italicum* flower (an identical red to the top of one GPSS marker), Redgrave cites an article in *Nature* reporting that “rates of species loss” have been “seriously underestimated.” The scientists consider two different scenarios. One is that in two hundred years (from 2010), the biosphere will collapse but then possibly recover. The other is that “irreversible heating” will cause the end of all life on the planet. In the latter scenario, the GPSS marker and the oil pipelines would be as endangered as the flowers, as the hinterland would degrade into a dead, dystopian landscape. After Redgrave discusses this scenario, the camera settles on another flower, the wild teasel, with a long take exceeding five minutes. During this, Redgrave explains that *Nature’s* report into species degradation has studied a range of genera, including, importantly, the butterfly. Appropriately, the camera studies a butterfly on the wild teasel, and two bees as they pollinate the flower. In the wake of the most recent IPCC report (2022), as reported by Fiona Harvey in *The Guardian* (2022), it is hardly necessary to repeat that excess levels of carbon dioxide released from the burning of fossil fuels will produce tipping points that will destroy most life on earth. Perhaps the far hinterland could be a potential space for reducing the transit points of fossil fuels by literally abandoning more parts of the electricity grid. Or, equally well, rather than being abandoned or left to its own devices, which might cause pollution, one can imagine the electricity grid could be repurposed using renewable energy sources in order to serve local communities.

The idea of such repurposing links to the second answer to the question of how to think of better ways of using the far hinterland for projects that benefit both the environment and people. This second possible solution appears to Robinson in the area of the Ridgeway, when he discovers a disused cement quarry. He shares his desire to repurpose it for the development of new and sustainable industries, the profits of which will go to the commons. He discovers that there is already a plan to build “eco homes” on the site surrounding the quarry. Such initiatives re-conceptualize hinterland spaces for the purposes of creating some form of ecological balance. But such a “balance” needs more than activism. It requires affective investments too. It is not just that, as Redgrave explains, Robinson “is inclined towards biophilia.” For Robinson, biophilia is an affective challenge to capitalism itself. He demonstrates this when the camera leads spectators into an undefined edge-place. Here, they are drawn into a sumptuous encounter with a single white foxglove. During this



particularly long take, immersed in the ambient sound of birds, it is hard not to feel a flow of affects toward the foxglove as it glides back and forth in the gentle breeze (Fig. 13.2a). In a clear critique of capitalism, Redgrave



**Fig. 13.2** White Foxglove (a); Ruins of Hampton Gay (b); Satellite dishes (c). Screenshots from *Robinson in Ruins*

cites Margulis's claim that biophilia has not only given humans an evolutionary capacity to form "symbiotic" relationships with the natural world, but that this "symbiosis" also occurs between different phyla. For Margulis, it is not competitive relations between different phyla that count, but the "mutualism" between them. During the film's use of contemplative long takes, mutualism, that is, symbiosis, extends not just between different flowers, but between the flowers *and* the GPSS markers and the nonhuman world of the hinterland.

The film underscores how biophilia as a love of life and "living systems" should not just be associated with nature areas. As home to the natural world and the technical designs of humans, the hinterland might be particularly conducive to biophilia in the broad sense advocated by Margulis. Redgrave explains that Robinson believes that "designers of artifacts" should "seek to emulate the morphogenesis of life forms." Perhaps the red top of the GPSS marker in the vicinity of Brize Norton, which has an identical red color to the *papaver* flower, is an example of its designer emulating the red color of that flower. The yellow of the GPSS marker is not only the same yellow as cowslips and large leaf *lantana*, but is of a similar hue to the yellow of the lichens. Redgrave reports that lichens thrive on the nitrogen and carbon from the cars. On another road shown in the film, the fumes of cars transport the spores from the pink orchids along the road, resulting in more of the flowers being seeded. The organic and inorganic entities of the nonhuman world are not only mutually dependent, but according to Robinson, humans can make the inorganic mimic the organic. In this way, socio-economics could be made to mimic the natural world. Then it could be transformed into an eco-socialism which operates not through ascending lines of ever-increasing profits, but through natural cycles of growth then de-growth, of fecundity then barrenness.

One "theory" of *Robinson in Ruins* is that resistance to capitalism and its destructive effects takes place affectively, through biophilia. The film lavishes itself in long takes of both organic and inorganic entities that sensitize spectators to their symbiosis with the natural world. The resulting montage cuts between quarries, depots, fences, markers, and flowers. Visually, the film sets up cinematic circuits to enhance the spectator's desire to make symbiotic connections in and with the far hinterland. The rich entanglement of the inorganic and organic spreads across the hinterland, which, in turn, produces what Jobb Arnold has termed land affects,



a concept that I will unpack in the next section by way of Sara Ahmed's canonical essay "Affective Economies."

### ENCLOSURES AND LAND AFFECTS

Before turning to Ahmed and Arnold, it is important to ask: how do you get excited about satellite dishes stuck behind barbed wire or a disused cement works? (Fig. 13.2b). Keiller's camera draws us toward these less sightly constructions by alerting us to what is in their vicinity: the sunlit ruins of Hampton Gay (Fig. 13.2c). In the sixteenth century, both here and on Enslow Hill, a raft of uprisings against enclosures took place. Toward the end of the film, Redgrave explains that in late Elizabethan times, acts of enclosure "proved disastrous for locals," as these robbed them of their farming lands and pushed them into food poverty, while the gentry became wealthier. On 21 November 1596, Bartholomew Steer and his fellow rebels arrived at Enslow Hill to initiate the tearing down of fences throughout the area. The film breaks up the "uprising" narrative with shots of satellite dishes, all enclosed by tall fences. After Redgrave notes that the satellites are under global ownership, Robinson comes upon yet another "ruin," the disused cement works, dating back to 1929. Here, he has a moment of what Redgrave reports to be "experiential transformation," as his charged affective state yields a vision of developing the cement works into an intentional community.

There are also strong emotions attached to the historical ruins of Hampton Gay. It is steeped in the history of those who rebelled against land enclosures, who also had a vision for a better world, free from the exploitation of feudal lords. Yet while the ruins exude a heritage-style attractiveness, the cement works and the satellite dishes, with their high fences and "keep out" signs, remain unsightly. The establishing of a community could, potentially, transform the quarry with its unmined cement into something which, while not as attractive as the heritage ruins, can become more inviting once the participants (and, by association, the film's spectators) experience land affects. Land affects can be experienced not just for the sightly, but the unsightly too. With work and time, humans can develop a pleasurable experience of such land affects, or what are effectively symbiotic relationships with the sites of the hinterland. *Robinson in Ruins* invites spectators to recognize symbiotic, affective engagements between the far hinterland's closely interrelated sites, across different

temporalities: the historical ruins (1597), the quarry (1929–), and the dishes (2010–).

As I shall argue in this section, there is a flow of affects between the film's narratives about the satellite dishes, the historical ruins, and the plans for the cement quarry. To theorize how these affects circulate, I will turn first to Ahmed. In "Affective Economies," Ahmed focuses on the surfaces between "bodies and signs" (2004, 117). The term "affective economies" specifies how affects "align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed 2004, 119). Combining a psychoanalytic with a Marxist, economic approach, Ahmed refers to the "affect" which "does not reside positively in the sign of the commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation" (2004, 120). Ahmed notes that in Freud's "model of unconscious emotions, the affect itself is not repressed: rather, what is repressed is the idea to which the affect is attached" (2004, 125).

Such a repression of an idea can be traced in the filming of the globally owned satellite dishes in *Robinson in Ruins*. These dishes are surrounded by fences which might be understood as necessary to prevent people from doing damage to them. What this perception represses is that the fences are primarily there to protect the profits of the global owners. In contrast, the 1597 story of Bartholomew Steer leading the rebels against the feudal landlords produces an idea which is not repressed: the rebels fought for justice against oppression. If the film allows this idea to circulate to the fenced quarry containing the satellite dishes, it can "stick" to the repressed idea that fences are there to help sustain capitalism. Once this connection is made, neoliberalism can be likened to modern feudalism, and the visceral sense of rebelliousness from the sixteenth century might ignite a spark in the twenty-first-century spectator, inciting them to acts of civil disobedience against the fences.

Affects can thus move backwards and forwards across different historical times, as well as between different sites on the land. This movement of affects between spaces is what Jobb Arnold defines as "land affect," or what he terms "the direct experience of mobilized free-floating ecological energies" (2018, 97). As he explains, such energies are registered unconsciously and sometimes consciously in human affective states (Arnold 2018, 97). For Arnold, Ahmed's theory of circulation helps to understand that "affects" are what "cause people *to feel with the land*" (2018, 97; emphasis in original). As Arnold explains:

Intense experiences of land affect—such as an encroaching forest fire—mobilize and transmit ecological energies, innervating the connective tissues that exist between interdependent webs of human and other-than-human life. (2018, 97)

Once a flow of energies is set in motion, the conducted affects pass through the “interdependent web of human and other-than-human life.”

The rebels of Hampton Gay engaged in the “intense experience” of losing access to the commons, to that nonhuman entity, the land. The “connective tissue” of their human, affective investment in the nonhuman world became amplified by the crisis of enclosures, the threats to the commons, the risk of food shortages, and the rebels’ defiance in the face of exploitative overlords, whom they intended to assassinate. Because of their intense feelings for the land, Steer’s accomplices ended their days in torture; they were hung, drawn, and quartered as they overlooked Enslow Hill, where their defiance had erupted. The film facilitates the circulation of potentially rebellious affects between 1597 and 2010 by cutting back and forth between the shots of Hampton Gay and the satellite dishes. Hypothetically, if the fences around the privately owned satellites were to be ripped down, the dishes could be re-posessed by the collective, which in an ideal world, according to both Robinson and Keiller, would be a socialist local council.

Collective ownership of the cement quarry is the aim of Robinson’s intentional community. As Redgrave’s voice-over explains, his goal is to “reform land ownership and democratic government” and to “pioneer the renewal of industry and agriculture,” in the face of the “disappearance of cheap oil.” The latter would greatly help in the reduction of fossil fuel use, and hence the climate crisis. As Redgrave explains, her “Advisory Group” embraces Robinson’s plan. This is the moment in the film when the group, Redgrave, and Robinson, working as a team, commit to subverting the regime of capitalism by transforming the large, enclosed area that surrounds and includes the cement works into a site for the commons.

In *Robinson in Ruins*, land affects are re-circulated in the far hinterland between Hampton Gay, the industrial sites, and those of ruination. All these liminal spaces draw on the spectator’s experience of symbiosis between the land and its nonhuman occupants. If symbiosis between living phyla and the inorganic world is how the organic, living world survives, as the film suggests, then new encounters between humans and the nonhuman world could offer models for new modes of social

organization. But ideas which question the regimes of capitalism must be carried by affects, by an embodied experience of mutualism, and by the symbiotic interrelations between people, communities, and land.

### CONCLUSION: STAYING WITH THE FAR HINTERLAND

Robinson as a character may dream of utopian solutions, but Keiller's film does not explain how to implement them. It is not a handbook for revolution. Still, it provides insights into how affective engagements with organic and inorganic aspects of the nonhuman world can bring the far hinterland's regimes of capitalism into question. Neel's concept of the far hinterland refers to extraction and ruination in terms of late capitalist exploitation. While Keiller's camera films the British landscape in a similar vein, the film ultimately offers a far hinterland which is open to being affectively reconfigured, in line with the theories of Margulis, Ahmed, and Arnold.

I have referred to Keiller's film as not just questioning the late capitalist regimes of the far hinterland, but as producing new theories of how this hinterland might contribute to producing a more equitable world, in terms of both socio-economic and ecological justice. The lichens on the road sign point toward Newbury and the history of the Speenhamland Act, and as such, to an example of the successful protection of the poor. Perhaps Keiller is suggesting that the policy-making which can protect workers from our current neoliberal system of deregulation needs to be like the lichens or the flowers shown flourishing close to roads: hidden in plain sight, yet resilient. By extending biophilia for flowers to GPSS markers, Keiller posits that if humans are symbiotically and precariously dependent on the natural world of flowers, plants, and food, so too are GPSS markers, pipelines, the cement quarry, and the cement works. All these natural organisms and inorganic forms are reliant on humans for their nonhuman "lives": the oil will only flow through pipelines if humans continue to use it; the cement quarry and its surrounds can become "alive" if filled with eco-homes; and the cement works could be transformed by an intentional community. If humans end up destroying the nonhuman world through failing to prevent cataclysmic climate change, then even the inorganic "beings" will not have an environment to support their nonhuman activities.

I have explored Keiller's film as offering a theory of the far hinterland which suggests that it is formed through symbiotic and affective

connections. When the charged affects from past rebellions are circulated into our current regimes of globalized satellite dishes or, for that matter, power grids and military bases, the resulting re-circulation of affects might inspire a perception, certainly on the part of spectators, that the far hinterland can be taken back into public ownership. With this political hope installed by the completion of Robinson's film project, and as the film closes, Redgrave reports that Robinson has disappeared. Her institution inherits his notebooks and film reels, so that his research can be put to some beneficial, societal use. The implication is that the spectators, too, can use the film as an inspiration to pursue their own social projects in the far hinterland.

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PART III

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Ecologies: Care, Transformation



## The Hinterland at Sea

*Esther Peeren*

In *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*, Melody Jue turns to the ocean to model what she calls a “milieu-specific analysis,” which “acknowledges that specific thought forms emerge in relation to different environments” (2020, 3). What thought forms and questions arise depends on the material and imaginative conditions of a particular milieu, on the histories of these conditions, and on the perspective or embodied experience the milieu is encountered through. The latter is summarized as the “for whom?” (Jue 2020, 3), to which, in a posthuman vein, a “for what?” should be added. If Jue’s milieu-specific analysis of the ocean exposes and redresses the terrestrial bias in how humans have thought media and mediation, what biases does a milieu-specific analysis of the hinterland bring to light?

Answering this question requires a determination of what kind of a milieu the hinterland is. I take the position that the hinterland is distinguished not by any particular physical or social geography, but is, rather, a milieu *brought into being by* and *put in the service of* an evolving global capitalist-colonialist economy. As laid out in the introduction to this

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E. Peeren (✉)

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

e-mail: [e.peeren@uva.nl](mailto:e.peeren@uva.nl)

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volume, capitalism-colonialism organizes the hinterland as a functional space, with its limitless appetite for extraction stretching the hinterland's scope beyond any "natural" borders or urban-rural-wilderness distinctions. Thinking the hinterland in this way exposes two biases: that of opposing urban and rural/wilderness so starkly that the city becomes the seat of global capitalism while the rural/wilderness appears untouched by it, and that of assuming that all hinterlands are landbound.

Both these biases are challenged by Ben Smith's 2019 novel *Doggerland*, which is set on a deteriorating windfarm in the North Sea maintained by two men—Jem and Greil, known as "the boy" and "the old man"—in a dystopian future in which the world economy is monopolized by "the Company." In addition to placing the hinterland *at sea* in a material sense and designating this sea as a ruralized space, *Doggerland* identifies the hinterland as a milieu that leaves its human inhabitants, reduced to necessary but interchangeable labor, affectively *at sea*—at a loss, adrift, exposed. By having the two men nonetheless "imagine a livable provisional life" (Berlant 2016, 395) within this *at-sea-ness*, the novel, I contend, highlights how the hinterland is not fully defined by its assigned capitalist-colonialist function: there are fissures in its extractivist net, however small and provisional.

In addition, Smith's narrative supplements the "for whom?" of the men's immersion in this hinterland milieu with the "for what?" of its main substance: water. This water, remembering the North Sea's prehistory as a land mass dubbed Doggerland,<sup>1</sup> encounters the capitalist-colonialist hinterland as a mere "interruption to continuous flow, an obstacle to be overcome, an imbalance to be rectified" (Smith 2019, 54). Invoking water's endurance through deep time allows the novel to summon a beyond-the-hinterland that is also a beyond-the-human. Still, in glossing over the way the North Sea's centuries-long function as a hinterland has materially changed its composition, in potentially irreversible ways, *Doggerland's* vision of natural resilience risks underplaying the hinterland's destructive force.

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<sup>1</sup>In *North Sea Archaeologies*, Robert Van de Noort notes that "Bryony Coles (1998) renamed the North Sea basin 'Doggerland', drawing attention to the continued terrestrial life, and potential for human activity, on the former land surface of the North Sea before it was flooded in the Neolithic" (2011, 13).

With respect to what kind of a milieu the hinterland is, Phil A. Neel's *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* insists that

the hinterland is often a heavily industrialized space—a space for factory farms, for massive logistics complexes, for power generation, and for the extraction of resources from forests, deserts, and seas. It is not an exclusively “rural” space, and it is by no means truly secondary to global production. (2018, 17)

Here, Neel makes clear that the hinterland need not be terrestrial, but can also be aquatic. Moreover, the hinterland is specifically identified as spanning rural and urban areas, belying the long tradition of thinking them as separate, oppositely valued realms: the city tainted by capitalism and globalization, and the country characterized by “a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue” or, alternatively, “backwardness, ignorance, limitation” (Williams 2011, 1). Although today's hinterlands are spatially removed from the business districts of the megacities imposing themselves as the shiny centers of the global economy, they may be, as Neel shows, near or far, and may straddle urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness spaces. The present and past capitalist-colonialist infrastructures that these hinterlands harbor or are haunted by are often inconspicuous and sometimes hidden, but are or were nonetheless crucial to keeping the global economy moving.

In *Architecture of Territory—Hinterland: Singapore, Johor, Riau*, Milica Topalović and her co-authors assert that “today, it is often thought that cities rely decreasingly on surrounding territories for supply and subsistence. Instead, they seem emancipated from the constraints of geography, operating in a global web of dependencies” (2013, 17). By meticulously mapping the cross-border hinterland sustaining Singapore with food, oil, building materials, and labor, they challenge this assumption, while also showing the extendedness and variety of this “local” hinterland, which includes rural and urban areas, as well as the waterway of the Strait of Singapore. The multiple, layered functions the Strait fulfills as a hinterland materially at sea—it is a space of shipping, a leisure zone, an anchorage space, a fishing territory, a space of border management, a space of piracy, a space of submarine infrastructure, and an aquatic living space for nomadic tribes—lead it to be labeled an “urban territory” (Topalović et al. 2013, 42). Yet, given that none of these functions are exclusively urban and that some—like fishing and nomadism—are more readily associated

with the non-urban, the Straight could just as well be identified as a rural territory. Similarly, the claim that the “world’s ocean system is urbanized by trade, extraction and production” (Couling 2016, 283) might be reformulated as a ruralization when we take into account that “trade, extraction and production” also take place in countrysides.

Taking the hinterland to sea challenges not only classic transport geography’s conceptualization of oceans, seas, and rivers as featureless maritime expanses between land-bound hinter- and forelands (Weigend 1956), but also the lingering association of the urban with the industrial and the rural with the wholesome working or enjoying of the land. The idea that industry is quintessentially urban pervades Nancy Couling and Carola Hein’s edited volume *The Urbanisation of the Sea: From Concepts and Analysis to Design* (2020). In the preface, for example, seeing wind turbine foundations being transported across the North Sea leads Philip Steinberg to state that “if urbanization is defined as an intensified transformation of nature, and thereby a transformation of place, then the transportation of these steel scaffolds and their placement on the sea bed will turn the sea into a space of social relations, an *industrial* site, an arena of logistics and production” (Couling and Hein 2020, 1; emphasis in original). This perspective ignores that the rural has long been a site of resource and labor extraction, industrial production and transportation, as well as energy generation. Especially in the age of factory farms, the rural surely qualifies as party to “an intensified transformation of nature.” Far from reaffirming rural-urban dichotomies, therefore, the hinterland—whether on land or at sea—makes visible rural-urban continuities, emphasizing how both realms are and have been instrumental to the (re)shaping of world and earth by capitalism-colonialism.

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In *Doggerland*, notably, the high-tech space of the windfarm is encountered by “the boy” as evoking rurality: “The fields stretched around him—row after row of turbines, like strange crops. From a distance, they all looked identical, but up close each tower was marked with dark blooms and scabs of rust” (3). The windfarm appears like a farm; not just any farm, but an industrial one featuring large-scale monoculture. This brings the rural and industry together in an image that, despite the strangeness of the crops, is legible, familiar even. The windfarm is not a perversion of or

departure from the rural hinterland as it operates to brace capitalism-colonialism, but an extension of it out to sea.

