

Ethnography beyond the Country and the City:

Understanding the Symbolic Terrain of Rural Spaces

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The 2012 London Olympic Games opening ceremony presented onlookers with a carefully choreographed vision of the British countryside. There were sheep, hillocks, trees, hedgerows and even working rainclouds. It was familiar, homely and bucolic and, according to the artist Danny Boyle, intended to represent a humorous “picture of ourselves as a nation” (Boyle, 2012). Condensing like the water droplets from the fake rain clouds suspended overhead, a moment of British culture was coalescing on the grass and tarmac of the east London Olympic park; a stadium that was constructed painstakingly and expensively on the sanitised remains of centuries-old industrial brownfield that still smelled of wet coal (O’Hagan, 2012) and resonated with the echoes of long-closed warehouses and works. In place of ‘derelict and weedy’ came ‘green and pleasant’ - animated, magnified and given vibrant life against the roars and camera flashes of the assembled crowds.

Despite the contemporary significance of the digital, virtual and the post-industrial, this pastoral spectacle served a timely reminder of the enduring significance of the rural landscape to identity and culture - a throwback to a simpler period of history, perhaps - a time when communities appeared to be more stable, authentic and ‘real’, or a time when people lived in close proximity with the land and other animals. Of course, many have questioned whether the countryside has ever really been a ‘green and pleasant land’. But this is to miss the point. Rural myths are both real and imagined - a juxtaposition and a blending of the ‘somatic’ and the symbolic; the fleshy and the representational and they are given life through praxis, the many and varied doings that constitute human life-worlds. This is where ethnography – turning a Janus face to both naturalistic social interaction and academic rigour – makes its unique contribution.

To approach an ethnography of rural life, it is often helpful to begin from a particular cultural space such as the village pub, the annual livestock or produce show, the shop. To hang around, chat and blend in is vital. But such spaces do not give us access to easy definitions of the countryside at large, its membership or borderlines. The very size and scale of ‘the rural’ seems to work against ethnography’s close-grained approach. Its mythic, romanticized and imagined qualities make the terrain more unstable still. How, then, can ethnographers go about making a field for themselves if notions of rural territory are, themselves, fragmentary, mobile and contested? Are ethnographers reduced to highly specific – but also highly fragmented – sites of study? The articles here share a concern about these issues, demonstrating that it is not enough to find and locate a site; one must also carve out an ethnographic point of participation. Using a variety of approaches to create a field for study, each draws on different contexts, theoretical frames and styles of involvement to get inside their selected terrain.

Together the articles create a patchwork of stories that present rural locations as sites for (and of) action. They expand on questions of ‘what’ and ‘where’ the countryside is to questions of ‘how’ it is done; that is, enacted, lived within and made meaningful by those dwelling there, whether they are

permanent residents or transient visitors. Paying attention to the way that sites might be activated by particular forms of action - or the relational forces between actors and their surroundings - is a more contemporary way of viewing the country. We are not dealing with a simple pastoral landscape but a mix of active (and reactive) symbolic terrains, demanding of researchers the ability to constitute and work flexibly within shifting spaces of engagement. It is a thematic meeting point of the articles in this issue to suggest that with its anti-reductionist approach, epistemological flexibility and literary ability to capture the essence of elusive cultures, ethnography is perfectly suited to building an understanding of the mobile meaning of such contested spaces, their processes, the ways they hold together and their instabilities. The articles that follow point to the centrality of the ethnographic method as a way of capturing, illuminating, evoking aspects of our shifting definitions and perceptions of the rural; living with a degree of partiality and fragmentation rather than tidying up the world to better understand it.