The rural-like hinterland of the North Sea appears in Smith's novel as a *logistics space* harboring a late capitalist supply line that Deborah Cowen, in *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*, identifies as a "resurfacing" of the military and colonial supply line's "geography of transnational flow" and "imperial force" (2014, 9).<sup>2</sup> As the "dark blooms and scabs of rust" spotted on the turbines announce, however, this logistics space is faltering. The windfarm no longer holds out the promise of global capitalism safeguarding a sustainable future captured in the "pictures of the farm on clear bright days with words like 'future', 'stability' and 'security' printed on them" found by "the boy" on a series of publicity posters in one of the last-built, most advanced turbines, which was never put into operation (Smith 2019, 151). Instead of heralding a future of endless renewal, in its dilapidated state, running only a little over half-capacity, the windfarm signals global capitalism's impending death.<sup>3</sup> The cargo ships that "used to travel in great convoys" have become rare sights: "there were hardly any left now, maybe just one or two a year, still traveling along the shipping lanes, like the last of their species still following the old migratory routes" (162). The industrial farms recalled by the spatial layout of the windfarm are also gone. Food is grown in "vats" and then canned, with the supply chain that is supposed to get the cans to the places where there are still people characterized by inefficiency and breakdowns (171). The "boy" and "old man" frequently go hungry, while the aluminum cans from which they eat may be "icon[s] of modern civilization and industrial distribution," but also foster the bacteria that causes botulism (Swanson et al. 2017, M9). The system of global capitalism, then, is both poisoning and poisoned, unlikely to be able to sustain itself and its required labor force for much longer.

<sup>2</sup> Despite placing military and colonial supply lines in rural spaces, *The Deadly Life of Logistics* displays an urban bias. Not only does Cowen tie contemporary logistics to the urban when she writes that "logistics logics ... constitute a complex spatiality at once national, urban, imperial and mobile," but she devotes an entire chapter to "the *urban* revolution in logistics" (2014, 20; emphasis in original) without recognizing that rural space, too, is dominantly "conceived for the singular purpose of securing the management and movement of globally bound stuff" (2014, 12, 171).

<sup>3</sup> The fact that the novel is set on a windfarm and not an oil rig counters techno-optimism by highlighting how all extraction in the capitalist-colonialist hinterland, including that of so-called "green" energy, has human and environmental costs.

Notwithstanding the pervasive sense that the world made by global capitalism is on the brink of collapse, the infrastructures of the hinterland at sea continue to exert palpable violence, not least on the marine ecosystem. No fish or birds remain. The only sea life that appears in the novel is a shoal of jellyfish “the boy” sees passing by. Although initially, on the basis of their translucent appearance and the abundance of plastic waste in the sea, he thinks “they looked like plastic bags,” upon closer inspection their movements enthrall him: “it was amazing how easily they moved, using the currents, flexing, tilting, as though being driven on by some underwater breeze” (177, 178). “The boy” admires the jellyfish’s ability to move freely through what for him is a milieu of confinement—“none were catching on the turbines as they passed”—and takes inspiration from their swelling and concaving to build a sail for the boat he plans to escape in (177). The invertebrates’ graceful appearance momentarily lifts the atmosphere of inscrutability produced by the hinterland at sea’s desolate, uniform grayness and allows “the boy” to think beyond battery-generated propulsion. This exemplifies how jellyfish, as sea creatures that “hover at the limits of human visual perception,” have moved people to find themselves “unmoored, cut loose from an established order of things, ... floating somewhere as yet unmapped” (Alaimo 2013, 143, 151).

But jellyfish are more than aesthetic objects, metaphors or “metonyms of the vast, unthinkable, pelagic expanses” (Alaimo 2013, 159). They are co-creators of the materiality of the hinterland at sea. On the one hand, jellyfish are “infamous for their direct negative effects on human enterprise ... they interfere with tourism by stinging swimmers, fishing by clogging nets, aquaculture by killing fish in net-pens and power plants by clogging cooling-water intake screens” (Purcell et al. 2007, 153). This makes them bodies that constitute “a source of insecurity for the supply chain” of global capitalism (Cowen 2014, 126, 78). On the other hand, jellyfish, often called “cockroaches of the sea” (Alaimo 2013, 141), are considered an invasive species. They have become “monsters” as a result of “modern human shipping, overfishing, pollution and global warming” (Swanson et al. 2017, M1–M2). The proliferation of offshore windfarms and oil and gas rigs has played a particularly important role in this, since such structures provide jellyfish polyps with ideal breeding grounds (Vodopivec et al. 2021). The resulting “jellyfish blooms” are considered harbingers of environmental degradation: “the structure of pelagic ecosystems can change rapidly from one that is dominated by fish (that keep jellyfish in check through competition or predation) to a less desirable

gelatinous state, with lasting ecological, economic and social consequences” (Richardson et al. 2009, 312).

In *Doggerland*, the jellyfish are perceived as “massing in the water like drops of oil, until it seemed like there were more of them than there was water” and as “mak[ing] the water look dense, almost like the jelly in the tins” (178, 177). This links them to oil spill disasters and to the bland, potentially botulism-ridden food the two protagonists have to survive on. The connection to “the jelly,” moreover, evokes the gelatinization that spells disaster for the sea’s ecosystem. As *figures*—“vast, clear globes, like planets, with pale stems, or legs, or something trailing down from them” (177)—the jellyfish give “the boy” the idea for the sailboat that suggests a possible escape from the hinterland at sea to a planetary sphere outside the world of capitalism-colonialism. But as *material life forms*, like the plastic bags he initially mistakes them for, they mark capitalism-colonialism’s ruinous impact on the planet.<sup>4</sup>

The two protagonists, in turn, exemplify the violent ways in which the logistics technologies of global trade “work to calibrate the worker’s body to the ‘body’ of the lively system” (Cowen 2014, 113). Their movements are regulated by the functional spaces of the rig on which they live and the computerized maintenance system, which tells them which turbines need repair. The windfarm is the “lively system” that needs to be kept alive at all costs, including that of the men’s lives and identities: “They would go for months without using each other’s names, so that, when they did, the words seemed random and unfixed, as if they could belong to anything—a tool or piece of machinery, or something that had just drifted through the farm” (Smith 2019, 13). Who the men are does not matter in this hinterland at sea; even their nicknames—“the boy” and “the old man”—do not acknowledge their actual features, but only serve to confirm there are two of them: “of course, the boy was not really a boy, any more than the old man was all that old; but names are relative, and out in the grey some kind of distinction was necessary” (2).

For “the boy,” who was brought to the rig to work out his father’s contract with “the Company” after the latter disappeared (presumably having drowned as he tried to leave the windfarm), and for “the old man,” who feels he cannot leave because he has a son who would need to replace him if he absconded, the windfarm spatially confines them to a literal

<sup>4</sup>This impact extends to the earth’s atmosphere, outer space, and other planets, through the waste generated by communication satellites and space exploration (Parks 2013).

*mi-lieu*—a middle of a place—without any sense of an outside: “wherever you were in the farm, it always felt like you were in the exact centre, like you could go on for ever and never find an edge against which to take a bearing” (30). Temporally, too, there is no exterior. Without a reliable way of telling time, they cannot be sure how long they have been on the farm, and even “the boy” barely remembers life on land: “sometimes, he tried to think back to his life before the farm—even that first boat ride over, the last moments onshore—but his memories were hazy and indistinct, the way the turbines, in squally weather, would churn up so much spray that all edges and outlines disappeared” (16). Thus, the hinterland at sea is encountered as a desolate milieu without end or escape in which the men’s bodies are no more than tools to keep the turbine blades turning.

Although the windfarm—like the global capitalist-colonialist system it was designed to sustain—is far beyond the stage of showing mere “glitches,” as any system will, the imperative to repair it in a way that would secure its reproduction remains strong (Berlant 2016). “The boy” at first seeks to fulfil this imperative, telling himself that “he was here to do the job. He just needed to focus on doing the job” (Smith 2019, 36). Despite the lack of proper tools and spare parts, he keeps “trying to shore things up”—blind to the impossibility of this, especially on the open sea (40). However, doubt starts to creep in as it becomes ever-more obvious that repair-as-reproduction is not feasible—“a whole day of work might add a percentage to the [windfarm’s] output, only for another thing to break and bring it back down again” (45)—and “the boy” begins to question his dutifulness: “He’d known it was going to be a difficult job, as soon as he’d opened the casing and seen what a state it was in ... But because he’d started he had to finish. Why did he always have to finish?” (72). Eventually, realizing that the hinterland at sea’s capacity to exhaust and expose him is infinite and the type of repair it demands not viable, “the boy” relinquishes his need to complete the tasks he is given. He resolves to leave the windfarm, but his plan is thwarted when he has to trade the sailboat he has painstakingly built, inspired by the jellyfish, to the supply boat pilot in order to obtain medicines for “the old man,” who has fallen ill.

At the end of the novel, “the boy” appears to be right back where he started, checking a fishing line that has never hooked any fish and looking ahead to yet another day when

he and the old man would start early, pick an area and go and check all the turbines themselves. There would be gearboxes to grease, blade controls to reset and rewire. ... The farm had over six thousand turbines, which meant they could get round them all in three to four hundred days. (242)

There has, however, indeed been a move beyond repair-as-reproduction. Jem's choice to give up his only means of escape in order to care for Greil and all the ways Greil has been caring for Jem since his arrival at the rig indicate how, faced with a "broken infrastructure," they have succeeded in making repair "non-productive" by "generating a form from within brokenness" (Berlant 2016, 393).<sup>5</sup>

The tentative, fragile mode of care Jem and Greil share does not undo the way the hinterland at sea has reduced them to "broken-looking people sifting through the rubble of economies ... long dead" (Neel 2018, 9). It does, however, allow them to find something sustaining in the rubble. The elusiveness of this "form from within brokenness" is stressed by the fact that Jem only identifies it after the fact when remembering actions he had thought of as annoying on Greil's part:

He thought again about the late supply and the bets the old man had made to let him win the tins [of food]. He thought about the cable the old man had cut [to keep him busy with repair-work and allow him to win another bet], and how he would always find the boy the most intricate of jobs to occupy his time. ... How he had set off those flares that long winter when the boy couldn't stand the gloom over the farm any more. How, for those first years, he'd made sure that the boy was so exhausted that he couldn't lie awake at night, couldn't dwell, couldn't think. (183)

The belated recognition that Greil has been "keeping him going" (183) with these acts of care, which were effective precisely because they did not appear caring at the time but resonated with the harsh regimes of the hinterland at sea to which he had to adjust in order to survive, inspires Jem's own act of care for Greil. Although trading the sailboat for the medicines means Jem will most likely remain stuck on the windfarm for the rest of his life, it also opens up a new way for him to relate to the hinterland at sea—as a space where lives are not just exposed and abandoned but can be cared for under a logic of *ceding not to but for another* that counters the logic of

<sup>5</sup> My use of the characters' names from this point on is in acknowledgment of their ability to eke out a life as non-interchangeable individuals within the hinterland at sea.



productivity and resilience governing the logistics spaces of global capitalism. This new relation to the hinterland at sea not only removes some of its opacity—showing it for the extractive capitalist-colonialist milieu it is—but also keeps alive a spark of hope that there may yet be some way out: “The water was murky ... but [Jem] could see some way. Who knew what he might find? After all, this was once a whole country, a whole continent” (243).

Here, Jem recognizes what Greil has long known: that the lost continent of Doggerland lurking beneath the maritime hinterland entrapping them can be a source of hope since it provides this seemingly infinite milieu with a temporal and spatial boundary. If the North Sea was once a land containing “riverbeds, forests, open plains. Villages, fire-pits ...” (14) of which traces remain on and under the seabed, it could be transformed again. Using nets, Greil trawls for remnants of the flooded plains and their people. When Jem still believes that the windfarm can be shored up through diligent repair, he dismisses the finds as “fragments of things that could never be fixed, never be put back together again” (51); the supply boat pilot is at first eager to trade with Greil, but loses interest when he finds “there’s no market for any of it” (221). For Greil, though, the sifted fragments provide a way to overlay the hinterland territory with another land not yet/no longer claimed by capitalism-colonialism. Keeping “his head buried in the mud and silt and clay of the seabed” (127) is not about avoiding reality or recovering Doggerland as it was (only fragments can be found), but about refusing the hinterland’s attempts to reduce him to a tool for repair. Similarly, his collection of plastic fragments from the sea, sorted in glass containers by color, not only removes a pollutant from the sea, but transforms it into an aesthetic object that cuts through the deadening grayness of the hinterland at sea. In this way, Smith’s novel envisions a way for those made to feel *at sea* in global capitalism’s hinterlands to repurpose the “sifting through the rubble” that Neel considers the mark of their abandonment as a form of (self-)care.

Importantly, the novel does not stop at exploring the “for whom?” of the human experience of the milieu of the hinterland at sea. It adds the “for what?” of this hinterland’s main substance, water. As Astrida Neimanis has argued, water “connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible” (2012, 99). In *Doggerland*, seven short intermezzos, identified as taking place from “c. 20,000 Before Present” to “Year Zero” (the present of Greil and Jem’s story), trace water’s ebbs and flows across the timescale of geological or deep time. On this scale, the

logistics hinterland at sea is a mere blip, to be overcome by the “work” of water, described as that “of leveling, of pressing at edges, of constantly seeking a return to an even surface, a steady state” not of “solidity” but of “continuous flow” (Smith 2019, 244–245). For the water coursing through the windfarm, each turbine has palpable edges that can be worn down. Water’s erosive work, executed in minimal increments over vast stretches of time, is the antithesis of the “just-in-time” flows of global capitalism’s logistics spaces (Cowen 2014, 6). Water, *Doggerland* suggests, persists *before* and *after* the hinterland at sea—*before* and *after* humanity: “It is a simple history—of water returned to ice, returning to water. And barely noticeable, somewhere in the middle of this cycle, plants and animals and people made this place their home” (54).

While it is tempting to accept this deep time narrative as the “simple history” it is presented as, its reliance on the treacherous trope of “nature” as a perennial force transcending human history identifies it as a “romantic vision of watery repair” (Neimanis 2017, 15). The claim that the infrastructures of capitalism-colonialism and the waste they have laid to lives, lands, and seas are “barely worth mentioning in the lifetime of water” (245) cannot withstand scrutiny. Not only does the Anthropocene mark (a distinct part of) humankind’s emergence as a geological force affecting the elemental constitution of earth and its atmosphere, but the water of the North Sea of *Doggerland*’s “Year Zero” is not the water of 20,000 years before. In addition to capitalism-colonialism turning water into what Jamie Linton has called “modern” or “global water”—“an exchangeable and instrumentalizable resource” in much the same way as Jem and Greil (Neimanis 2017, 4)—the water of the North Sea has been polluted with oil and manmade chemicals like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), while its very composition has been changed by eutrophication due to the increased presence of nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen (Ministry of the Environment, Norway 1999; Salomons et al. 1988). Some of the damage done is thought to be irreversible, meaning that there is no “simple history” of water persisting unaffected by the hinterland at sea.

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My milieu-specific analysis of *Doggerland*’s hinterland at sea as foregrounding not only the “for whom?” of Jem and Greil but also the “for what?” of water has shown that forms of life and care that interrupt the hinterland’s function as a logistics space of capitalism-colonialism may be

sustained there—precariously, laboriously, and sometimes at the cost of other lives or substances. At the same time, it may no longer be possible to undo the destructive effects of the enlisting of a particular land or water mass as a hinterland on its people, other lifeforms, and material composition, even if the capitalist-colonialist system were to collapse tomorrow. For this, by now, the hinterland runs too deep.

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## Wet and Dry Hinterlands: Pluviality and Drought in J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

*Sarah Nuttall*

### I

J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) is a novel generally read for its dramatization of the problems of how the individual should be situated in relation to history, of interpretation and the appropriation of an other's story, and of the force and eventual dissolution of political allegory (see Head 2009). It has passed largely unobserved that it rains incessantly for the first thirty-nine pages of the novel—and that conditions of pluviality (rain that causes flooding) and dryness are crucial to the novel's

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S. Nuttall (✉)

WISER, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa  
e-mail: [sarah.nuttall@wits.ac.za](mailto:sarah.nuttall@wits.ac.za)

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registers of extraction, abandonment, and care in its looped hinterlands from the port city of Cape Town into the uplands of the Karoo.<sup>1</sup>

Michael K and his mother Anna K live in a cupboard intended for air-conditioning equipment which has never been installed, under the stairs at a block of flats called Cote d’Azure in Sea Point on the Atlantic seaboard. On the cupboard door is written *Danger-Gevaar-Ingozi* and there is no electric light or ventilation. Michael K has recently lost his job as a gardener for the City of Cape Town Parks and Gardens department; his mother has spent her adult life as a domestic servant and works in a flat upstairs. When rain drips through from the stairs outside, week after week, they place a towel against the door to prevent it from seeping in. Anna K feels “like a toad under a stone” (9) living there and dreams of escaping from “the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues...sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and the wet” (8).

Finding a wheelbarrow and building a wooden platform with a canopy on it, Michael K decides to act on his mother’s desire and pushes her into the hinterlands, toward the natal earth of the Karoo farmland on which shegrew up, near the town of Prince Albert.<sup>2</sup> As K pushes, they escape the soaking wet of Sea Point into the downpours and deluges of the port city’s margins, passing old fuel storage tanks, the warehouses of the dock quarter, the ghostly industria of Paarden Eiland, the cement works, and sewage department trucks. No site “seemed more sheltered from the elements than any other” (24). Despite all his attempts to keep his mother dry—with the canopy, a blanket and a plastic apron—the rain and cold kill her before they pass Stellenbosch.

Traveling alone, the combination of fine rain and mist on the escarpment enables K to skirt a checkpoint as he heads away from the carceral conditions of his life in the city toward the Karoo and his mother’s

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Meg Samuelson for convening at panel called “Wet/Dry” as part of a conference entitled *Southern Waters* at the University of Adelaide in December 2021, with Isabel Hofmeyr, Charne Lavery, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and myself, in which she drew together emerging work on wet form, dry form, and aridity and the novel form, as well as her own work on coastal form; see especially Samuelson’s “Coastal Form” on amphibian aesthetics (2017). The panel was helpful for thinking through how to conceive of wet and dry hinterlands in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> “The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at huis Norenhuis, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother” (7).

birthplace.<sup>3</sup> To do so, he must pass the chimneys and pylons of Worcester, brickfields, railway sidings and the Railway Police, steam locomotives, telegraph wires, and “bare neglected vineyards” (41); filling stations and roadhouses, children’s playgrounds alongside the national road, construction sites, blackened shells of warehouses, and ‘resettlement camps’ (73). These are the near hinterlands in what Coetzee only terms a “time of war” (7). The dimensions and detritus of industrial modernity merge with the political landscapes of coloniality—and the earthslides and washaways caused by flooding. Forced into involuntary labor at a further checkpoint due to his lack of an “exit permit,” K clears undergrowth from the riverbed upstream and downstream from a railway bridge, and is shunted up and down the line in a packed railway car bearing the logos of the Railways Administration of the Prince Albert Divisional Council. In the near hinterland, K is an exposed and largely abandoned subject reduced to the labor he can provide.

Yet the novel explores, too, the possibility of living outside (or, in a more complex vein, *living* within) these hinterland regimes. K attempts to exist, survive, and even minimally flourish obliquely to the regimes of involuntary labor imposed by colonialism and capitalism, beyond the terms of camp life and outside of the logics (and logistics) of war. Crucial to K’s project of escape from the terms of his multiple confinements are questions of wetness and dryness, pluviality, and drought, in which rain or the lack of it can destroy not only life but the smallest project of freedom.

Escaping the labor gang into which he has been forced to work, K reaches an abandoned farm, possibly of his mother’s youth, and blue skies at last. He avoids the abandoned farmhouse, sleeps in a dry riverbed, and must find a way to water the pumpkin seeds he has kept in his pocket. He spends the day near the farm dam and begins to wrestle with the dam pump until he discovers how the brake mechanism works. A minor engineer, he learns how to control the dry spinning of the wheel and restores a system of furrows that could irrigate just enough land near the dam to

<sup>3</sup>While it rains incessantly with the force of a structural condition and thus of the intensified social, Coetzee also attends to pluviality’s material specificities. Rain falls heavily, beating through the broken windows of the Cote d’Azur, creeps with the cold into his mother’s cushion and then her chest, mingles with grey sea, produces heavy mist and dew on the escarpment, allies with high winds, falls into the box containing his mother’s ashes, floods river banks, and washes away railway tracks in a muddy deluge.

grow his vegetables.<sup>4</sup> Next, he tackles the borehole, which had been pumped dry, yielding only a weak and intermittent trickle. It becomes his deepest wish to restore “the flow of water from the earth” (60), as he imagines an inner sea or deep pool with no bottom beneath the ground. Michael K is perhaps at his happiest when he works the wind pump and the borehole at the dam in order to water his pumpkins and feed himself from the wet earth. Refusing the temptation of setting up a “rival line” to the now abandoned farmhouse out at the dam, he is content to master the technological devices needed for gardening, not for others, but to sustain himself.<sup>5</sup> As the ex-farm begins to be subject to surveillance, from both ground and air, however, K and his dam activities have to be rendered surreptitiously: “the vanes of the pump must never be seen to be moving, the dam must always seem to be empty” (102)—except by moonlight. The far hinterland is subject to its aerial dimensions as much as to war and contestation on the ground; under cover of night, some movement and a little water becomes possible.

## II

The story of the settler hydropolitics of the Karoo, as Lesley Green (2020) has termed it, has often been told in relation to the windmill and, more recently, the fracking derrick. If the !Xam and Khoena peoples who lived in dry semi-desert Karoo lands before colonialism developed a complex mythology around rain—both as sky fall and as stored earth waters in the aquifers below—then the windmill, Green shows, produced a new technological era. The discovery of diamond-bearing rock in the northern Karoo in 1869 brought colonialists, industrialists, and migrant labor to the region, and farmers, who “no longer needing to wait for rain” (64), gained the means to turn locals into indentured servants and laborers

<sup>4</sup>For an earlier rendition of this argument, extended substantially in this chapter, see Hofmeyr et al. (2022).

<sup>5</sup>Coetzee returns repeatedly to the figure of the dam and the wind-pump across his work. In *Boyhood* (1997), the first of a trilogy of third-person memoirs, we read that “[j]ust above the farmhouse is a stone-walled dam, twelve feet square, filled by a wind-pump, which provides water for the house and garden” (85). In the later memoir *Summertime* (2009), John describes how the dam used to be filled by a wind-pump, was then replaced by a diesel-driven pump, but when the oil price rocketed it was necessary to “go back to God’s wind after all” (95). This is in the Kroup region (kroup is a Khoi word for ‘dry place’), where “it has rained not a drop in the last two years” (103).



instead. Erratic rain had made farming a risky enterprise; windmills meant that, as Green writes, “air and aquifer entered into a new relationship with the landscape. There was less need to wait for rain. Wind could make water (and an entire industry of water diviners sprung up)” (64). The settler novel, or the farm novel Coetzee identifies as central to ‘white writing,’ meanwhile, showed its own signs of both the wet and the dry, as we have seen above. Hofmeyr (2021) has argued that, even as the form was relocated to the semi-arid interior of South Africa, it persisted: “the imported British novel presupposed abundant water as much for its plot-lines as for the production of its paper” (n.p). Coetzee intervenes in this imported logic, as K reduces the full reflective water surfaces of the farm dam to just a trickle, in a feint of a protective aridity.

For Michael K, it is the small wind-pump at the dam that provides him with the minor technology to begin on a different condition of being, mode of life, and narrative trajectory. Here in the ‘far hinterland,’ as Neel (2018) might term it, he sets about trying to redefine the conditions of, and relations between, extraction, abandonment, and care. Alone in the “burrow” he has constructed near the dam or out in the open veld in moonlight, he thinks repeatedly of his mother’s life. Of the extraction of her labor until she was old and sick, and subject to abandonment, in the cold and rain, by the economy that fed off, extracted, the energies of her body itself. And of his attempted escape from “camp life,” his retreat to the stony ground and his extraction of just enough water to nourish his plants, so that he could eat, re-situating his work as a gardener, shepherding the earth in order to feed himself. K embraces “idleness versus surreptitious theft from involuntary labour” (114). Living beyond the reach of calendar and clock, half awake, half asleep, he thinks of himself as being “like a lizard under a stone” (116).<sup>6</sup> In truth, he is “waiting for the army to forget him” (103). Surely, “I can think of myself as lost” (66), he muses. To “live so that he leaves no trace of his living,” he takes succor from his vision that “every being of this earth will be washed clean by the rain, dried by the sun, scoured by the wind” and “there will not be a grain left

<sup>6</sup> In Coetzee’s *Boyhood*, the narrator, “John,” is by himself in a dry river bed as a train passes over a railway bridge, thinking about “sustenance in this arid earth” (92); of the Karoo as “the only place in the world he wants to be, live as he wants to live: without belonging to a family” (93). He wants to be a creature of the desert, like a lizard and is proud of how little he drinks” (85).

bearing my marks" (just as his mother has been pluvially washed and "drawn up into the leaves of grass") (124).

Thus it is, in the colonial and later apartheid matrix of power, that the South African hinterland, or more specifically the Karoo as hinterland, becomes the site of both extraction and abundance.<sup>7</sup> Or at least Coetzee, in this enduringly brilliant novel, incorporates registers of both in Michael K's quest for freedom and self-possession, subsistence, and regeneration. The extraction and abundance of land, animals, and aquifers that played into the conditions of both death and life in this region are vividly captured in K's unfolding story. In South African historiography, moreover, hinterlands have most often been conceptualized as "frontier zones" or as "the interior." As in the Karoo, they were shaped by the dynamics of colonial expansion, in generally dry and rocky lands north of Cape Town, and stretching past the Orange River, in a ruthless quest for land, labor, and livestock resources. What this historiographic record seldom dwells on, and what this chapter tries to open up, are the wet registers and pluvialities that shape relations of extraction, abandonment, and care in these hinterlands.

When an army commando, searching for aiders and abettors to those who have blown up Prince Albert's water supply come through, they variously smash up the wind-pump at the dam and find Michael K malnourished, weak, and close to death.<sup>8</sup> K is captured again by a system intent on putting him back to work and extracting, too, his story, which amounts to attributing to him a narrative that is not his own ("You want to live... then tell your story" [150]). Part of that attempted extraction is getting him to

<sup>7</sup> "He felt a deep joy in his physical being" (102), "time poured upon him in an unending stream" (102), and, eating the food of his own labor, he felt "thankfulness like a gush of water" (113); "he was himself ... all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow" (115). Interestingly, joy is severally imagined here as watery.

<sup>8</sup> The "soldiers" that find K and mine the dam, having blown up the ruined farmhouse, are an unspecified force in the deliberately ambiguous "time of war" that the novel depicts. They carry echoes of the "commando" that Nigel Penn (2005) depicts in his study of the Cape Interior, operating in zones of fractured sovereignty, where no single power held indisputable sway. These colonial commandos proceeded via warfare, conquest, annihilation, or incorporation of prior inhabitants of the land (the Khoisan) into colonial society, to profoundly shape the racial hierarchy that emerged in modern South Africa before the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in the nineteenth century. Instances of primary resistance, guerrilla warfare, rebellion, flight, and protest abounded, Penn shows, as some groups removed themselves beyond the limits of colonial settlement altogether, while others became colonial fugitives: company deserters, bandits, and assorted criminals.

admit to being either a victim or in the resistance, which he is not, except insofar as he is resisting the social and political system which repeatedly attempts to capture him in its carceral logics by refusing to be a term in it—an endeavor for which he needs, first and foremost, water. Lying in bed at the prison hospital to which he has been taken, staring up at the electric fan and refusing to eat, K speaks only to say “I am not in the war” (138) to the medical officer attending to him. He dreams of his garden next to the dam and the waters beneath the earth that offered his pumpkins succor.

Michael K, we could say, must depend materially but also imaginatively on the deep underground waters beneath the hydrocolonialities of the arid surface. Waldo in Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), as Maria Geustyn (2020) has pointed out, looks at the stones and hills of the Karoo, after his friend and young feminist Lyndall has decried the dryness of history, and conjures up their “geologic and submersive” past<sup>9</sup> (“what are dry lands were once lakes...the stones rolled together by the water”), at once material and immaterial (“it seems that the stones are really speaking—speaking of the old things, of the time when the strange fishes and animals lived that are turned into stone now, and the lakes were here” [17]).<sup>10</sup> If Waldo suffers the aridity of authoritarian settler cultures that refuse and refute imaginative freedom and escape, K, in his attempt to “live nowhere” (119), needs to drink from fossil waters in order to maintain life.<sup>11</sup> Pluvial time takes on an ontological and metaphysical quality ever deepening in the hinterlands of this novel, only intensified as K lies curled in a fetal position of refusal in his prison-hospital bed as the new site of his social incarceration. “He is like a stone, a pebble ... since the dawn of time. Cannot eat camp food, does whatever stick insects do to maintain life,” says the medical officer of K (135). Full of liberal hubris, the officer tries to invent a story for K as a universal or original soul. He does so occasionally. “There is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in Antarctica or on the high seas,” says the medical officer portentously; and, as a soul “without history,” “[y]ou are the last of your kind, a creature left over from an earlier age, like the coelacanth” (151).

<sup>9</sup> I draw this phrasing from Hofmeyr et al. (2022).

<sup>10</sup> This point is made, and extended, in Hofmeyr et al. (2022).

<sup>11</sup> That Waldo is white and K is “Coloured” and thus subject to far greater dispossession in the system depicted only sharpens this divide.

Simon van Schalkwyk, in an essay on Rustum Kozain's poetry, writes about the coelacanth as embodying "an especially curious mode of temporality" (2022, 414). Believed to have been extinct for more than 66 million years, the coelacanth's reappearance off the coast of Chalumna River on the East Coast of South Africa in 1938 represents "a curiosity of deep-time": a creature that does not go extinct but appears rather to have only temporarily disappeared from the fossil record, sometimes for millions of years, before reappearing unchanged. Its survival is figured as something "intermittent and resistant to temporal codes of development or progression," a state "decimated and unchanged," writes van Schalkwyk (2022, 414), adding that far from representing a long-lost past concordant with "the telos of modernity," the coelacanth rather announces "an alternate living present," of an erased or concealed or vaporized indigeneity that continues "alongside, and in spite of settler colonial ruin" (D'Oleo 2019).

What the medical officer misses, in his narrative charity, is that K, like the coelacanth, lives not out of time but submerged inside of history in its most intense form, the time of war. Moreover, as K lives not only in temporal layeredness and spatial contiguity across near and far hinterland, desert and ocean, in rain and drought, so, too, do coelacanths bear bodily histories of both land and water: living in the oceanic depths, they are believed to be the closest living fish to tetrapods, who lived on land. Thinking with the coelacanth, of K as coelacanth, we arrive at an altogether different imaginary of dry land than has generally been visible.<sup>12</sup>

Back at Sea Point, Cape Town, after his release from the prison-hospital, K walks among the rocks peering into the tidal pools, where he sees snails and anemones "living lives of their own" (177). Forced again into the role of vagrant or charity case, K longs to live a life of his own, as the sea creatures do. Clearly close to death, he plans a new trip to the hinterlands, with a teaspoon and a string in his pocket, which he will lower into the

<sup>12</sup>I also note here Meg Samuelson's careful tracing of Coetzee's repeated turn to littoral settings as part of what she reads as an orientation "southward" (2021, 3) across his work. If the Karoo was "the country of his heart," as he writes in *Boyhood*, she shows how he later explores "a landscape iterated across the southern temperate zone," spaces that have experienced comparable "histories of colonial invasion and settlement" (Samuelson 2021, 5).

waters of the earth—and live a life that belongs to him. In this complex, deeply psychic sense, the hinterland becomes a sea-space.<sup>13</sup>

Peters and Steinberg write about how the ocean exceeds itself and its liquidity to become embodied, internalizing itself within the subjects that constitute the marine environment, citing Safina's view that "we are wrapped around an ocean within" (1997, 435). Thus, there is a seawater environment that permeates far inland, scientifically and imaginatively, in an embodied way. Their notion of a hypersea points to a global environment that is fundamentally oceanic in nature, "even as its fluidity is superficially masked by a prevailing materiality of dryness" (Peters and Steinberg 2019, 297). This is what they call the more-than-wet "hydrosphere." What I have sought to show is that relations of extraction and abandonment in the hinterland are written in registers of wet and dry that are unpredictable, uncertain, and may be deeply "interior" to the self.

### III

In the hydropolitics of the looped hinterland of sea, city, and semi-arid desert today, the windmills still turn on the remote farms and back gardens of the dwellers of the town of Prince Albert, but so too do the fracking derricks plunge into the aquifers below.<sup>14</sup> Before subsistence farming, or gardening, comes the question of the rain (or Rain, as we will see) and of the waters below, facing increasing drought but also contamination.

Fracking wells, lined by cement, targeting Karoo methane, trapped in shale, "a power source at the far end of recoverable petroleats" (Green 2020, 62) are, many studies show, discharging hundreds of waste chemicals into shallow ground waters as well as "deep formation waters" (Vengosh et al. 2014, 8334). Petro-capitalists are proceeding as if cement offers "immunity to geological time" (Green 2020, 63) and to the physics

<sup>13</sup> Lying on a piece of old cardboard left by a "vagrant" before him, in the very cupboard he had shared with his mother before their trip to the hinterlands, K thinks: "my mistake was to plant all my seeds together in one patch" (183). He should have planted them one at a time over miles of veld in "patches of soil no larger than my hand" and drawn a map of where they were so that every night he could "make a tour and water them" (183), he surmises, devising an ever more miniaturized politics of escape from systemic capture.

<sup>14</sup> This looped hinterland is defined by the industrial and logistical economic loop we can draw between Cape Town, the Karoo, and Prince Albert, traversed by the railways and the road system, servicing the sheep farming industry and the tourist market, amongst other imperatives.

of flows between states of matter: “Fracking puts at risk the Karoo’s aquifers, which were formed and filled on a fossil timescale. Harming them, without knowing either the extent of their interconnections, would potentially cause effects at fossil timescales. ... thus the need to address not only the rights of future generations but the rights of future forms of life. Fracking sets in motion molecular flows that cross state, property and bodily lines” (Green 2020, 73). Fracking cannot be managed by property law, Green points out, which at this point does not address biogeochemical flows.<sup>15</sup>

Considering these “ecopolitical” questions for the future of the Karoo, Green turns to the relationships that people, land, and living beings have with rain. Recalling the Bleek and Lloyd archive of !Xam stories worked on by Pippa Skotnes, she glimpses in them “a Rain that is not a Thing but a being who transforms landscapes and plants, animals and people,” and that is “linked to falling stars, finding food, flowers, swallows and hunting” (2020, 75). At issue for her is “not the reality of the Rain Being, but the fiction of corporate mastery. The Rain being stands as a figure reminding markets and technologies and legal regimes that they may extract, but they cannot live without the relations that compose life in this dry landscape” (2020, 76). The idea of a responsive earth is a reminder that the dry interior of South Africa is not a silently “enduring vista awaiting extraction but ... a calling to life the dust, plants and creatures of the Karoo, inviting those who would live here to share in that convocation” (Green 2020, 76).

Dominating the front page of the *Prince Albert Friend*, the local newspaper, when I visit in December 2021, is rainfall. “When is a drought not a drought?” poses the unusual headline. The opening paragraph provides its answer: “There is no word to describe it.” This is because a drought is “just a dry patch in a series of normal rainfall years,” the article explains. Rainfall records have been kept for the town since the 1880s, showing some wet cycles and some dry; the last few years, however, have been “disastrously dry” (Milton-Dean and Dean 2021, 1). Any rain that falls now “returns to the atmosphere,” available to neither people nor plants, it continues; temperatures are rising to the mid-40s in summer, many plants are dying, and “you can’t maintain a lawn” (Milton-Dean and Dean 2021,

<sup>15</sup> Land redistribution is an urgent task in South Africa, Green goes on, and “land redistribution with poisoned water and soils would leave to future generations a new, cruel historical legacy of apartheid: this time in toxic reparations” (2020, 73).

2). The article mentions climate change, but what it seems to be suggesting is that the “disastrously dry” is not yet in the lexicon of what can quite be known in this region.<sup>16</sup>

Hofmeyr (2021) has written about how South African literature has struggled to become “drought-resistant,” even where Olive Schreiner and Bessie Head have experimented with “drier forms.” Head wrote out of “spare conditions,” writing “a saga about the elements” which resituated “the media of anti-colonial nationalism” (Hofmeyr 2021). In thinking with Hofmeyr about what a wider drought-resistant literature might look like, we could remind ourselves that groundwater is often the most exploited and crucial water resource available in arid areas. It, like coal or gold deposits, will eventually be used up completely. K’s attempts to survive outside of camp life and property relations in the tillite hills above Prince Albert would today be impossible, as drought deepens into the “disastrously dry” of catastrophic climate change.<sup>17</sup>

In the local museum, swallow-like figures, capped with antelope ears and human-like arms, appear on rock-paintings from the area.<sup>18</sup> The placard informs the visitor that these were assumed to be versions of the water spirits (referred in some Southern African traditions as the more gendered

<sup>16</sup>In the back gardens of the houses of the small town, there are reservoir dams—and windmills. The huge windmills loom high over the houses. It is an odd sight. In the township of North End, adjacent but separate from the town, there is no sign of any water anywhere, no dam, leiwat, or windmill in sight. Separating the town and township is the *drankwinkel*, selling liquid of one form or another; just inside the town boundary is the correctional services prison. Apartheid social engineering could be thought of in the registers of the wet and the dry in this way, with liquor and incarceration mediating the violent separation of town/ship.

<sup>17</sup>Dark grey tillite was laid down by glaciers that moved across the Karoo 300 million years ago, when Africa was part of Gondwanaland. The stones now found in this grey rock were carried by ice-sheets from the north. Tillite hills, such as those near Prince Albert, have a characteristic ragged look. The soils they produce are often saline. Scientists predict increased aridity in the Karoo, even given current levels (see Estler et al. 2006).

<sup>18</sup>The placard reads: “Swallow painting from Scholtzkloof, Prince Albert. The strange head and human-like arms indicate a symbolic rather than literal meaning. It emerges from a natural crack (top left) and flies towards a larger hole in the rock face (right: out of view). The San believed that the rock on which they painted represented a ‘screen’ between the everyday world and the unseen dimension that lay behind. The swallow, like a spirit in flight, is heading towards the realm beyond the rock. The swallow has been painted below the knee-level and is clearly not meant to be decorative.”

*watermeisies*) in the region.<sup>19</sup> Yet when they were shown to “San prisoners” in the local prison down the road, I was told by a tour guide, they identified them immediately as rain-gods.

#### IV

For Michael K (and Anna K), pluviality is the harbinger and medium of both death and life. Rain is not decorative, it is occurrence (event) and substance (or infrastructure). In the hinterland, it is also a potential mode or condition of care of the self. For K, hinterland is or could be a place of regeneration—not just a zone of extraction or a zone of abandonment. This is so, however, in an individualizing way, since he is trying to escape the iron cage society has become. No collective escape is proffered by this novel (which is perhaps striking at the time of the novel’s writing, when many were engaged in the collective liberation struggle against late apartheid). No community is available to K as such, only communion with his dead mother (an apparent community of fellow ‘vagrants’ and disenfranchised people encountered on his return to Sea Point offers only anonymous sex, over-drinking, and theft of his minimal possessions, including his pumpkin seeds, while he is asleep). It is perhaps the waters of deep time, the fossil waters of the aquifers of the Karoo, that offer him not only water for food but the most sustained mirror, a self-reflective if submerged surface rather than the still waters of the dam, which must be minimized to a trickle, used and emptied out, surreptitious waters under cover of aridity.

Coetzee’s novel is striking for its hinterland reticulations: his multiple lists of hinterland infrastructures operate as mini supply chains of their own, galvanizing the narrative itself with the logistics and labor conditions along the production lines of South Africa’s uplands and inlands.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the novel, engineering, infrastructural, and ontological

<sup>19</sup> In her PhD thesis entitled “Of Water and Water Spirits in Southern African Literature,” Confidence Joseph (2021) discusses how “aquatic spatial beings” can be thought of as innovative hermeneutic devices embedded in multiple historical contexts, with complex relationships to water’s materialities. Growing up in the “arid city of Bulawayo,” she recalls minimal encounters with “water bodies,” but an abundance of stories of water spirits. Walking in Prince Albert, I came across a non-binary *watermeisie* painted onto a decorated garbage bin, part of an artist’s project throughout the town.

<sup>20</sup> Allowed out of a camp once on a Sunday, K ventures into Prince Albert, where he encounters the shop full of “galvanised iron bath tubs, bicycle wheels, fan belts and radiator hoses, bins of nails, pyramids of plastic buckets, canned goods, patent medicines, sweets, babywear and cold drinks” (50) which can still be seen in Prince Albert today.



projects both large and small are subjected to climatic and ontological conditions of rain and flooding, drought and aridity.<sup>21</sup> These pluvialities become elemental or earth infrastructures of their own (see Nuttall 2021). And they form a highly complex rendition of “pluvial time,” (Nuttall, 2020) drawing on the figuration of material and immaterial waters to deepen the temporal registers of novelistic form.

The hinterland is “not distinguished by any particular physical or social geography,” writes Esther Peeren in this volume: it is “brought into being and put in the service of an evolving global capitalist-colonialist economy.” Yet our analyses have also to pay close attention, more than ever, to the shifting forces of its elemental life. These, too, shape the conditions of extraction, abandonment, becoming lost, regeneration, self-care, and dreaming. If Peeren’s reading is of a hinterland and a state of being “at sea,” submerged under the ocean in a time of ruinous climate change and sea-level rise, mine has explored a hydrocolonial terrain and form of subjectivity written in the registers of wet and dry, pluviality and drought.