Starting from the perspective that we can consider the countryside as complex and difficult to 'pin down', this issue draws together perspectives on the 'real' and 'imagined' landscape to illustrate how rurality is contested and uncertain. The aim is also to show how the countryside becomes an imaginative 'canvas' upon which symbolic and meaningful human experience can be carved out (Jones, 2013). Borrowing from aspects of a broad cultural and geographic literature, I term this a symbolic terrain. Sometimes this is reflective of the powerful nature of social structures and norms (like gender, for example, see Dashper, this issue) but sometimes this terrain works freely, creatively and independently of it (see Mitchell, this issue). At times the terrain sits closely with the physical landscape (Goodwin-Hawkins, this issue; Emery and Carrithers, this issue) while at other times the terrain is personal, internal and intimately lived (Hardie-Bick and Bonner, this issue). This flexibility in the meaning of categories of place and space, at the very least, challenges traditional modes of thinking about countryside as a narrowly definable zone where nothing much happens (Merriman, 2012). Ethnography is, of course, ideally placed for getting inside such complication and uncertainty to make the seemingly mundane, strange.

This journal has already published some particularly fine examples of rural ethnography (for example, Bourdieu, 2004; Pinder, 2007; Mischi, 2013) although it is perhaps fair to say that urban ethnography continues to dominate the agenda in this journal as elsewhere in the social sciences. This is, of course, understandable given that populations tend to concentrate in urban areas and that social issues such as anti-social behaviour, for example, are usually more acute there (Hillyard, 2014). In a UK context, for example, approximately 80% of the population dwell in towns, cities and suburbs (UK National Ecosystem Assessment 2011a, 2014b; Office for National Statistics, 2013). It is a starting point within the current issue, however, to argue that the countryside provides an equally rich (if somewhat different) set of social issues that have yet to be fully understood or explored. It is hoped that by opening out this line of analysis, the issue will help to show that ethnography can tell us a lot about the rural as complexly lived and that by attending to this, rural ethnography can also problematize our presumptions about the importance of the urban.

Disassembling modernist categories

While the majority of ethnographic work maintains a focus upon the urban, most of Britain is – in fact – rural. The physical geography of the UK shows that although the population is most dense in its towns and cities, the urban landscape accounts for just 10.6% of England, 1.9% of Scotland, 3.6%

of Northern Ireland and 4.1% of Wales (ONS, 2013; NEA, 2014 and 2011). Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, only a small fraction of Britain has been concreted over. Almost 93% of the UK is, in fact, green space with a large proportion of urban settlements themselves constituted by parks, verges and playing fields. The total percentage of England's landscape which is 'built on' is currently 2.27% (ibid). In geographic terms, then, there is a degree of blurring between green and grey which suggests that the country is not a tightly bounded, easily defined 'place' or a neat zone of green outside the city. And in spaces that we can term 'rural', there are varied tapestries of wilderness, woodland, wetland, as well as villages and hamlets which baffle attempts to simplify it as a particular type of place (Goodwin-Hawkins, this issue; Rackham, 2000). But no matter how blurred and complex the geographic divisions might be in practice, symbolic partitions between town and country have persisted within literature, the arts and the academic community.

The strong element of nostalgia which infuses much romantic art and literature often divides town and country along aesthetic, cultural and moral lines (Barrell, 2011). The cultural antecedents of Boyle's 'Green and Pleasant' at the Olympics are the songs and poems of Clare, Wordsworth and Blake, the novels of Hardy, Austen and Eliot, a genre in which the countryside often emerges as a moral and cultural anchor of authenticity against the ever-sprawling city; that 'dark mirror' to the simple, rustic life of the country (Williams, 1975). Much nostalgic literature mournfully harks back to lost traditions, work methods and ways of life and warns us about the perils of change (Blythe, 1969). Elsewhere, divisions between town and country have been sustained along political and ideological lines. Raymond Williams's seminal book *The Country and the City* (1975), for example, described and analysed rural images and cultural associations by viewing them in relation to lived experiences. Openly sceptical about artistic, and especially nostalgic depictions of the countryside, he called romanticism "a myth functioning as a memory" (p.43) that suppressed a whole host of conflicts and tensions.