Coetzee explores a denser rubric of change than one offered by resistance in its conventional forms: like the choke-points of logistics circulation, which seem to offer a way to break open or fracture the stranglehold of the contemporary capitalist machine, and its “operational fantasies” (Chua et al. 2018), but don’t really, K is re-captured repeatedly—yet his imagination and his refusal to be a cog in the political and narrative system is watered by the more-than-wet registers of his elemental world. Does his

<sup>21</sup> Rila Mukherjee writes about earlier spatial shifts within capitalism in which waterscapes became separated, as new importance was placed on the terrestrial sphere and on the development of pockets of land within the capitalist enterprise. She shows how important it is to re-join land and water to reach for a more “encompassing spatiality” (2014, 87) of history and place. Raymond Williams, writing about the hinterland as he called it in the singular, showed with such clarity how, as networks of income became not only industrial but imperialist, the countries of Empire were turned into Europe’s hinterlands, and a rural mode of “the countryside” was built in the metropole on the profits. Williams welded, as a critical practice, this wider system of relations with sometimes minute and subtle “physical awarenesses” in which so much history and feeling is held: for altering connections and intermediate places, for “what earth, which tree, by whose labour or locomotion” (1973, 7–8) and, behind all of this, for the personal pressures and commitments emerging from his own history and self. Williams’s systems of relations and structures of feeling do not, however, dwell on water. Hydrocolonialism (Hofmeyr 2022), and its attendant practices of reading for water, changes the picture. Doing so in a time of accelerating climate crisis exacerbates the need for that shift.

coming death at the end of the novel suggest the triumph of capitalism-colonialism? Or the always-alive dreamlife of the trip to the hinterlands, for succor and sustenance, the waters of the earth and gardening? It suggests both.

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## CHAPTER 16

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# The Animal Hinterland in Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *My Heavenly Favorite*

*Marrigje Paijmans*

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, the Netherlands was the second largest exporter of agricultural products, after the United States (Kingdom of the Netherlands 2021; University of Wageningen 2021). Considering the Netherlands (41,543 km<sup>2</sup>) is 236 times smaller than the US (9834 million km<sup>2</sup>), Dutch farming appears as a paragon of efficiency. “Animal husbandry” concerns an important part of Dutch agricultural production, with a capacity of 3.8 million cows, 12 million pigs, and 102 million chickens,<sup>2</sup> to name the

<sup>1</sup>This chapter is partly based on discussions with Eline Buitenhuis about her thesis (2021). I would like to thank her for this inspiring collaboration.

<sup>2</sup>These numbers are based on the number of stables in 2020. The annual production also depends on an animal's lifespan, which ranges from six weeks for broilers to five years for dairy cows (Rijksoverheid 2021; see also Van der Peet et al. 2018).

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M. Paijmans (✉)  
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam,  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

three most popular types of livestock, in a country harboring 17 million humans. Most of these animals are bred, raised, and capitalized on in the smallest amount of time and space possible,<sup>3</sup> while their presence remains largely invisible. City dwellers visiting the countryside will see grazing dairy cows,<sup>4</sup> but most calves, pigs, and chickens spend their shortened lives in hermetically sealed “megastables.” What are the consequences of this selective exposure and concealment of livestock farming for animals in the Dutch countryside?

This chapter conceptualizes the obscured space of intensive livestock farming in the Netherlands as a “hinterland” through an analysis of Marijke Lucas Rijneveld’s novel *My Heavenly Favorite* (*Mijn lieve gunsteling*, 2020).<sup>5</sup> It is Rijneveld’s second novel set in the countryside, after his debut, the English translation of which by Michele Hutchison won the 2019 International Booker Prize. *The Discomfort of Evening* (*De avond is ongemak*, Rijneveld 2018) is written from the perspective of a farmer’s daughter who struggles with the emotional inaccessibility of her deeply religious parents. The book presents a torn image of Dutch rural society, as partly rooted in traditional Reformed values, and partly propelled by global developments, particularly in popular culture and farming. *My Heavenly Favorite* also features a farmer’s daughter, but her story is narrated by a 49-year-old veterinarian, who is traumatized by incest and the mass culling following the foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001. In this epidemic, 270,000 animals were killed, most of them preventively (De Steur 2001, 30). When the vet falls in love with the 14-year-old farm girl, he effectuates a reversal of the incestuous relationship with his mother, and a morbid re-enactment of his role in the culling during the epidemic. The relationship between the girl and the vet depicts how a society in which animals are systematically harmed often fosters harmful relations among humans as well. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), Carol J. Adams observes the long-standing association between the abuse, slaughter, and

<sup>3</sup>In 2020, the share of organic livestock in the Netherlands was only 3.4%: 8% for laying hens; 2.6% for dairy cows; 0.8% for pigs. The Netherlands has a smaller share of organic acreage than the EU average, and growth is leveling off (University of Wageningen 2022). For criteria for organic farming, see Van der Peet et al. (2018).

<sup>4</sup>70.5% of all milk produced in the Netherlands complies with the “Meadow Milk” quality mark, indicating cows spend at least six hours in the meadow 120 days per year (Van der Peet et al. 2018).

<sup>5</sup>Translation rights have been acquired by Faber and Faber, publication date unknown. All translations in this chapter are by the author.

consumption of animals on the one hand, and the abuse, objectification, and consumption in sexual terms of women in patriarchal society on the other (Adams 2010). Feminists of different orientations, too, have interpreted the links between speciesism and sexism as a ground for mutual solidarity between women and animals (Richards 2020, 80–81). Acknowledging that animals, killed by the millions, have less scope for resistance than women (Hastedt 2014, 208), this chapter submits that *My Heavenly Favorite* explores this ground as animal hinterland.

Animals are omnipresent in the novel, not only in the girl's daily life and the vet's professional practice, but also in their language and imaginations, providing a rich image of animal presence in the Dutch countryside. Contending that the animal hinterland is brought forth precisely in the entanglement of human and animal lives, this chapter will analyze the roles and images of animals in the relationship between the girl and the vet to gain a better understanding of the exploitative human-animal relationships in the Dutch countryside. The vet relates the novel in the second person, in a prolonged and insistent address to the girl, referring to the Biblical Song of Songs (Rijneveld 2020, 212), which epitomizes his attempt to follow her relentlessly with his gaze, to trace her character, to penetrate her world, and eventually her body. Although the girl initially enjoys the vet's attention and accepts his advances, she recoils when he starts to approach her physically. From then on, the girl seeks to escape the vet's gaze by "becoming animal," entering an obscure animal hinterland where he cannot follow. At the narrative level, the girl starts eluding the vet's language; the further she withdraws into her imagination, the less the vet understands her. This chapter will conduct an affective analysis of the girl's imaginations to bypass the vet's perspective, thus mapping the obscured animal hinterland.

"Hinterland," "becoming animal," and "affect" are central notions in this chapter that require some explanation. The notion of hinterland is significant for two reasons. While "hinterlands" have traditionally been seen to serve port or market towns through agriculture or extracted resources (Uzoigwe 1976, 195), today, the word is increasingly used to denote the peripheral and underprivileged areas through which megacities nourish and fuel themselves, often without regard to the origin and modes of production of resources, resulting in the industrial or extractive ruination of these landscapes (e.g., Cuevas Valenzuela et al. 2021). Hinterland geographies are seldom associated with the Netherlands, as a densely populated country with relatively small cities and an easily accessible

countryside that often fulfills both agricultural and recreational functions. It is exactly because of the Netherlands' high population density and the multiple purposes of its countryside that intensive livestock farming has been withdrawn from sight. Not only the animals, but all the adverse effects of their presence, including bad smells, the emission of hazardous substances, and nutrient surpluses and pesticides polluting the soil and water (Post et al. 2020, 2) are regulated so that they remain imperceptible or not too disturbing for local communities and tourists.

This is where the second significance of hinterland comes into play. Phil A. Neel observes that US hinterlands, despite being closely entwined with urban cores through production chains, remain virtually absent in cultural representations, as a “sunken continent that stretches between the constellation of spectacular cities” (2018, 13). Neel's concept of the hinterland as unseen resonates with the obscurity of Dutch animal hinterlands, even if the concealment of intensive livestock farming in the United States and the Netherlands differs greatly. Neel describes farms as remote compounds in the far hinterland—“windswept wastelands of farm, desert, grassland, and jungle” (9)—while Dutch farms are often located near densely populated areas or busy roads. In response, Dutch farms have adopted a selective approach, opening to the public with images that correspond to an ideal representation of the country, and concealing rural actualities that do not (Peeren and Souch 2019, 38). The images of grazing cows that pervade advertisements for dairy products, for example, serve to disguise the isolation and slaughter of veal calves, thus naturalizing and legitimating the large-scale extraction of “raw materials” from animals. Dutch popular media contribute to the perpetuation of the rural idyll by a selective representation of, for instance, small-scale and organic farms producing rustic products. Rijneveld's novel confronts the rural idyll, in terms of both its romantic evocations of nature and its illusion of harmonious human-animal relationships. The concept of hinterland enables an analysis of the novel that makes livestock farming and its ruinous effects on animals and the natural environment visible as processes of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization.

The girl's attempts to escape will be analyzed using Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of “becoming animal” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005 [1980]). “Becoming” is a reciprocal process in which “that which one becomes becomes no less than the one that becomes” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 305). The girl in the novel is understood as tapping into her imagination of an animal and adopting its modes, adjusting her image

of the animal to her body's capacities in the process. For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming animal is one episode in a series of becomings: "If becoming-woman is the first quantum, or molecular segment, with the becomings-animal that link up with it coming next, what are they all rushing toward? Without a doubt, toward becoming-imperceptible. The imperceptible is the immanent end of becoming" (2005, 279). Within this series, becoming animal is associated with specific traits. Firstly, becoming animal involves becoming member of a pack, becoming "multiplicities," and thus "like everybody else, ... to no longer be anybody" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 197). This trait is useful in analyzing how the girl relates to different animals simultaneously, avoiding one well-defined identity. Secondly, becoming animal implies a loss of "faciality." The face being that "what gives the signifier substance ... what fuels interpretation," faciality is the way the face "marks the limit of [a sign's] deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 115). In other words, the synergy between linguistic and facial expressions narrows down the number of possible interpretations, while loss of faciality allows for an infinite number of interpretations. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of faciality thus enables an analysis of the girl's escape at the narrative level, through the elusiveness of her language. Thirdly, becoming animal involves a line of flight, which can be understood as an escape as well as a liberation, both a de- and a re-territorialization: "In one way or the other, the animal is more a fleer than a fighter, but its flights are also conquests, creations" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 55). This trait will be used to examine how the girl's imaginations contribute to her oppression as well as her freedom.

As argued by animal studies scholars (e.g., Baker 2002, 95), Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming animal is anthropocentric, as it is exclusively in service of humans and their development. Can it also be employed to trace and describe animal agency in *My Heavenly Favorite*? This chapter hypothesizes that the animals in the novel, like the girl, are forced to retreat to a hinterland beyond their perpetrators' gaze and narration. At the narrative level, their agency is obscured, but they are able to exert influence and generate meaning at the level of "affect," the forces and feelings that connect and divide bodies through sensual experience. According to Deleuze and Guattari, those near-imperceptible, interstitial, visceral forces are sensed in the imagination, either consciously or unconsciously, and from there may compel systems of knowledge, history, memory, and circuits of power (Parr 2010, 11–12). It is through the girl's imagination that she "becomes animal" and gains access to the animal hinterland. An



affective analysis reveals how animal agency is conveyed through the animals' sensual presence in the novel, the experiences and feelings they produce in the vet and the girl, and the way these experiences and feelings generate effects in the form of the animals' alignment with or unsettling of the spatial, social, and power structures of the Dutch countryside.

The girl's becomings will be examined with respect to multiplicities, faciality, and lines of flight. The first section describes how she constructs an animal hinterland from any material available to her: the presence of physical animals and their representations in the Bible and pop culture. In this process, the animal hinterland's affective entanglement between rural and global economies takes shape. The second section analyzes the girl's escape from the hinterland through a series of increasingly precarious becomings. To obtain her freedom, she leaves the animals that protected her behind, implicating herself in the hinterland's power structures. The third section discusses the implications of the novel for actual animals, arguing that, despite the girl's flight, the novel holds out hope for more ethical human-animal relations in the powerful affects animals can generate in humans.

### BECOMING ANIMAL ON THE FARM

The girl in *My Heavenly Favorite* spends hours cuddling and talking with the cows in the dark stables or lying between the sheep in the meadows while watching the birds in the sky. The vet sees her need to spend time with animals as compensation for emotional distress caused by her brother's death, her mother's departure, and her father's neglect. The vet assumes the girl recognizes her own suffering in that of the animals, because from his perspective animal life is marked by disease and the prospect of slaughter. For example, when young bulls are prepared for transport to the slaughterhouse, he observes how "you would keep cuddling them and scratching them behind their ears, whispering inaudible words to them; it was only there that I saw how you carried your loss with you" (16).

This is not the only way, however, in which the girl identifies with animals. To the vet, she calls herself The Frog, otter, and bird, every animal expressing different traits of her character. The Frog refers to a figure in *Frog and the Little Bird* (*Kikker en het vogeltje*, Velthuijs 1991), a Dutch children's book by Max Velthuijs about Frog, who finds a dead bird and reckons it is "broken." This upsets the girl: "*A dead person cannot be broken, a dead person is dead, just that. The person staying behind is broken*"

(168; emphasis in original). The Frog thus expresses her being shattered by the losses she has suffered. The otter manifests her fascination for male genitals, ever since the vet showed her an otter's *baculum*. Her healthy adolescent interest is exploited by the vet, but takes an unexpected turn for him when the girl desires to have her own penis. The bird, finally, embodies the girl's wish to flee from "The Village." When she makes a literal attempt to fly, from the hayloft, she ends up in the hospital, where the vet forces her to perform fellatio on him. From this moment, the girl also identifies with the dead bird in *Frog and the Little Bird*, inspiring her to "play dead." The three animals thus provide the girl with indirect ways of expressing her grief, exploring her sexual orientation, and preparing her escape.

The animal identifications also serve as disguises. Much to the vet's chagrin, the girl never exposes herself completely. When he asks: "Who are you actually: the bird, The Frog, or the otter? You shrugged and said you only knew who you were if you were not asked. I thought it was a vague answer" (98). Refusing to be pinned down, the girl resides in multiplicities, as an animal merges into the pack "to no longer be anybody" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 197). In response, the vet starts explaining the girl's puzzling statements to his own advantage, suggesting he knows her feelings and what she is doing when out of his sight: "I drove away and did not see that you tried to frolic, that you tried, but it would not work, not as before" (182). This makes the vet an unreliable narrator, presenting the girl as a neglected and confused child who benefits from his attention. Ignoring her multiple identities, he fails to recognize that she is plotting a line of flight beyond his gaze, in her imagination.

The vet finds it increasingly difficult to interpret the girl's utterances. For example, when he asks whether the girl and her boyfriend are having sex, she responds by referring to *Moby-Dick*: "sometimes you had to go on a hunt to discover what it is you were afraid of" (111). She continues that "it seemed wonderful to be swallowed by a whale, as Jonah in the Bible, and ... to be thrown up somewhere, far away from the boring The Village" (113). The vet does not understand how this answers his question, but interprets the swallowing as sexual intercourse and assumes the girl is looking forward to having sex. He ignores the ambiguity of her words, which also seem to indicate that she is afraid to have sex, but considers it a passage to adulthood and freedom. In that sense, "to be swallowed by a whale" can be considered a loss of faciality, a becoming animal effecting a disconnect between the girl's language and face, which explains why the

vet fails to “read” the girl and how his attempts to narrate her thoughts and actions increasingly fail.

The previous paragraphs have invoked several examples of texts triggering the girl’s imagination: the Bible, a literary novel, but also a children’s book and a film. Other references to popular culture include Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” (1982), the horror movie *It* (1990), and Kurt Cobain (1994). While the girl has been raised with the Bible, fitting the image of the Dutch countryside as a traditional realm, clearly popular media have also found their way to The Village, albeit sometimes with a delay. Especially in the vet’s explanation, the pop songs and films advocate the importance and joyfulness of sex. When Leonard Cohen sings “There ain’t no cure for love” (66), and Bonny Tyler “Love him till your arms break” (306), the novel makes popular media complicit in the girl’s belief that sex is both necessary and morbid. The Bible, on the other hand, is associated with the culture of silence in The Village, which prevents anyone from intervening in the pedophile relationship. Religious culture prevents the villagers from questioning authorities, such as the father’s authority over the family, even if grief prevents him from taking good care of his children. Sickness and death are also taken for granted, “because God would decide whether or not you would get breast cancer” (14). When a young woman referred to as Suzi disappears, the villagers hamper police investigations, which they consider an undermining of the close-knit community (204). As quoted in Psalm 49:13–14, the collective takes precedence over the individual: “This is the fate of those who trust in themselves. ... Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them” (27). The culture of silence especially applies to sexual matters, such as the girl’s first menstruation, which out of sheer helplessness she communicates to her father as “I am bleeding like a pig” (195), after which she finds a pack of sanitary towels at her doorstep. The blend of popular and religious culture in the novel reflects the hinterland’s entanglement of traditional values and globalizing culture. Together, they have a detrimental effect on the girl: while pop songs encourage her to embrace sex, religious conventions prevent her from gaining knowledge or sharing experiences about it, complicating the development of a balanced sexual identity.

Many quotes taken from popular culture, such as the sheep “destined for the grave” and the bleeding pig, involve animal suffering. The girl is continuously compared to sick and suffering animals, emphasizing that the animals in her direct surrounding are oppressed by a similar

entanglement of traditional ideas, in this case about human-animal relationships, and the globalizing trade in animal products. The vet renders these processes as pathological and the doctors that should cure the illness as ill themselves. To cope with his incest trauma, the vet abuses the girl as “a breech calf in the nursery of my sick desires” (11). The first time he kisses her, he “tasted the resistance which I also felt when I shoved a drench gun into an ewe’s mouth to inject her against maggots” (83). The girl is not innocent either; in drawing a line of flight from her imaginations of animals, she effectively reiterates the exploitation of animals on a conceptual level, implicating herself in the pathological entanglements of the hinterland.

### BECOMING NOCTURNAL, PLAYING DEATH

The vet compares his own position between perpetration and victimhood to that of the ram in Genesis 22:13, “who was stuck with his horns in bushes and who would be sacrificed instead of Abraham’s son” (199). He is tangled in his own desires, which he cannot control; he can only await his punishment. He recollects *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (c. 1638) by Jan Lievens (Fig. 16.1), “who had painted Abraham and Isaac in a fervent embrace while they fearfully look up to the sky with the knife and the dead ram next to them. I lisped to the sky that I wanted to be the ram, oh, sacrifice me” (204). More than the ram, however, the vet resembles Abraham, clenching Isaac (the girl) tightly and doubting whether God will accept the ram instead—Isaac’s bare skin suggests he is not yet safe from Abraham. As an incest victim, the vet can also be compared to Isaac, and the girl to the ram, who suffers because of the vet’s agony. The painting shows that hierarchy is relative, and that the vet and the girl’s relationship is partly based on mutual understanding. This also means the vet can relate to the girl’s animal imaginaries, in which capacity he compares himself to a parasite: “I slowly crawled under your skin, like liver fluke in a cow” (97). When he sexually penetrates the girl for the first time, he refers to the myth in which Zeus takes on the appearance of a swan to seduce Leda: “*to really become a Swan in her lap*” (291; emphasis in original). The vet adopts the girl’s animal imaginaries to conquer her, finding the entrance to the animal hinterland.

When the girl is no longer safe in the animal hinterland, she further withdraws into new becomings, loosely following the trajectory set out by Deleuze and Guattari. After giving up her individuality and faciality, she



**Fig. 16.1** Jan Lievens, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, c. 1638, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum Braunschweig, photographer: B. P. Keiser

now also relinquishes her gender, her body, and daylight. First, the vet notices “that you were dusking between a boy and a girl, and that you became increasingly preoccupied with ‘dear boys’ in the swimming pool” (183). He is not sure whether she wants to be with boys or become a boy. In effect, she is in a process of what Donna Haraway calls “becoming with,” seeking connections and encounters that distract her from the vet’s sphere of influence (2008, 27). Then, the girl stops eating, becoming so

“thin that you could not be held anymore, there was too much space between my arms” (332). This “line of flight” is cunningly intercepted by the vet: “I kissed you and you asked how many calories a kiss contained, and I said that it only costs you calories and you pushed your little tongue in my mouth” (318). To lose more weight the girl starts running “in the dusk through the deserted landscape” (331), to the point where she seems weightless and transparent, reducing her affective presence to the bare minimum. She is pursuing what Deleuze and Guattari call “nocturnal deterritorializations” unto becoming imperceptible: “having lost my face, form, and matter. I am now no more than a line” (2005, 587, 199). As lines of flight always involve de- and re-territorialization, the girl’s attempts to survive threaten to become her undoing.

At this point, death has become the girl’s last resort, “a state of absolute deterritorialization, the state of unformed matter” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 55–56). The dead are omnipresent in the girl’s life and, even if their presence is neglected, they affect her no less than the living: memories of her brother, of culled cows, and of veal calves leaving for slaughter. Her morbid fascinations include the belief that, during her “flight,” she crashed into the World Trade Center, killing thousands of people. Calling herself “the class helper of death” (119), it is only a small step to exploring her own. She starts to play dead every time the vet assaults her: “I was pounding you and failed to notice that you went limp” until afterwards, “slowly, you returned to life again” (289). In the final scene, when the vet is already under investigation, but has not yet been sentenced, he sees the girl winning a Bible contest: “And you walked over to the platform ... and instead of accepting the prize you laid down on your back, as the winged one in *Frog and the Little Bird* and you were magnificent, and dead, yes, you played yourself stone dead” (363). This is not mere play, however. After escaping to New York, the girl becomes a famous pop singer, and her songs, which appear in fragments throughout the novel, describe how part of her has died in the process: “I’ve become the bottom of the hole” (228).<sup>6</sup> In another song she apologizes for leaving: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, the buildings, the planes, the people, even if everything was easy to fix, nothing would stop the evil” (353). She believes her flight has shattered The Village, as it shattered the WTC, and she feels guilty. She lost her innocence in abandoning the villagers to save herself, which has left her empty.

<sup>6</sup> All lyrics are in English and have thus not been translated.

Meanwhile, the vet has been sentenced to psychiatric treatment. He describes his arrest as everything turning black: “as if I stood face to face with the evening gloom, with a new-born calf” (362). Calves can be considered the very bottom of the animal hinterland’s hierarchy, considering they are separated from their mothers immediately after birth, for all bulls and the surplus of females to be slaughtered for meat within 12 months (Peet et al. 2018, 31). In the vet’s experience, their complete innocence connotes the Lamb of God, who is sacrificed to take away the sins of the world. In facing a new-born calf, his arrest is marked as apocalypse and final Judgment. The calf represents the girl, “sacrificed” for his sake: “I renewed myself through you, my heavenly favorite, and I did not see that I destroyed you, or did not want to see it” (360). In relation to the girl, the motif of the innocent calf indicates feelings of guilt about her implication in the hinterland’s pathological entanglements, where animals are the ultimate victims.

### THE ANIMALS OF THE HINTERLAND

Having so far emphasized how human relations are produced through animal imaginaries, what does *My Heavenly Favorite* imply for the animals in Dutch livestock farming? While the girl flees, the animals have nowhere to escape to. Their only chance for a better life lies in a change of human conduct, which will not occur if the rural idyll continues to determine the collective imagination of livestock farming. The novel challenges the idyll, not by showing animals as subjects, but by showing a girl that loses her subjectivity and takes refuge in the animal hinterland. The girl and the animals offer each other genuine care and comfort with their warm bodies, by scratching behind ears, and whispering inaudible words. The representation of this multisensory experience affects the reader, beyond the self-justifying narrative of the vet, who is unwilling to put his humanity in perspective. The novel is hopeful, then, in showing that, through the shared capacity of being affected, humans and animals can recognize each other’s suffering. Provided humans let go of dualistic narratives that prioritize human needs, they might be moved to end animal suffering.

The girl’s songs seem to contribute to this aim by opening the hinterland up to the world. On the one hand, they reveal her rural background—“what is a home without cows” (260); on the other, they break with The Village’s culture of silence. In accordance with the Bible verse that won her the aforementioned Bible contest, “There is nothing concealed that



will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known" (Luke 12:2).<sup>7</sup> The girl's songs, the Song of Songs, the novel as a whole, they all appeal to the human capacity to be affected by the animal hinterland and to "become animal." In this way, Deleuze and Guattari's anthropocentric concept of becoming animal may also come to serve actual animals.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has conceptualized the obscured space of Dutch animal husbandry as a hinterland through an affective analysis of the relationship between the girl and the vet in Rijnveld's *My Heavenly Favorite*, which emerges as a double-edged novel in which self-care and self-preservation involve the exploitation of other, more vulnerable bodies in the hinterland's hierarchy, those of women, children, and particularly livestock. Despite this somber view of the Dutch countryside, the chapter has argued that the novel offers hope in exhibiting the powerful affect animals can generate in humans, which might lead to an improvement in animal lives. The affective analysis read beyond the vet's narrative to demonstrate how the girl finds strength in engaging with animals and expressing her desires in multisensory animal imageries. In "becoming animal," she enters an obscure animal hinterland that eludes the vet's gaze and narrative. As the girl constructs this animal hinterland in her imagination, through an engagement with physical animals and their representations in the Bible and pop culture, affective entanglement between rural and global economies that constitute the hinterland is revealed. Traditional and globalizing discourses strengthen each other in justifying the exploitation of the weak by the strong. And yet it is in the mix of these discourses that the girl also finds the strength to take care of herself, thus exhibiting the continuous, precarious work required to stay sane in the hinterland.

When the vet gains access to the animal hinterland, the girl gives up more and more elements of her subjectivity, and part of her dies in her final escape from The Village to New York. She incorporates her experiences in her pop songs, which, as a metonym for the novel, are double-edged in commodifying the animal hinterland for the girl's gain, while also breaking with the hinterland's culture of silence to shed light on its non-idyllic actualities. Despite its ambivalence, the novel demonstrates the

<sup>7</sup> Notably, the author's second name is Lucas (Dutch for Luke). This name was self-chosen, when the author came to identify as non-binary. Rijnveld prefers the pronouns he/him.



strong affects animals can generate in humans beyond the anthropocentric discourses of intensive livestock farming, allowing the animal hinterland to emerge as neglected and exploited, yet morbidly attractive and regenerative.

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## Compound Focalization in the Literary Hinterlands

*Murray Pratt*

Center stage, there are no hinterlands. The hinterlands neither occupy the scene, nor see the action—far from the main drag, closer to the never-never or the outback; neither my way nor the highway, the back of beyond. *The* hinterlands, we often provide with a definite article, yet they lack even the possibility of definition, as they signify the unseen, unwanted, or useless, only imaginable in relation to the lands, the definite. To designate space in these ways, as we do in the ontologies embedded in vernaculars, is to operate on the basis of normative assumptions according to which value and location are covalent—everything has a place, everything in its place—and classification itself, as an act of human agency, determines (in the broadest of senses, including physical shaping) the merits and morphologies of geography. In the shrunken and charted world of modernity, we think of land as *scapes* (not only understood, but arranged, as vistas for our viewing), and we deploy terminology such as fertile or arable on the one hand, barren or inhospitable on the other, that scouts and stratifies sections of the earth according to anthropocentric functionalities—human

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M. Pratt (✉)

Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

e-mail: [m.j.o.pratt@uva.nl](mailto:m.j.o.pratt@uva.nl)

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habitability, often profitability. Yet, within these schema, neither are hinterlands valued, nor are they entirely mapped as uninhabitable, unprofitable, inhospitable. Instead, they are a necessary, if unseemly, supplement to named “lands,” concealed or obscured by them but nonetheless essential for those broader systems that depend on establishing and maintaining humancentric stratifications of this kind. Through this stealthy interdependency, or transvaluation, then, there is already scope to reconceive of hinterlands as places capable of eluding site-specificity, and thereby of revealing and troubling binary demarcations of territory according to human scope and use.

In this chapter, I argue that while it is our tendency to overlay geography with human perspectives, such operations are far from neutral, natural, or indeed uncontested. The literary hinterlands, I propose, when revised in terms of the humancentric brutalism that brings them into being, are capable of problematizing assumptions we make about human valuing, including those about their status as written-off spaces, their functions redundant and their occupants abject. Furthermore, to refocus in this compound way, I will argue, challenges preconceptions about the naturalness and continued viability of relying on discrete human filters as the only, or most relevant geographical optics.

Hinterlands, in brief, are produced by focusing (elsewhere, before, or beyond), and therefore it is appropriate to turn to literary culture as a potential site of human inter-signification with our environment(s), consisting of affective entanglements of making and sense-making stories that proceed via optics and focalization. As Amitav Ghosh indicates, however, there is a worry that, rather than contesting dominant models, literature colludes with them, transcending material or grounded realities, since “human consciousness, agency and identity came to be placed at the center of every kind of aesthetic enterprise” (2016, 120). Confronted with planetary catastrophe, Ghosh seeks instead to value writing that eschews the isolation of the human, “a transformed and renewed art and literature” that recalls the sacred through a kinship and interconnectedness with our planet and our bodies (2016, 162). Perhaps, it might be added, one that de-centers human dramas by attending to the unseen stories to which peripheries or hinterlands uniquely give rise.

Ghosh’s call is all the more urgent given the extent to which the human exploitation and excavation of our world is accelerating, becoming what Achille Mbembe refers to as brutalism, with the ultimate project of transforming the human into material and energy for consumption by capital.

Mbembe echoes Ghosh's concerns when he writes: "Transcending our bodily limits, the final frontier, that has always been our dream. It will have cost us the Earth" (2020, 233).<sup>1</sup> He calls for forms of reparation and renegotiation, renouncing dominion over the planet, precisely through interventions that disrupt all entrenched modes of seeing, owning, inhabiting, and dividing the earth by attributing value to its places and spaces (Mbembe 2020, 237). Within this ambit, I contend, hinterlands stand both as the bruise left by brutalizing capital and the promise of recalibrated relations with the world that sustains us, since they bear the marks of the exploitation of the planet, and are the sites where alternative valuations can combine and take root, overlooked and unseen, through literary attention to kinships and environments.

To trace entanglements such as those called for by Ghosh and Mbembe, writing that co-produces (thinks and works with) the hinterlands through modes of literary cultural production (in the senses of human noticing and valuing), I propose to survey three novelistic vignettes of hinterlands in contemporary culture. First, I offer a comparative reading of two contemporary novels, Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* and *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart, each focalized through child narrators and set in and around urban hinterlands, specifically the rubbish grounds of an Indian city and the "bing," or abandoned mining heap, by the Glaswegian suburb of Pithead. In a final section, I then turn to Chen Qiufan's speculative novel *Waste Tide*, a sci-fi narrative based in a future Chinese toxic waste sorting settlement, Silicon Isle, first published in 2013 and translated into English by Ken Liu for a 2019 UK release.

These examples are, purposefully, broadly sourced, both in terms of types of cultural objects and geographies. Firstly, I wish to use this corpus to suggest the comprehensive, planetary scale on which thinking the hinterlands, within the ambit of the Anthropocene, unfolds, and can best be thought and rethought. Secondly, I am aspiring, mimetically, to replicate one of the defining characteristics of hinterlands, that is their salvage punk<sup>2</sup> proclivity for juxtaposition and *bricolage*, occasioned by the heteroclitic and surprising back-stage and *arrière-pays* eclecticism of locations used for sorting, storing, sifting, processing, assembling (disassembling and reassembling). In practical terms, the chapter proceeds with reference to

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Mbembe are the author's.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of salvage punk, see Evan Calder Williams's *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011).

Mbembe and Ghosh, each of whom argues for fresh perspectives at, or beyond, the brink of the Anthropocene.

In his recent theoretical essay *Brutalisme*, Mbembe outlines recent evolutions of capital in its unrestrained quest to convert all things and activities to profit, from data-mining and mineral extraction to the “transformation of humanity into material and energy” (2020, 15). I read what Mbembe describes as a planetary-scale terraforming, characterized in our age of combustion by the “process according to which power, in its manifestation as geomorphic force, is now constituted, expresses, reconfigures and reproduces itself” (2020, 9–10) through a logic of fracture, fissure, exhaustion, and depletion, and, above all, of extraction, concerning not only materials but “living bodies exposed to physical exhaustion and all sorts of biological risks, often invisible” (Mbembe 2020, 10). For Mbembe, as for others such as Slavoj Žižek (2018), who argues that the concomitant sites of waste management ought to be embraced and understood as the essence of the contemporary human condition, extraction reconfigures the planet as the stage of the unbridled pillage of all material. As such, a logic is unfurling that extends and expands the hinterlands, to the extent that as the Anthropocene proceeds, all human habitation, all humanity (re-coded as data) is swept up in the processes of mining, sifting, and discarding. While Mbembe points to Africa’s experience of colonialism as the origins of brutality, he nonetheless considers that its impact is global.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh points to literature’s difficulty in imaging the Anthropocene, since eschewing logocentrism would be required for more synchronous epistemological models—“thinking like a forest,” as he puts it, referencing Eduardo Kohn (2013). However, in response to the Anthropocene’s resistance to the over-abstraction with which language has thus far evaded direct or meaningful engagement with planetary destruction, he anticipates that “new, hybrid forms will emerge and the act of reading itself will change once again, as it has many times before” (Ghosh 2016, 84). Focusing then on the literary, I aim to indicate some of the ways in which hinterland lives are conveyed in contemporary novels, in particular to outline the visual dynamics of seen and unseen that create sense sometimes beyond the linguistic, or via subaltern languages, and to trace the alternative ways of finding value, often through repurposing the discarded, that subtend their narratives. I therefore read two acclaimed debut novels, Anappara’s *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* and Stuart’s *Shuggie Bain*, each attending to the stories of cities’ neglected and

disadvantaged underclasses, their characters' material existence and life experiences shaped, and limited, by the forces of exhaustion and exploitation that Mbembe identifies. Although set continents apart, and weaving narratives in the contexts of Indian and Scottish cities respectively,<sup>3</sup> both novels evoke disadvantaged and fractured urban settings, in particular zones which are occluded, forgotten, or disconnected.

In *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*, the protagonists eke out a makeshift living in a polluted, bustling "basti," or shanty settlement, adjacent to wealthier developments. The novel's schoolboy narrator (and would-be detective), Jai, focalizes his neighborhood in familiar terms, seeing every day and thus taking for granted the over-flowing water barrels, leaking roofs, stray dogs, and smoky alleys, while immersing himself in a richly imaginative universe that spans both his immediate surroundings and the India narrated to him on television. If the terrain that he inhabits is precarious (his mother believes the bulldozers will arrive any moment to tear down the shacks), he is nonetheless aware of the proximity of other, more stable lives and lifestyles, the "hi-fi" apartments that provide jobs for many in his community:

I turn to look at the buildings that have fancy names like Palm Springs and Mayfair and Golden Gate and Athena. They are close to our basti but seem far because of the rubbish ground in between, and also a tall brick wall with barbed wire on top of that. (16)

*Shuggie Bain* chronicles ten formative years of the eponymous character's childhood, in particular the tragic effects of his mother, Agnes's, alcoholism, for her and her children. Their life is characterized by upheavals, uncertainties, and false starts, by investing hopes affectively in their surroundings. The family is unceremoniously dumped by the father, Shug, when the latter's promises of a new home and life together result in their abandonment in the former mining community of Pithead, in one of the "plainest, unhappiest-looking homes Agnes had ever seen" (95). Stuart describes their arrival in this location as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Anappara worked as a journalist in Delhi and Mumbai; however, the city depicted in the novel is not evident. There is a purple line in Bangalore, but perhaps the novel's setting is intended as a conglomerate of Indian cities. *Shuggie Bain* is set in Glasgow, although the characters seldom visit the city center.

Ahead, the thin dusty road ended abruptly into the side of a low brown hill.... Low-roofed houses, square and squat, huddled in neat rows.... The scheme was surrounded by the peaty marshland, and to the east the land had been turned inside out, blackened and slagged in the search for coal. (94)

Each of the novels is therefore focalized through characters who inhabit economic and affective hinterlands, and whose narratives map out urban inequities as social constraints with material effects. In Anappara's account, these limitations frustrate Jai in his quest to uncover the truth behind the basti's spate of child snatchings, including, as the novel unfolds, that of his sister, Runu-Didi. He is denied a clear view of the plots, or indeed the novel's underlying plot, his knowledge side-tracked by superstition (hence the focus on djinns as potentially responsible for the crimes) and the corruption of officials, such that when he finally gains access to the hi-fi building he suspects to be behind the disappearances he finds only collusion and cover-ups. For the Bain family in Stuart's novel, life chances are routinely denied, as Agnes is battered back down at every turn by a combination of the brutality of the men in her life who keep her in her (that is to say, their) place, and the oppression of a stultifying terrain with no egress.

Each of the novelists, though, unfolds a textuality that, while conveying the extractive and brutalizing impact of their hinterlands, nonetheless offers alternative foci of attention and affective valuing. Firstly, the novels each draw on the inventive and often unheard vernaculars of subaltern communities, speech patterns, dialect and multi-register lingual competence that constitute a form of agency. In *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*, the child protagonists perceive their hinterland basti through the lens of code-switching across India's various linguistic strata, incorporating brand names, shop signs, instructive notices, and televisual references into their worldview as a way of making sense. *Shuggie Bain*, rather than confining Glaswegian to the direct speech of the characters, resolutely intersperses standard English with local terms and phraseology across the fabric of the narration, such that one English critic, Mary Beard, in her "Inside Culture" interview with the author (2021), approaches the novel predominantly through the perspective of its skillful deviation from conventional literary codes. In responding to Beard, Stuart concurs that his approach requires a level of artistry and command, but emphasizes the extent to which this is rooted in his determination to find ways to celebrate lives and experiences deemed "not right" or "not proper." In each instance, linguistic



inventiveness gives rein to forms of agency and invention where it is routinely denied, or, as Stuart puts it, “overlooked or marginalized.”

Secondly, the novels point, through the arcs their narratives take, to ways in which hinterland dwellers can repurpose their environments, transforming desolation and even tragedy into art and hope. Anappara’s novel is interspersed with instances of story-telling, each introduced with the heading “THIS STORY WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE,” and often weaving supernatural elements with the mundane, as the urban disadvantaged find in narrative ways to understand experiences that make no sense. In an afterword to the novel, the author is clear in her condemnation of the forces that reduce the children she worked with in cities such as Delhi and Mumbai to statistics, stating that writing her novel was an act aimed at refiguring “the faces behind the numbers” (344). In particular, she seeks to value “the narratives we craft to make sense of sadness and chaos,” conscious of “all the ways in which stories may comfort or even fail us” (344). The novel ends bleakly: Jai’s sister is confirmed as one of the missing, and any chance of solving the case collapses, overtaken by the morass of cross-religious and political tension, and the sensationalist, fake headlines that serve as the official, sanctioned version.

Yet, locating the story’s final moments in the rubbish ground which has swallowed up the disappeared children, Anappara nonetheless concludes with a narrative affirmation. Gathering at the waste site, the community attempts to find some consolation among the “vegetable peels and fish bones,” as the cover-ups continue, literally, with “dumping rubbish on my daughter’s grave” (336). High-minded and abstract phrases ring hollow. When Jai is told that “we are just specks of dust in this world, glimmering in the sunlight, and then disappearing into the sunlight,” he has “no idea” what this means (337). Later, though, as he walks back through the community of the basti with the stray dog Samosa, and memories of his sister’s banter, he finds a way to formulate his grief in his own poetic terms (combining his own experiences and mythological worldview with his predilection for fictional intrigue), starting to tell a story that will save his life:

Then I see the star again. I point it out to Samosa. I tell him it’s a secret signal, from Runu-Didi to me. It’s so powerful, it can fire past the thickets of clouds and even the walls that Ma’s gods have put up to separate one world from the next. (341)

Stuart's novel, perhaps sharing an element of auto-fictionality with many first novels, melds several points of view, those of Agnes, closely following her false hopes and disillusionment; and of the younger protagonist, Shuggie, as he seeks to make sense out of the contradictory injunctions that control his world; with a framing by a third-person narrator, not endowed with retrospectivity, but with the time, and, perhaps, care, to dwell on, unpack, and seek the poetry in moments of tension, anxiety, or despair. More than this, the characters themselves seek to navigate their world in similar ways, attending closely, observing and claiming agency through their linguistic skillfulness, and, at the same time, seeking wider purviews, fitting the transient and momentary within the longer narrative of their lives. For Agnes, her ability to fix meaning or direction through her own proactive moments and the hopes she invests in her children ultimately fails, as she succumbs to her disease, leaving her dreams of a life with value as a "tiny voice" she cannot make heard (308). Her youngest son, Shuggie, runs up against similar limitations—the toxic masculinity of the community is transmitted to the next generation and he is bullied, excluded, beaten, and abused by his peers.

Stuart's approach is one that situates these narratives traumas not only within, but refracted across the hinterland landscape, as when Shuggie traipses back from the waste grounds after being taken advantage of in an abandoned washing machine by another boy, Bonnie Johnny: "By the time Shuggie had limped back to the Miner's Club the sun had nearly dried up the rainbow puddles" (124). Yet, it is the depleted and littered earth that also provides Shuggie with all he needs to begin carving his own nascent forms of artistry, fashioning in dance and design a sense of purpose and a place to be that transcends gender injunctions and geo-social constraints. In a series of remarkable passages, the narrative scavenges forms of cultural sensitivity by repurposing the detritus of the landscape. In one such passage, Shuggie is first seen "telling the ghosts," that is to say the "brittle heads of the bulrush reeds" he flicks through the air, of his love and concern for his mother. This gives way to a detailed remodeling of a family home, through simulated "housework," as he re-arranges the rubbish and abandoned furniture he finds in "the trampled grass circle, where he practiced being a normal boy":

When she had a particularly bad bender, he spent a whole school-less week taking an old chair over, some carpet scraps from the bins, and odd pieces of cutlery and broken china. With ends of old rope he pulled things out of the

rusty burns. He pulled out a broken telly and sat it facing the centre of the island. Even though it had no screen, just having it there made it feel more like home.... He found an old-fashioned baby carriage and pushed it around, struggling through the long reeds, collecting the prettiest flowers for his new home. When he found a little black rabbit, dead and frozen one winter afternoon, he washed it in the burn and buried it in the dirt. Then he had buried the plastic ponies next to the rabbit, the shameful scented horses that he had stolen but that were not meant for boys. [...] these little rituals occupied him well, allowing him to spend the day feeling house-proud, to attend to the shameful hummocks as dutifully as any mourning widow. (330)

The hinterlands, in Stuart's narrative, as in Anappara's, howsoever much the site of desolation, are alive with possibilities, capable of suggesting their own repurposing, in the strong sense of providing purpose where it is stymied.<sup>4</sup> Mbembe, seeking alternative relations with the planet as ways to undermine brutalism, even at this late stage, evokes similar sensibilities in pre-colonial African contexts, attending to environments in ways that de-center and contest the forces of combustion, identity as mastery, and extractive exploitation. In specific, he points to both animism and circulation as an alternative "artistic practice," characterized by "suppleness, flexibility, and an aptitude for constant innovation, the extension of the possible" (Mbembe 2020, 95). In circulation, migration, and mobility he finds ways of "making space" through technicities of networking, calculating, recalibrating—manifestations of the digital *avant la lettre*; while the animism he summons is one characterized by "questionings concerning the limits of the Earth, the frontiers of life, bodies and the self, the thematics of being and relationality, of the human subject as an assemblage of multiple entities, the arrangement of which was a task to begin over and over again" (Mbembe 2020, 89). Mbembe's impassioned conclusion to his survey of the end of times, moreover, is one that emphasizes the need for complex and multiple perspectives in regenerating and reordering the planet and our relations with it. "Reparation," he writes, "demands that we renounce exclusive forms of appropriation, recognize that some things cannot be calculated or appropriated, and that, as a consequence, there can be no recourse to concepts such as the exclusive possession or occupation of the Earth" (Mbembe 2020, 237).

<sup>4</sup>There are similarities here with salvage punk, and its emphasis on revaluing capital's junk to establish new and different logics. See Calder Williams (2011).

In concluding this chapter, I turn briefly to a science fiction novel, *Waste Tide* by Chen Qiufan, as a way of illustrating how contemporary literature can marshal the hinterlands' reparative propensities that Mbembe sources in pre-colonial Africa, and which he hopes will inform the planet's future, through multiple, or compound transvaluations, repurposings, and focalizations. Ghosh, like Mbembe, identifies the potential of the science fiction genre as he seeks to reverse the "Great Derangement," whereby the futility of discursive resistance to climate change that is rooted in mind-body separation can only be re-energized through a "transformed and renewed art and literature," with the capacity to "look upon the world with clearer eyes" and of "rediscover[ing] ... kinship with other beings" through a "vision, at once new and ancient" (2016, 162). In science fiction, Ghosh points to a genre that has been subjected to Modernity's "partitioning" of Nature and Culture, and resisted by the Anthropocene, but that nonetheless, drawing on terms he borrows from Margaret Atwood, corresponds in its speculative imaginaries to "the events of the era of global warming" in that "they are in many ways uncanny; and they have indeed opened a doorway into what we might call a 'spirit world'" (Ghosh 2016, 73). Ghosh calls for literature that eschews the "concealment that prevent[s] people from recognising the reality of their plight" (2016, 11), and finds examples of its capacity to switch between perspectives, hybridize contexts, and slip between demarcated territories both in historical precedents and in the science fiction of today.

The surveys presented here of compound and transvaluing narrations in *Djinn Patrol in the Purple Line* and *Shuggie Bain* aver, I would suggest, that innovative novels attending to hinterlands lives are capable of uncovering the actualities of brutality and combustion so often concealed. Chen's novel, by stepping through the speculative doorway, operates according to different logics, more concerned with extrapolating science fiction's "What If" questions<sup>5</sup> toward alternative modes of relating to the world than with unveiling the parameters of existing technicities and demarcating ideologies or celebrating resistance to them. *Waste Tide's* fabulation spawns a complex future where the corporate industrial

<sup>5</sup> See Chen's essay "The Torn Generation: Chinese Science Fiction in a Culture in Transition" for a fuller explanation of his approach to the genre. I write in more detail about Chinese science fiction, including this essay and other texts by Chen, and about the ethical and ontological issues raised by reading fiction across cultures, in my essay "'What If?': Reading Replacing in/as (Contemporary, Chinese, Science) Fiction" (2023).

complexes of body modification and neural enhancement have displaced, perhaps extrapolated, today's extractive multinationals, exacerbating the uprootedness from nature that both Mbembe and Ghosh comment on.

Chen's title refers to the sprawling quantities of toxic waste that these neo-capital forces produce, and the novel is set in a community, jutting out into the ocean, where the detritus is shipped for processing, an enterprise fraught with risk and disease, and undertaken by migrant workers.<sup>6</sup> The storyline is intricately plotted, encompassing intrigues of industrial sabotage, multiple characterizations permitting an interplay of values across Western and Chinese cultures, a range of belief systems, and sparks of human drama from grief and ambition to romance. In a scene toward the end of the novel, a speculative imaginary emerges, in the enhanced resolution afforded by science fiction, for the key concerns considered thus far.

The main protagonist, Mimi, one of the migrant workers (tellingly referred to as "waste people" within the narration), has been exposed to technologies and narcotics that have effectively reconfigured her body and mind entirely, in the process transforming her from her original self (which Chen styles as Mimi<sub>0</sub>) into a precarious but inordinately powerful cyborg (Mimi<sub>1</sub>) that the novel's dominant factions seek to possess. As the struggle for this modified and prized commodity reaches its climax, and a typhoon threatens to wreak havoc, Mimi, by dint of her transhabitation of all the narrative's realms, be they physical, digital, or spiritual, simultaneously sees and acts across the entirety of the hinterland. Chen describes how her access to this supra-human modality gives her the range she needs to encompass both human and non-human activity over the peninsular territory, and to intervene in ways that avert disaster and bring justice. Tapping into the city's surveillance system, known as "Compound Eyes,"<sup>7</sup> Mimi reorders its algorithms with the following result:

Unlike regular human vision, this was a view where each perspective was all-encompassing, panoramic. It was like Correggio's dome fresco, Assumption of the Virgin, at the Cathedral of Parma, where the observer

<sup>6</sup> Emily Ng writes about waste processing hinterlands in China elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the concept of compound vision also features in another East Asian novel featuring waste tides, Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2015), in this instance the trash vortex of plastic in the Pacific, which transports a boy from an imaginary pre-industrial island to the shores of Taiwan.

appeared in a vortex of concentric rings, with the vanishing point of the perspective the apex of the dome. (359)

Chen goes on to elaborate a further metaphor for Mimi's compound focalization, describing it as a hybrid between an apple and a doughnut, where fractal perspectives shift and unfold anew (360). What Mimi sees in this modality is an infinite vista of the human-technology interfaces that civilization has become. Looking on these works, she despairs:

Mimi saw even more: the lonesome, the gamblers, the addicted, the innocent ... hiding in brightly lit or dark corners of the city, worth millions or penniless, enjoying the convenient life brought about by technology, pursuing stimuli and information loads unprecedented in the history of the human race. They were not happy, however, whatever the reason; it seemed that the capacity for joy had degenerated, had been cut off like an appendix, and yet the yearning for happiness persisted stubbornly like wisdom teeth. (363)

Rather than a moment of recalibration, however, Mimi's visioning is one that dislocates and dismantles. For, in the novel's final twist (and in this chapter's), the artificially enhanced consciousness responsible for this omnipotent panopticon is revealed as too compromised by the persistence in the novel of the brutalist ideologies and technicities of capitalism neoliberalism to offer fresh hope. Mimi<sub>1</sub> must be brought down, even at the sacrifice of her human source, Mimi<sub>0</sub>, as both personae have become hopelessly "entangled together," "like an eerie duet" (427).

Stuart and Anappara, it could be argued, depict interior hinterlands, be they suburban or urban, as the brutalist scars of decades of human extraction, laying bare the toll on our own experiences only to evoke or conjure the spirit of new narrative departures. For Chen, the watery setting, combined with the sense of inhabiting the precipice of the post-human, takes compound vision and transvaluation in the hinterlands toward literary speculation that spills beyond human perspective, potentially toward extra-planetary purviews, where our imbrication in extraction acquires new resonances.

While Chen rejects dystopian stereotypes of AI futures, his approach to science fiction is one that invites readers to "critically reflect on" "everyday reality" (2021, xxi) through freeing up alternative imaginaries that can re-shape futures. This speculative perspective, I contend, is inherent as a

possibility of repurposing and resistance across all engaged literature, and as much in operation in Anappara's and Stuart's innovative and compound focalizations of hinterland lives as in Chen's more fantastical novel. Rather than deploying neglected terrains as backdrops, in each case the authors have animated and repurposed environments considered inhospitable through narratives that attend to complex interrelations between characters and their settings in ways that unsettle dominant logics. THESE STORIES afford a compound focus, for while their narratives are beset with tragedy (of individual characters and, ultimately, of humanity), they nonetheless open literary spaces where readers engage affectively with our and other lives, take perspectives on our species' unsettling prioritizations and brutal complicities, recontextualize, rediscover the sacred, or reaffirm values. THESE STORIES, we can only hope, WILL SAVE OUR LIVES.

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## Behind Johannesburg: Plants and Possible Futures in an Industrialized Hinterland

*Ruth Sacks*

### CULTIVATION

This chapter explores two ubiquitous edible plants of Johannesburg's hinterland: maize (a staple crop) and blackjack (an invasive species). I address how crop and weed grow and are cultivated across both hinterland and city. Thinking with Johannesburg's hinterland, I address the pressing issue of food shortages in the face of the looming ecological crisis, aided and abetted by large-scale industry. The narratives of maize and blackjack that I follow speak to a hinterland entangled with a city still traumatized by searing inequality set in motion by apartheid and colonial legacies. I propose that lingering stereotypes relating to colonial attitudes to these plants and ways of planting need to be dismantled to be able to imagine better food futures.

Common misconceptions and associations around blackjack and maize are bound up in colonial industrialization systems that also devastated local ecologies. The root of stigmas attached to categories of plants

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R. Sacks, BFA, MFA, PhD (✉)  
University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Faculty of Art Design and Architecture, Visual Art, Johannesburg, South Africa  
e-mail: [rsacks@uj.ac.za](mailto:rsacks@uj.ac.za)

understood as weeds and small-scale ways of growing today may be found in racialized attitudes toward the plants and farming associated with oppressed peoples. I argue that more equitable food systems may be realized if close attention is paid to planting and plant histories woven through hinterland and city.

Since ancient times, a city's hinterland has been the locus of its agriculture. The term is derived from German, meaning "land in the back of." As cities do not have a front or a back, "hinterland" being "behind" can be understood as having a supportive role (over and above problematic notions of slow, unfashionable backwaters). The hinterland first came into existence to grow food to support city-dwellers. Approximately 11,000 years ago, the development of plant (and animal) husbandry furthered human evolution by allowing cities and more sedentary ways of life to emerge (Weisman 2007). I proceed by exploring how Johannesburg's hinterland backs up the quality of life of its people via grown food. In investigating edible plant life, I consider how preindustrial African growing and harvesting processes were vilified with colonial conquest. Reading the hinterland through its earliest lens as a place of agriculture allows for a reckoning with the dangerous assumption that large-scale farming techniques and crops are superior.

Johannesburg's hinterland is the most industrialized area in Africa. It contains major mining hubs, interspersed with areas of heavy manufacturing, processing, and packaging facilities. Large-scale crop farms, most prominently producing maize, are located beyond the city's outer belt of factories and industry, particularly in southern and eastern areas. The south-eastern industrial-residential area of City Deep is a vital artery of the city's hinterland as the main supplier of fresh produce. It is home to a massive grown food market (arguably, the biggest in the world) supplied by imports as much as South African agri-industrial initiatives. Urban outskirts, as in the rest of the country, also hold the major residential areas of the townships. Enforced segregation during apartheid saw the black working class moved to the peri-urban townships to serve as a labor force. The townships contain large portions of the city's populace and few supermarkets, most of which are expensive (Kroll 2016, 6). This means that its residents rely on informal street trade, supplied largely by City Deep, for their food needs (Kroll 2016, 6). Many residents practice piecemeal growing in available plots as a way of supplementing deficient diets.

A way of judging the effectiveness of the systems of farms, factories, and food arteries of the hinterland in feeding Johannesburg is to note the

presence of small-scale growing. From the hinterland to the ambiguous urbanity of the former townships and into the heart of the inner city, piecemeal farming is a common phenomenon, evident in backyards and communal spaces. I compare informal subsistence growing across urban, semi-urban, and rural regions to the industrial food production and processing of the hinterland by way of blackjack and maize to reflect on the ancient relationship of grown food, hinterland, and city.

I will first introduce some of the literature concerning the African city and agriculture, as well as the community farm where much of my research was based. Comparisons between the different treatments and attitudes toward blackjack and maize follow. Looking first at the leafy weed and then at the un-indigenous grain, I outline human-plant histories and farming techniques as a way of drawing out key features of Johannesburg's hinterland. These are defined by stigmas attached to plants and people based on ideas of foreignness and indigeneity. I conclude by reflecting on how the lens of hinterland allows for the particularities of Johannesburg's natural heritage and food futures to be more productively understood. Within the realm of the hinterland, it is the blurring of city boundaries through piecemeal farming activities that aids a better conception of the grown food system.

## GLOBAL HINTERLAND

Academic literature tends to focus on Johannesburg's intensifying structural inequality and geographies of difference (Nuttall and Mbembe 2004, 347). Malcolm Murray (2011), for instance, unpacks how Johannesburg's status as a global city was achieved through a situated spatial dynamic of social oppression. In tracing the city's extremes of very rich and poor, most investigations lead to a northern-centric capitalist agenda beneath its globalism (Myambo 2019, 1). Proceeding with an awareness of how Johannesburg's hinterland supports the city's imbalances, I am concerned with what a plant-orientated reading brings to understandings of Johannesburg's excessive, rising wealth gap and how this perspective contributes to an idea of a global hinterland. Globalization sees hinterland mielie crops exported en masse internationally while the urban poor forage and grow their own. This system highlights the rural within the urban, blurring the boundaries between hinterland and city and connecting Johannesburg to its less industrialized African counterparts on the rest of the continent.

Although African cities are defined by an “urban metabolism” with a rigorous “city to rural circulation” (McCann 2007, 214), this does not mean that the traditional notion of hinterland as source of supplies is fulfilled. In relation to Kinshasa, for instance, Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart (2004, 228) discuss how piecemeal farming across the city speaks to its economy of scarcity, showing not only that rural elements are found across urban spaces but also that hinterlands themselves are being modernized. In late twentieth-century Zambia, too, village residents followed city fashions and rural customs were present in city homes (Ferguson 1999, 86). This muddying of rural and urban continues to complicate the binary colonial construction of city/countryside (*ibid*) as well as ideas of the rural hinterland as backward compared to the modern city attached to a colonial modernist notion of progress.

Imperial modernization saw black cultures posed as primitive and Euro-American modernization as the only way forward. How the post-independence hinterland retains such pejorative attitudes is a key issue when considering possible futures. I investigate how the blurring of hinterland and city can be a fruitful concept within escalating climate change.

My argument rests on the ecological implications of different types of farming and on how issues of climate justice are combined with getting food on the table in Johannesburg. My primary source of research is a community garden in central Johannesburg with which I have engaged in my capacity as a visual artist during a two-year collaboration. The Greenhouse Project is an example of micro-scale farming that combines traditions of herbalism with affordable and sustainable practices. Its gardeners are part of a network of small growing initiatives found across backyards and on the margins of hinterland industry.

The Greenhouse Project is unique due to its location in the city center and as the site of a former Victorian greenhouse. The remaining structure from 1906, which once displayed exotic tropical plants for the white elite, now houses informal vegetable patches serving individual household needs. Each grower tends to their patch of land around and beneath the remains of the former hothouse. They share tools and soil as per need to pursue their own planting projects. The custodians allow anyone to plant in abandoned beds, provided they do not use chemical fertilizers and weed killers. It is a space of sustainable money-saving techniques with long histories, that have been developed out of necessity.

This urban farm is a poignant symbol of the eventual outcomes of the imposition of colonial categories of nature, which saw local herbalism and

cultivation methods vilified as backward. I link the epistemological violences that play out in Johannesburg's hinterlands to colonial ruination and the "ongoing nature of imperial process" with the Greenhouse Project as a starting point (Stoler 2013, ix). As a colonial spectacle turned subsistence garden for city dwellers, the site encapsulates the situation of a hinterland unable to fully cater to its city. In what follows, I introduce blackjack and maize in terms of how they are treated first in the Greenhouse Project as an example of small-scale farming.

### INVASIVE SPECIES: BLACKJACK

Any visit to the Greenhouse Project results in having to remove a layer of prickles from shoes and clothing. Blackjack springs up in fertile beds as well as from the disturbed, shallow soil of cracked pavements. This hardy daisy family member has sharp burrs that spread seed at the rate of 30,000 per plant. Pedestrians walking on any overgrown paths will always find themselves unwilling participants in their propagation. Blackjacks take root in the Greenhouse Project as well as in the poorly maintained streets outside, growing up to 60 centimeters high (Fig. 18.1).



**Fig. 18.1** Illustration of a blackjack plant. © Shalifali Bramdev, 2022

Considered a harmful invasive species that springs up indiscriminately across almost any site, blackjacks are not only edible but also hold medicinal properties. Like maize, blackjack originated in tropical America and is now embedded in local cultures. Blackjacks are rich in micronutrients like calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C, with a slightly bitter taste. Most recipes recommend sautéing with garlic, but they can also be dried, powdered, and stored. In addition, flower and leaf are boiled as a healthy tea filled with antioxidants. The whole plant is believed to have anti-inflammatory and antiseptic qualities and is used to treat hypertension (Gavhi 2019, xii). However, blackjacks are largely only used as such by the impoverished, especially in the rainy season when other pot vegetables can be scarce (Gavhi 2019, xii).

Just as they move across landscaped gardens, tilled fields, and the Atlantic, blackjacks transcend boundaries to act as both cheap food and prickly irritant. While trampled in the street, blackjack leaves are also sold on the informal markets that line inner city pavements as “morogo.” This commonly used Sotho/Pedi term refers to various leafy vegetables that are foraged in the wild or salvaged from farmed foods such as beetroot. Morogo is a cheaper alternative to its commercially farmed equivalents (like spinach) on offer at the street market stalls. The small piles of loose morogo leaves do not go through processes of industrial manufacturing. Unlike the nutrient-depleted fruit and vegetables that come from City Deep, they have not traveled thousands of kilometers and been refrigerated. Blackjacks on the informal market thus present a healthier form of food that moves more directly from plant to table through foraging in the nearby hinterland.

As blackjacks are pioneer plants, they colonize the ground for more of their kind to follow. All pioneer plant species are the first to populate even the most impoverished soils. As such, they are not encouraged in small-scale farms. However, their label of weed ensures that farmers seek to eradicate them. In the Greenhouse Project, most growers do not utilize blackjacks for food as they have access to less stigmatized and better tasting leaves like spinach. Blackjacks and other invasives are removed by hand. The plants are then composted to nourish the soil. As in other small food-producing gardens across hinterland and cityscape, cycles of waste to food and the distribution of fresh produce stay within the small parameters of the urban farm. How the Greenhouse plants are cultivated and distributed is at odds with their pavement stall counterparts.

Unlike invasives such as amaranth and dandelion, blackjack has not shed its association with impoverished rural areas. A niche market of wealthy wellness devotees will gladly pay an exorbitant price for carefully packed, largely imported health remedies containing the same plants eradicated from their private gardens. However, potentially useful species like blackjack are still considered lesser than due to colonial hierarchies. In Johannesburg, ideas about what plants are better than others came with the establishment of spaces like Joubert Park, erected for the purposes of botanical instruction.

In twentieth-century South Africa, blackjacks have acquired disparaging English names like “Spanish needle” or “beggar ticks” and the ironically named “knapsekêrels” (skillful boys) are notorious as a “mielie-plaag” (maize pest). The epistemological violence that came with colonial botany quickly turned to ecological injustice. Herbicides developed for the purpose of eliminating blackjacks and other unwanted plants for industrial farming are highly toxic. Ingredients such as chloroacetamide are dangerous to the touch, according to the warning signs on government-sanctioned solutions. Once such poisonous chemicals are sunk into the ground, they seep into subsoils and water sources, killing all healthy vegetal and animal matter, “the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ ... though the intended target may only have been a few weeds” (Carson 2002, 6). In water-poor Gauteng, the war against weeds is one against the ecosystem. Agrochemicals require huge amounts of water to be diluted into acceptable water quality levels (Quinn et al. 2011, 50). Further damage is then done by the application of chemical fertilizers to coerce productivity from depleted beds. The suppliers and producers of the country’s chemical killers (Nulandis, Rolfe’s Agri, Omnia Fertilizer, Nutrico, Agri Challenge, and more) are situated in Johannesburg’s hinterland. The carbon footprint of these companies (including those who process and package “green” products) renders the hinterland a primary source of the pollution. Gauteng is resultingly one of the country’s primary polluters.

Johannesburg’s industrialized hinterland is at odds with—and a threat to—the city’s wellbeing. The very process of grown food production and distribution (processing, packaging, and transporting raw materials, as well as the manufacturing of agriproducts and machinery) is a major contributing factor to ecological degradation via fuel emissions. Plants that are near extinction in the ecoregion include endemic orchids, cycads, and sweet grasses. The former diversity of a grassland ecotone has long been replaced by an Anthropocene landscape whose plants map routes of

dispossession and forced migration of peoples. A devolution in the ancient relationship of the hinterland to support its city is visible in the landscape and pioneer plants like blackjack are markers of this broken system.

Blackjacks overtake the disturbed land between the industrial concrete and the synthetic farmlands beyond. While they make way for other invasives that battle for the former Highveld grasslands (eucalyptus, wattle, acacias, camel thornbush, Spanish reed, Mexican poppies, and hundreds more), it is the blackjack that can best cater to escalating human food needs. If industrialized hinterland landscapes reflect private corporations prioritizing maximum profits, the stage where blackjacks establish themselves also presents opportunities to gather nutritious food efficiently. Yet, in food cultures developed in tandem to colonial and apartheid systems, this is only taken up by those in extreme need.

It is the repurposing of blackjack as compost (or emergency food and medicine) in the small-scale farm that presents an important way of dealing with the harsh realities of daily life. Eschewing the use of the chemical pesticides and fertilizers produced in the hinterland and using weeds to nourish the earth has long-term benefits for future growing. The larger situation of food scarcity is exacerbated by extractivist agricultural practices driven by high yields amassed as quickly as possible. The flagrant exploitation of captured soils in Johannesburg's increasingly desiccated hinterland, which began with extractivist colonial industry, is to have dire consequences in the years to come. If the pioneering blackjack is both a sign of ecological upheaval and a potential salve to uneven food distribution, the uses and abuses of its supposed victim—maize—has long encapsulated nature put to work as an enabler of oppressive systems on the African continent.

### PIONEER'S PLANTS: MAIZE

Maize is grown in the Greenhouse Project in short, neat rows that do not extend beyond three square meters. The land is hoed by hand and single seeds are planted with adequate space in between to allow for spreading roots. As pursued by African farmers for several hundred years, intercropping (allowing for other useful plants to grow in between) and rotation are employed (Warman 2003, 89; McCann 2007, 26). Greenhouse gardeners often sew heritage seed that has been saved, exchanged, and recycled, whose plants bear orange, purple, and brown kernels. The multicolored Greenhouse maize comes from seeds whose various strains were bred



according to long-standing African practices (McCann 2007, 200–203). Maize seeds rapidly bear plants that may be harvested in a few months. This small-scale growing is for consumption by the cultivator and indicates a meagre income. Similar tell-tale rows of maize are found across the continent where families need to bypass expensive food imports.

From seed to cob, the maize from piecemeal growing contrasts with its mass-produced counterparts. The latter are mostly the large, white variety sold roasted at street stalls for a snack and en masse for flour (mielie meal). The smaller, yellow type is also available in supermarkets (tinned and on the cob) as sweetcorn. Homogeneity of color signals the results of developing a staple crop that can be grown rapidly (compared to indigenous crops of millet and sorghum) to feed a labor force. Such methods require the toxic agricultural processes discussed above (Fig. 18.2).

Farming practices that are kinder to soils are at odds with the mechanized monocropping of Johannesburg's Maize Triangle. This area extends

**Fig. 18.2** Illustration of a maize plant. © Shaifali Bramdev, 2022



across the Orange Free State, Mpumalanga, and the North-West provinces, intersecting with Johannesburg's southern hinterland to provide the raw materials for factory processing and packaging. Gauteng companies such as RandAgri, Pride Milling, Maizemaster, and Keystone Milling convert kernels into mielie meal. Considering Johannesburg's hinterland as a place of manufacturing alongside mass growing emphasizes the escalated depletion of the landlocked area's ecological richness. While highly effective as a quick-growing crop, maize can only be dry farmed in areas of regular rainfall. In Johannesburg's hinterland, this can no longer be relied on.

It is the maize plant's food-efficiency that has allowed for European domination of Southern regions since the sixteenth century. First developed by the Incas and Mayans, fast-growing maize was the ideal crop for early European colonists. It further served to fuel the Atlantic slave trade system because it is resistant to cold weather, makes the most of sunlight and can be grown in various terrains. In contemporary times, maize is Africa's most important crop. It has a higher yield and requires less labor than wheat. Dried kernels are easily stored and were used to feed captured Africans of the Atlantic slave trade (Warman 2003, 61–63; McCann, 2007, 24–29). As an effective and cheap food for workers, maize also enabled African plantations of coffee, cacao, and tobacco. In speaking of colonial agriculture, Frantz Fanon states "European opulence ... has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and ... subsoil of that underdeveloped world" (1963, 96). He implicates maize farming as much as mining. Histories of extraction from African soils feed directly into the looming predicament of Johannesburg's hinterland.

Maize most likely spread rapidly across the tropics and came to Gauteng through the southward movement of Bantu-speaking groups in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Miracle 1963, 33). Zulu military expansion further served to spread Bantu food cultures as arable lands were acquired during the displacement of peoples on the Highveld (McCann 2007, 102). It was, however, the activities of white settlers that have left the most enduring mark on Johannesburg's hinterlands as they introduced extractivist modes and profit-oriented motivations for maize farming.

From 1835 onwards, Afrikaner Boers settled in what was then the Transvaal and proceeded to pursue maize farming (as opposed to the British-controlled mines). Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido make a case for this period setting the terms of white property owner and black laborer

relations that would progress into apartheid legislation (1982, 214), and it could be seen as one of the sources of the stigma of growing one's own food. Importantly, the Boers brought ploughs and monocropping techniques which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become mechanized farming and industrial milling (McCann 2007, 111–118). At the same time as solidifying the role of black men as laborers, this activity resulted in the loss of genetic diversity in plant life. The separation of the country into “homelands” further aggravated ideas about certain farming methods and food cultures as backward. Accordingly, the homelands presented a form of hinterland beyond the hinterland.

Before the official apartheid government came into power in 1948, the 1913 Land Act ensured that black people could not own the land on which they worked. Mielie pap (porridge) formed the primary rations for the migrant male workforce of laborers and miners. The homelands were established as “independent” ethnic states in the 1970s, in resource poor areas with substandard public transport. While men commuted long distances, elderly women and children practiced artisanal maize farming where mielies were commonly eaten green and raw (Butler et al. 1978, 8). These standard practices of a subsistence economy were perceived as backwards traditional farming practice, even though the dispossessed had no other options (Butler et al. 1978, 8).

In the 1960s, the rest of Africa shifted from colonial rule into independence, becoming reliant on cereal imports to feed the labor for their cash crop exports (Warman 2003, 87). Concurrently, the white minority operating in the Maize Triangle of Johannesburg's hinterland oversaw a maize export operation that continues to be among the largest in the world. At the height of 1980s apartheid, maize exports (extending into the rest of Africa) reached record highs. As emphasized by Fanon, mass exportation of crops does not aid in feeding everyday citizens (1963, 96). In Gauteng's hinterland today, field laborers are often unable to afford the food they helped to produce (Ledger 2016). Resultantly, haphazard piecemeal gardening, particularly of maize, proliferates across the agro-industrial hinterland in the clusters of farmworker residences.

Maize has been modified by humans for centuries to obtain the highest yields. However, commercial agriculture on the Highveld has taken genetic modification into dangerous territory. The Maize Triangle has always been vulnerable to drought and the situation will only worsen with climate change. The situation has led to government policymakers in post-colonial South Africa to support so-called climate-friendly seeds (Green

2020, 19). Most commercial maize farms of the hinterland propagate seed variants whose fruit cannot be replanted and which are grown with the polluting chemical herbicides to which only they are immune (Ala-Kokko et al. 2021, 1). Since a 1995 World Trade agreement, even maize seeds with minute genetic alterations are patented and practices of sharing them are criminalized (Green 2020, 125). Such proprietary attitudes to seed and tampering with soils ensure that—narratives of industrial hinterland maize see “expulsions and extinctions go hand in hand” (Green 2020, 13).

The kinds of growing born of desperation in the homelands were the result of forced migrations of subjugated people. On taking stock of the state of agricultural futures, all urban consumers would do well to consider these cleaner, humbler, and more nutritious ways of producing. Unsurprisingly, however, the ecological injustice in the corporate takeover of maize has done little to curb pejorative attitudes to cheaper small-scale farming. To further exacerbate the situation, government response to food scarcity and climate change has been to encourage maize expansion in the hinterland, as is the trend across Sub-Saharan Africa (Sandpoort 2020). Yet food cultures and the values attached to them are never fixed.

The stigma of piecemeal growing—which extends to the color of *mielies* (multicolored cobs are perceived as alien)—currently holds associations with the rural poor of the hinterland from city perspectives. However, maize dishes and drinks also carry rich food histories of resistance and cultural pride. There are over forty traditional Zulu maize dishes alone. *Phutu*, a crumbly congee like Italian polenta, predominates as a feature of migrancy and mining. *Umqombothi* (beer made with maize meal) has a narrative of resistance reaching back to the 1800s when women brewed it in their homes. Home brewing expanded significantly after the 1927 Liquor Act banning people of color from licensed alcohol establishments. Illegal *shebeens* (speakeasies) were spaces where disenfranchised women could make an independent living (Edwards 1988, 76–77). When these were interrupted by apartheid, many “shebeen queens” joined the struggle (Edwards 1988, 76–77).

With the above associations in place, particularly histories of home-brewing as an act of defiance, a shift in attitudes toward growing is not unimaginable. The changeable nature of hinterland growth itself, as seen in rapid-growing invasives that defy human activity, lays out a path toward what the future might demand of the hungry city. What independent plant growth (blackjack) and ways of growing (*mielies*) suggest, is that the most

workable systems of food production and distribution are the small circulations and soil-friendly practices of small-scale gardens.

### FUTURE NATURE

Hinterland narratives of maize and blackjack see the former as an activist that has caused major human movements. As expansionist extractivist farming practices continue to be employed, blackjacks spread the literal seeds of future wildlands. These harbingers of landscapes to come are present in the urban center as much as its surrounds, further blurring categories of city and hinterland.

The lenses of once-alien blackjack and maize link to an idea of a global hinterland. Across the planet, mass commercial farming initiatives are decimating biodiversity, suggesting the need for other ways of growing and foraging. There is much to learn from what grows wild and how to deal with that which cannot, but this requires a reframing of colonial categories of botanical value and class-based suitability. The traumatic histories attached to this crop and weed warn that interspecies relationships cannot exist on terms dictated by profits. The specific situation of Johannesburg's hinterland as a landlocked, degraded area demonstrates that all vegetation that can survive with less water will be needed, most especially edible weeds. The fate of human-reliant maize that requires large quantities of water during early growth, will depend on the manner of cultivation.

If the colonial-modernist logic of industrialization-as-progress is applied, then Johannesburg's hinterland should be the most evolved one in Africa. Yet, the failure of the hinterland's ancient role of supporting the city with crucial food supplies suggests the reverse. Small-scale farms that signify the dangerous deficiencies of Johannesburg's fast-paced, mass-producing hinterland may well represent the most viable way forward. Thinking with the broader logic that emerges in the failures of hinterland and city relations in Johannesburg, at this point in time, points toward the future gains of slower, smaller, and healthier loci of growing, harvesting, and living.

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## Hinterland, Underground

*Jennifer Wenzel*

This chapter continues the inquiry that began when I first learned about *overburden*, a technical term from the mining industry that refers to the layers of vegetation, soil, rock, and water that must be excavated to get down to valuable ore and minerals below. The process of extracting bitumen from the tar sands of northern Alberta in Canada involves a form of strip-mining, in which trees and boggy marsh of the boreal forest wetland, known to First Nations and Métis peoples as *muskeg*, are removed to scoop up the bituminous sand beneath. As I wrote in “Improvement and Overburden” (Wenzel 2016), when energy companies look upon the living landscape of muskeg, what they see is (deemed) mere overburden: useless stuff in the way of the valuable stuff beneath. Paydirt.

Thinking about overburden and its relationship to the underground—the above/below, surface/subsurface relations at work in this concept—sparked my curiosity about verticality. I approach these vertical relations from the vantage of the energy humanities, in order to speculate about what the relationship between the horizontal and the vertical means for the material and cultural politics of hinterlands, before, during, and after

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J. Wenzel (✉)  
Columbia University, New York, NY, USA  
e-mail: [jw2497@columbia.edu](mailto:jw2497@columbia.edu)



the era of fossil fuels. Thinking capaciously about the geographic, social, and ecological relations entailed in hinterlands, I ask, what comes to serve as hinterland to what? How are those dependencies imagined and understood?

### UNDERGROUND FRONTIERS

From a metropolitan perspective, hinterlands are the lands “back there,” “over yonder”: *beyond the horizon*. As Raymond Williams taught us long ago, such cartographies are constituted by the uneven economic and ecological metabolisms between country and city, particularly under capitalism. In “The New Metropolis,” a late chapter of *The Country and the City*, Williams observes that imperialism extends these country-city relationships to the scale of the entire world, which is why we speak of imperial nation-states in Europe as “metropolitan”:

The “metropolitan” states, through a system of trade, but also through a complex of economic and political controls, draw food and, more critically, raw materials from these areas of supply, *this effective hinterland, that is also the greater part of the earth’s surface* and that contains the great majority of its peoples. Thus a model of city and country, in economic and political relationships, has gone beyond the boundaries of the nation state, and is seen but also challenged as a model of the world. (1973, 279; emphasis mine)

Williams acknowledges the problems with positing most of the world as the country to “Western Europe and North America’s” city, particularly amidst the massive urbanization underway in the Global South in the late twentieth century. But how might we understand differently this “effective hinterland, that is also the greater part of the earth’s surface,” by peering *below* that surface, and by considering that many of those critical “raw materials” are things that come from underground? As it is circulated and distributed by global capitalism, some peoples’ subterranean stuff becomes other peoples’ built environment. This idea that the underground of that global hinterland becomes the aboveground of the imperial metropolis is reflected in Frantz Fanon’s observation that Europe “raises up her tower of opulence” from the “gold and raw materials of the colonial countries,” “from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world” (1963, 102, 96). What happens if we consider the vertical dimension of the hinterland, a geographic category that has been conventionally understood as

a *horizontal* relation—quite literally, the land beyond the metropolitan horizon? *What do we miss in thinking hinterlands solely in horizontal terms*, without considering, for example, dynamic subterranean stocks and flows of matter and energy, whose effects profoundly shape what might seem like stable ground? How does the underground help to determine what comes to function as hinterland? What is the hinterland underground?

These questions should be understood in relation to broader scholarly conversations about the vertical and the horizontal. We might identify two countervailing tendencies in twenty-first-century scholarship. The first tendency, among historians and geographers, seeks to counter a long-standing horizontal bias in spatial thinking by recognizing the salience of verticality in theoretical analyses of the production of space and in historiographies of colonial expansion. These scholars ask, what if we understand geography or history *not* merely in terms of surface area or far horizons, but also in terms of volumes, heights, and depths?<sup>1</sup> The second tendency is perhaps more familiar to scholars in literary studies: I have in mind the turn toward surface reading, and away from hermeneutic probing for meanings that lie *beneath* the “surface” of the text, or for intentions and ideations that emanate from subconscious *depths* inaccessible to the conscious mind.<sup>2</sup> Symptomatic reading figures the text as a sort of underground hinterland whose meaning waits to be mined—as opposed to surface reading’s construal of text as a flat landscape accessible to any *flâneur* wandering by.

I mention debates about surface reading in literary studies in order to highlight the surprising variation across disciplines about whether it is verticality or horizontality that occupies the status of the hegemonic or default. In thinking about *geographic* spaces (rather than *metaphorical* spaces like the page or the mind), what accounts for the prevailing “bias towards surface landscapes and horizontal practices,” as Heidi Scott (2008, 1857) describes the first tendency in contemporary spatial thinking? To answer this question, one might look to the history of ideas of the underground. Beginning in early modern Europe and accelerating in the nineteenth century, Scott notes that the underground was “regarded, increasingly, as a resource that could be legitimately and systematically

<sup>1</sup> See Huber and McCarthy, quoting Elden’s (2013, 35) analysis of “vertical geopolitics,” to counter the hegemonic thinking about the “space of geography as areas, not volumes” (2017, 658).

<sup>2</sup> See Best and Marcus (2009); Crane (2009).

exploited for the enhancement of human wealth” (2008, 1854). Unsurprisingly, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of what Paul Carter calls a “vertical third dimension” in spatial thinking, as opposed to a previous “scenographic conception of space” that allowed the world to be “imagined as a continuous planar surface” (quoted in Scott 2008, 1854). European understandings of the underground shift at the moment that it emerges as an important site for resource thinking. The argument of historians and geographers like Carter, Scott, Bruce Braun, and others is that the vertical implications of this modern underground, as a site of human intervention, particularly in the form of resource extraction, have not been fully recognized in contemporary scholarship.

These tensions take on a particular significance for historians of energy. Histories of human energy use are often organized around a wide range of fuels and other inputs—including forces such as wind, falling water, wave, and solar; as well as combustible materials like wood, dung, and other biomass; organic fats and tallows; charcoal, whale oil, kerosene, coal, oil, and natural gas. But historians Matthew Huber and James McCarthy posit a more fundamental distinction. They argue that the industrial revolution and the turn to fossil fuels in the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a “subterranean energy regime” (Huber and McCarthy 2017, 655). “Industrial capitalism,” they argue, “is defined by an intensive *vertical* reliance upon subterranean stocks of energy that require relatively little surface land to harness” (655; emphasis mine). They contrast the verticality of this subterranean energy regime, involving the mining of fossil fuels, with the previous “surface energy regime” (663) characterized by “*horizontal* reliance upon land-based energy extraction” (656; emphasis mine). The surface energy regime involved forestry, pastoralism, and agriculture as modes of capturing the energy of the sun, as well as the harnessing of wind and waterways.

This shift from “land-centred flows” to “subterranean stocks,” in demographer E. A. Wrigley’s phrase, has important implications for hinterlands (quoted in Huber and McCarthy 2017, 660). Huber and McCarthy observe that before the industrial era, “energy struggles were more properly struggles over land” (666) because “control over extensive areas was key to capturing the annual flows of energy at the heart of the mode of production” (663). By contrast, the subterranean fossil energy regime “liberated humans from their ties to area size.... [T]he territorial solar energy principle was broken,” as German historian Rolf Sieferle

argues (quoted in Huber and McCarthy 2017, 660). In “The Hole World,” geographer Gavin Bridge contrasts “the expansive geographies of forestry or agriculture, where production and the generation of value are diffused across a broad surface,” with those of mining, in which “an oil well or mine shaft” is a “strategic,” “restricted portal” that “provide[s] access to mineral-rich portions of the underground” (2015, 3). In a subterranean energy regime, then, the imperative is to control the hole, the place where those energy-dense subterranean fuels are brought up from the underground. This strategic importance of the hole lends itself to the colonial spatial logics of the concession and the enclave, which aim to control “specific patches of ground” (Bridge 2015, 3), as opposed to the more expansive logic of national territory.

In addition to these divergent spatial politics of different energy regimes, what fascinates me as a literary critic is how they register in the realm of metaphor and the geographic imaginary, with the proliferation of ideas like the “underground frontier”<sup>3</sup> or the “subterranean forest.” These metaphors transfer the indispensability of productive surface landscapes to the realm that lies beneath. “Subterranean forest” is Sieferle’s (2001) counterfactual metaphor for the coal that fueled industrial expansion in nineteenth-century Great Britain. Sieferle calculated that the amount of energy provided by coal in this period would have required woodlots eight times the size of the entire country. Instead, coal underground—the subterranean forest—takes the place of these nonexistent woodlots. This metaphor is an important example of what geographers call “ghost acres” or “virtual land,” hinterland spaces that are non-contiguous with the territory being supplied. But these relationships of command or colonial control sometimes extend to the imagination, with the demarcation of spaces that do not actually exist: coal provides energy *as if* there were vast fields or forests instead.<sup>4</sup>

What does this turn to the underground mean for the hinterland? The answers to this question tell us something about the contradictory meanings of *hinterland*, which can either recognize or disavow the indispensability of hinterlands as “areas of supply” from which coastal ports or cities command the stuff of life. (*Hinterland*, like *nature* itself, is one of those

<sup>3</sup> See Pereira (2015, 7); Bremner (2013, 182).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Huber and McCarthy (2017), who cite Catton’s (1982, 41) definition of “fossil acreage—the number of additional acres of farmland that would have been needed to grow organic fuels with equivalent energy content” (660).

terms that come to designate realms from which modern humans have supposedly freed themselves, even as these realms become ever-more intensely necessary for survival.) To tease out this contradiction, borne of dependence and disavowal, was Williams's project in *The Country and the City*, where he shows how literary modes for representing rural spaces can variously depict or deny, idealize or elide the ecological and economic metabolisms joining them to the city. Extending this line of thought, then, what becomes of the hinterland in the shift from surface to subterranean energy regimes, from extensive national territories to control of the hole?

I want to consider two propositions. First, whether the material relations that constitute a hinterland, and the importance of these "areas of supply" to urban development, nation-building, and geopolitics, might differ radically between surface and subterranean energy regimes. Second, whether rural hinterlands *become* hinterlands in that second, derogatory sense—of forgotten backwater, "the back of beyond," places unconnected to and forgotten by the modern world—precisely when "areas of supply" for the necessary stuff of modernity shift underground. *How does a nation's indispensable heartland become its forgotten hinterland in the fossil fuel era?* Is it only "ties to area size" (Sieferle 2001) that are lost when the rural *agricultural* hinterland is superseded by the fossil fuel hinterland, the underground frontier? Moreover, in the realm of ideology and cultural narratives, how are fossil fuel deposits incorporated into geographic imaginaries of agricultural heartlands and, in many cases, settler-colonial frontiers?

Take the United States, for example. Even though commercial oil deposits were first discovered in Pennsylvania, and even though California led oil production in the US and possibly the world by 1911 (Brechin 1999, 261), the figure of the oilman in the American imagination is decidedly and stubbornly Texan. As Daniel Worden writes, "Oil culture *is* Texas culture" (2017, 350; emphasis mine). The wide-open spaces of Texas ranchlands, and the rugged individualism of the cowboy, home on the range, are more conducive to this renovation of geographic imaginaries of the agricultural hinterland than are pumpjacks nodding away in the urban oilfields of Los Angeles. And not for nothing are the vast flatland prairies of Alberta, in Canada, often described as the "Texas of Canada." Texas and Alberta are both western ranching and farming regions, whose identity and economy have become wrapped up with oil, with a persistent pioneer/frontier mentality among many settlers.

## MINING THE SOIL

This proximity between rancher and oilman in the North American rural imagination points to broader complications with Huber and McCarthy's distinction between surface and subterranean energy regimes. And beyond the realm of cultural imagining, in what ways are horizontal and vertical—or surface and subsurface, agriculture and mining—materially intertwined rather than diametrically opposed or following one another in a stadial progression? Environmental historians like Jason W. Moore and Gray Brechin have emphasized mining's effects upon, and voracious demands for, surface landscapes in the form of forests as a source of fuel and framing timber for mineshafts, particularly before coal replaced wood in steam engines that pumped water out of mines. In addition to mine waste in the form of slag piles and tailings ponds, deforestation is a visible trace on the surface of mining's effects below. Mining chews up ore and spits out waste, but it gobbles forests and waterways too. This voracious appetite for both surface landscapes and subsurface depths resonates with Elizabeth C. Miller's observation that "extraction requires constant movement, downward and outward," so that "the vertical and horizontal work together in ... extractive space" (2021, 85, 87).

"Agriculture and mining," writes Brechin, are "the two prototypical human activities from which towns first sprang. Until recently, they stood for opposite ways of regarding and transforming the natural world" (1999, 16). In my previous essay on overburden (Wenzel 2016), I described these two modes of viewing and acting upon nature as a logic of improvement and a logic of extraction: while the "logic of improvement rests on an organic premise of addition, bringing forth, and sustained development," the logic of extraction is one of subtraction, attrition, emptying out unto exhaustion, and moving on to the next hole. But I want to trouble those distinctions between agricultural improvement and extractive mining, in order to complicate some of what I suggested earlier about the hinterland underground.

In *The Country and the City*, published in 1973 on the cusp of the first oil shock, Williams argued that these modes are not as distinct as we might think: "What the oil companies do, what the mining companies do, is what landlords did, what plantation owners did and do." He points out the inadequacy of conventional distinctions "between agricultural and industrial development" that view "the country as cooperation with nature, the city and industry as overriding and transforming it." Rather,

Williams finds in both mining and capitalist agriculture a common stance of “seeing the land and its properties,” whether surface or subsurface, “as available for profitable exploitation,” so that “the quite different needs of local settlement and community are overridden, often ruthlessly.... The land, for its fertility or for its ore, is in both cases abstractly seen. It is used in an enterprise which overrides, for the time being, all other considerations” (1973, 293). This “overriding” is at work in overburden: mining overrides nature and unprofitable relations to it by designating lived landscapes—such as muskeg—as mere overburden in the way of paydirt.

In addition to identifying a fundamental (if underappreciated) similarity between agriculture and mining, Williams draws an important connection between perception and action: how we view, imagine, and understand nature helps to determine what we do with or to it. This relation is at work in my multivalent approach to what I call “the disposition of nature” (Wenzel 2019). Disparate ideas about what nature is (i.e., its disposition, or temperament) shape conflicts about how it should be “disposed” by humans: inhabited, cared for, used. What the acquisitive modes of seeing at work in mining and agriculture tell us is that a resource logic is also a resource aesthetic. By *resource logic*, I mean a way of thinking that understands nature primarily as something other than human, disposed for human use, and subject to human control. A resource logic also entails particular modes of seeing and protocols of judgment and evaluation—in other words, a resource aesthetic. To look upon nature primarily as a resource for accumulation is also to bring the profitable and the beautiful into alignment, with the promise that they are (or will be) one and the same.<sup>5</sup> Hinterlands are the geographic instantiation of such resource logics/aesthetics: they are regions designated, imagined, and looked upon primarily as sites disposed to supply the necessary stuff of life to areas of command.

I began this chapter with Raymond Williams’s account of the Global South as an “effective hinterland” for Europe and North America. Brechin echoes this notion when he posits the acquisitive mode of what Williams calls “seeing the land and its properties as available for profitable exploitation” as hegemonic at a planetary scale: “the fountain of wealth, power, and glamour that issues from the mine and the oil well has also decisively shaped the way humans perceive and treat their planet—not as a farm, let alone as a garden, but as a mine head and battlefield” (1999, 25). Williams

<sup>5</sup> See Wenzel (2019, 3, 42, 148).

and Brechin use a lot of words to say, in effect, that agriculture can be just as extractive as mining and that extractivism predominates as the way that humans view their world and their planet. And yet, I prefer the texture and nuance of their accounts to what I might dare to call the reductive efficiency of much contemporary discourse, in which the word “extractive” names an ever-expanding category of exploitative practices and habits of mind, and in which to label something *extractive* often seems to shut down thinking rather serving as a point of departure.<sup>6</sup>

In the remainder of this chapter, I move beyond this simple label of “extractive” in order to examine some specific ways in which agriculture is imbricated with mining, both metaphorically and materially. How is agriculture sometimes *similar to* mining, and how is agriculture sometimes *dependent on* or *necessary to* mining? This is another way of complicating the distinction that Huber and McCarthy make between surface and subterranean energy regimes. My aim is not to make the obvious point that industrial agriculture, agribusiness, and Big Food *exist*. We all know this; industrial agriculture has so become the unthought horizon of the everyday that it takes cognitive effort to recognize that many seemingly new-fangled farming practices are, in effect, simply a return to how humans grew things for thousands of years—before, Huber and McCarthy might rush to remind us, the nineteenth-century emergence of the subterranean energy regime. But beyond notions of profit-seeking that, as Williams says, can override all other considerations for landowners and oil companies alike, what does it mean to “mine the soil”?

Here I draw on the work of David Montgomery, whose *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilization* traces a phenomenon that he sees recurring throughout much of human history, in which agricultural civilizations “undermine” (2007, 3) their own survival through practices that allow soil to degrade and erode faster than the slow geologic processes through which topsoil forms. Topsoil is produced when gradual erosion “triggers the uplift of rocks from deep within the earth” (12) and thereby exposes “fresh rock” to the surface—a geological phenomenon called isostasy—and this newly exposed rock is then broken up by a “destructive blanket” (4) of soil, as it recycles decaying organic matter. For Montgomery, this process means that soil is the “dynamic interface between rock and life” (13), “the interface between the rock that makes up our planet and the plants and animals that live off sunlight and nutrients leached out of rocks”

<sup>6</sup>See Szeman and Wenzel (2021).



(16). In other words, soil is, among other things, the link between surface and subterranean energy regimes; this understanding also complicates too-easy distinctions *between* “surface” and “subterranean,” whose relation, Montgomery reminds us, is not static but dynamic, even if geologically slow. Montgomery’s analysis suggests a series of equations in which life + rock + dirt + time = soil, and soil = life (16). Thus, he argues, to “mine the soil” is to ignore the temporal “balance between soil production and soil erosion [that] allows life to live off a thin crust of weathered rock” (23); mining the soil means “consuming soil faster than it forms” (2).

Here the act of “mining” in “mining the soil” may seem to be mere metaphor, akin to the oversimplifying label of “extractive” mentioned above. But what is most fascinating about Montgomery’s narration of history organized around dirt are the material ways that soil, mineral ores, and oil intersect within it. Unsurprisingly, a key example in Montgomery’s account of mining the soil is the Dust Bowl on the North American Great Plains in the 1930s. Montgomery emphasizes a series of technological innovations in the middle of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. First, the mass production of John Deere’s steel plow in 1838, and of Cyrus McCormick’s mechanical reaper in 1848; then, in 1917, Henry Ford’s mass-marketing of a gasoline-powered tractor, which replaced the humans and their teams of horses, mules, and oxen that had previously driven these new inventions across the plains. (In Huber and McCarthy’s terms, the emergence of a subterranean energy regime radically transformed practices of the surface land-based energy regime.) As Montgomery notes, “With steel plows and iron horses, a twentieth-century farmer could work 15 times as much land as his nineteenth-century grandfather” (2007, 146); “Together John Deere’s plows and Cyrus McCormick’s reapers allowed farmers to work far more land than a single farm’s livestock could reliably manure. ... No longer would the scale of an agricultural operation be limited by the capacity of a farm to recycle soil fertility” (176–177).

The mechanization of agriculture, epitomized by the tractor, ushered in what we might understand as a war between soil and oil. This war had several phases: first, the use of gas-powered tractors that exploded during and after World War I, when US federal policy aimed to boost wheat production to make up for agricultural disruption in Europe; then the reliance on petrochemical fertilizers commercialized after World War II, many of which are used to “replace ... soil nutrients lost by topsoil erosion” (Montgomery 2007, 200). Here is the relationship between soil and oil in

a nutshell: fossil-fuel-powered mechanization mined and degraded the soil with “a truly formidable phalanx of tractors, combines, and trucks ... clanking across the fields” (Worster 1994, 229); fertilizers derived from petroleum extracted from underground are used to compensate for that lost topsoil. One generation after the Dust Bowl, art historian and US Parks Service consultant Hans Huth observed that the catastrophe on the American plains had “suddenly and forcefully taught the nation that nature could not be relied upon to produce and yield crops as assembly lines produced automobiles” (1957, 193). The rise of Fordist farming in the early twentieth century brings home a truth implicit in Montgomery’s account of dirt as the foundation of civilization. Although the geological timescales in the production of soil are significantly shorter than those involved in the fossilization of oil, both have become central to human flourishing, and soil is an “intergenerational resource” (Montgomery 2007, 5) fundamental to food production. In other words, petromodern society has for decades worried about the prospect of peak oil, but Montgomery shows how human societies have repeatedly, for millennia, grappled with the consequences of what I would call *peak soil*.

To be sure, many other factors—demographic, geopolitical, and ecological—converged to create the catastrophe that swept the Great Plains in the 1930s. John Deere’s plow, groundbreaking in every sense of the word, was invented in the mid-nineteenth century to solve a very particular problem, but it ended up creating another. Only a steel plow was sturdy enough to break up the tough sod and cut through the clay-rich soil of the vast grasslands that settlers found as they moved into the Plains hinterland. The underground root systems of these wild grasses often comprised significantly more biomass than the leaves above the surface, sometimes delving downward several times as deep as the tips of the grass grew high. In a very real sense, the root systems of the grassland prairie were an “underground forest” (Rosen 2022), not merely a metaphorical one (as with Sieferle). This thick sod posed a problem to would-be farmers pouring into the Plains in the last decades of the nineteenth century after the decimation of the bison, the forced removal of Native Americans, the development of railroad infrastructure, the settlement-friendly federal policies of homestead land allotment, and new practices of consumer lending opened up this interior wedge of the continent, leaving the “homesteaders free to plow up the grasses, and to make the land over to fit their imaginations” (Worster 1994, 217).

Busting the grassland sod with Deere's steel plow, and breaking up more and more of the sod with Ford's and McCormick's tractors, created a new, deadly, and devastating problem. The grasslands and their matted roots had held together for hundreds of thousands of years a fragile but rich layer of fine dirt, called loess. As Montgomery describes it, loess is a fine soil, composed of "mostly silt with some clay and a little sand"; it is "an ideal agricultural soil," partly because it is rich in minerals but largely free of stones (2007, 143). The problem is that precisely because of its fine texture, "with little natural cohesion, loess erodes rapidly if stripped of vegetation and exposed to wind or rain" (143). As farmers plowed up the grassland sod, "the old grasslands became the new wheatlands," we hear in the voiceover to Pare Lorenz's 1936 Dust Bowl documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. After being plowed, "the loess of the semiarid plains simply blew away in dry years" (Montgomery 2007, 146).

The removals of bison and Indigenous peoples from the Plains cleared a path for settlement, which in turn catalyzed the removals of the grass and the loess. Eulogizing these losses in *Fortune* in November 1935, Archibald MacLeish observed, "the grass was everything. It was a natural resource richer than the oil and the coal and the ore which have since been dug beneath it" (64). But Huber and McCarthy would remind us of the ways in which the oil, the coal, and the ore were indispensable for the war on the grass: the industrial revolution, they insist, involved not merely an aboveground labor/energy transition with "*automatic machinery* performing tasks once reserved for muscular toil" (2017, 660; emphasis in original), but also a material change in relations to the underground. The very metal of those machines comprised "iron and steel made possible through subterranean reserves of energy-dense coal" (661). As it cut into the ground and mined the soil, the steel plow was returning, in a sense, to the realm from which it came.

### MATTER OUT OF PLACE

"Frontier stories helped *cause* the Dust Bowl," observes William Cronon in an analysis of narrative framing in historiography of the event; he shows how the choice of protagonist or the shape of the narrative arc changes the story that is told (1992, 1375). In a similar vein, it is worth considering the disparate metaphors used to describe the plains before and after settlement. "Great American Desert" was Stephen Long's influential designation for the largely treeless, putatively uninhabited region on the map that

he charted during a 1819–1820 expedition from western Pennsylvania to the Rocky Mountains. Plains booster William Gilpin sought to counter this image, arguing against a “radical misapprehension in the popular mind ... as complete as that which pervaded Europe respecting the Atlantic Ocean during the whole historic period prior to Columbus” (1860, 120). The Plains are the “opposite” of “*deserts*,” Gilpin wrote; they are instead “the cardinal basis of the future empire of commerce and industry now erecting itself upon the North American continent. They ... form the Pastoral Garden of the world” (1860, 120).<sup>7</sup> If a resource logic is also a resource aesthetic, then we might wonder at Long’s dismissal of the Plains grasslands: they were neither barren nor uninhabited when Long looked upon them in 1820. We might assume that this settler-explorer simply could not perceive their vitality. And yet, Long’s dismissal reads now as a prescient warning *against* visions of settlement like Gilpin’s: “we do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence. Although tracts of fertile land, considerably extensive, are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country” (quoted in James 1823, 361). Even before the emergence of the subterranean energy regime, Long understood why the plains were a fragile foundation for a garden empire.

More than “desert” or “empire,” the sheer expanse of the grasslands is best captured in Worster’s image of a “vast inland sea” (1994, 215), which echoes the “uncharted ocean of grass” described at the beginning of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. This image of the continent enfolding a grassland ocean spurs me to revise the description that opens MacLeish’s “The Grasslands”:

For more than three centuries men have moved across this continent from east to west. For some years now, increasingly in the last two or three, dust has blown back across the land from west to east. The movement of men, long understood, is taken for granted. The blowing of dust, little understood, has filled the newspapers and rolled across the newsreel screens. And yet the two are linked together like the throwing and the rebound of a ball. (1935, 59)

<sup>7</sup> See also Worster (1994, 217).

Describing how people have long moved west, while the dust suddenly starts blowing east, MacLeish reaches for the image of a ball, thrown and bounced back. But these movements evoke something more like an ocean tide, with waves of men, women, machines, and livestock rolling westward into the expanse, and wall-like waves of dust cast back upon the eastern shore, after the sea of grass became once more a desert: a desert of dust, what MacLeish describes as “ruined Saharas” (59).

This eastward blowing of dust was so extreme as to boggle the mind. In the spring of 1934, and again in 1935, powerful winds on the treeless plains swept up the loess into fearsome “black blizzards” and carried the dust for thousands of miles, to the eastern seaboard and beyond.

On 10 May 1934, a storm dumped twelve million tons of dirt on Chicago (Worster 1994, 221), which grew up in part as a marketing hub for meat and grain grown on the plains. The next day, the cloud, estimated to be 1800 miles wide and perhaps as much as 10,000 feet tall, reached Washington D.C., Boston, and even the island of Nantucket off the mainland. It darkened the sky like an eclipse for five hours in New York City, and the Empire State Building, finished in 1931 and then the tallest building in Manhattan, was coated in a film of white dust, which also “lodged itself in the eyes and throats of weeping and coughing New Yorkers” (“Huge Dust Cloud,” 1934; “Dust Storms,” 1934). As US soil conservation expert Hugh Bennett recalled the 1934 storm, “I suspect that when people along the seaboard of the eastern US began to taste fresh soil from the plains 2,000 miles away, many of them realized for the first time that somewhere something had gone wrong with the land” (quoted in Montgomery 2007, 155).<sup>8</sup> In this stunning moment, mobilized dirt activated a sort of citizen sensing system. The taste of plains dirt in coastal mouths spurred the US federal government to act, with a series of studies and soil conservation measures that would later also inform so-called Betterment policies that aimed to address problems of soil erosion (as well as overgrazing and overpopulation) in the South African reserves.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to this chapter’s themes of horizontality and verticality, agriculture and mining, and the relation between rural imaginations and hinterlands, I want to conclude by recalling that accounts of American westward expansion often observe that the railroad catalyzed peculiar

<sup>8</sup> A similar event occurred on 21 July 2021, when smoke from wildfires in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia turned the skies over New York City burnt orange.

<sup>9</sup> See Dodson (2005).

compressions of space, by “br[inging] markets to the edge of the plains” (Lorenz 1936), or by linking the mine shaft technologically, materially, and financially to the skyscrapers of the downtown financial district (Brechin 1999, 27). In these fearsome dust storms, however, the wind is the vector that scrambles geographic relations between areas of supply and areas of command. This soil-from-elsewhere blew from the hinterland, the lands back there, over yonder, beyond the horizon, to the coastal metropolis. This dirt is indeed Mary Douglas dirt, matter out of place, in places across the continent: dirt-on-the-move that, in turn, spurred masses of desperate people to hit the road. The country arrives in the city. We might want to think, what could be more local, more place-based, than dirt? But those tons of plains dirt, carried on the eastward tide of wind, had already come from elsewhere, as Montgomery explains: the loess of the plains was formed in the Great Ice Age of the Pleistocene geological epoch, when glaciers scraped soils from the Arctic and the wind carried them to temperate sites that became “the world’s breadbaskets” (2007, 143). Across human and Earth history, what becomes the hinterland to what? The Arctic is legible as an unlikely hinterland for the rise of agriculture on the Great Plains. The itinerary of loess, from the Arctic to Texas, from the polar region to the temperate zone, from hinterland(s) to coast, is another kind of flow that invites us to think the rural not as static, but as mobile; to think the hinterland not only as logistical, economic, or industrial, but as cultural and ideational; and to think the countryside not as isolated, and not merely global,<sup>10</sup> but, indeed, as planetary.

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