Williams argued that it was important to show how myth became embedded and made powerful in literary forms because ideals of the countryside reproduced class distinctions. Of course, some theoretical standpoints (of Marxism, particularly) have always supported the differentiation between town and country as the basis of the division between mental/manual labour, politics/community and between culture/society (Burkett, 1998; Castree, 2000) often perpetuating a degree of social constructionism along urban/rural lines (Bourdieu, 2004). Bourdieu's (2004) study of a village dance, for example, pointed to the ways in which young rural men were negatively impacted by the cultural clash between country and city. Bourdieu argued that country men became 'devalued' in the eyes of potential female partners and denigrated as rural 'peasants'. His argument was that because young women were sensitive to 'tenue' (appearance, clothing, bearing, conduct) as well as open to the ideals of the town, they rejected the rural youths that they met at the dance as rustic and unsophisticated. In taking to heart this 'devalued image' of themselves, the men became 'em-peasanted' – their bodies burdened with the traces of the activities and attitudes associated with agricultural life.

The relations between 'townies' and 'villagers' are, by now, well documented although more recent studies have also highlighted a range of complex social tensions within rural communities. Beyond age-old conflicts between 'peasants' and 'squires' (Heley, 2010), then, are frictions between 'incomers' and second-home owners (Burnett, 1998; Cloke, et al., 1990) and between indigenous and migrant labourers (Storey, 2013). In Britain alone, examples of rural dispute are extensive: the

Peasants Revolt of 1381, the highland clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries, the 'right to roam' movement of the 1950s (Stephenson, 1989) fox hunting, foot and mouth disease, bovine tuberculosis. These are just a few examples of the contested nature of the country, many of which are infused by class concerns. Some of these examples have emphasised the disparity between rural communities and urban ones. But not all.

At the very least, however, such political issues are suggestive of different countrysides and fractures between ideological, literary and lived experiences. The countryside is messy, multiple and contested because it is neither geographically, culturally or socially coherent. It defies definition as a simpler place in relation to the sophisticated city. Of course, ethnographic work often takes a naturalistic, reflexive approach to better understand such contradictions and 'mess'. The danger is, as Raymond Williams suggests, that if we mythologize the rural as a fixed, pastoral idyll, much of this (fascinating) complexity is lost (Williams, 1975). It is not merely nostalgia and romanticism which limits our enquiry, however, but the very categories of town and country. As Latour puts it, such labels no longer offer 'solid hooks' upon which we might 'attach our interpretation' of the world (1993: 95). Persisting with modernist terminology has the effect of straightjacketing the ethnographic endeavour by explaining away meaning-making as a straightforward function of place. This, in turn, pushes 'rural studies' firmly to the margins. As this issue hopes to show, however, binary labels often appear to break down in practice and, indeed, through symbolic practises. The task, then, is to show how such practises lend themselves to ethnographic enquiry. It is hoped that doing so in an exploratory way here will further blur town/country distinctions to foster a broader and more open-ended range of possibilities for comprehending human identity and culture building within a variety of spaces (Serres, 1987; Thrift, 2004). How, then, can we move away from the binaristic determinism that has characterised the discourse about town and country into a more nuanced reading of rural distinction?

Countrysides produced in relations?

One possibility for tackling this question is by taking a network view; that is, the idea that actors and material things are 'produced in relations' (Law, 1999 and 2003). A particular sort of 'hybrid countryside' is produced, perhaps, when the network of people, objects and other materials work together to create a specific effect. In this issue, for example, Laura Mitchell's account of live action roleplay shows how the careful organization of events creates magical and fantastical effects that participants can then immerse themselves in. While she does not theorise this in explicitly actor-network terms, Mitchell's emphasis upon enactment and performance looks to the fleshy world as much as the linguistic to examine how such magical effects are brought into being and made real for those involved. This is a particular kind of countryside, one which relies on a meshwork of creativity and imagination as well as physical geography.

Law (1999) thinks of this sort of effect in spatial terms as a 'topology'. Importantly, and while acknowledging the power imbalances and negotiations which might infuse such topologies, Law argues that 'spatiality is not given. It is not fixed, a part of the order of things. Instead it comes in various forms.' (ibid, p. 6) Instead of perceiving a clean distinction between places as either town or country, then, each social setting draws on specific materials and meanings to become somewhere. Within that, we see how relations emerge, how they are performed with and through objects and the physical world and sometimes how they become robust, fixed and (seemingly) certain. In the

unusual case of live action roleplay, they become certainly uncertain. Steering us away from a treatment of the countryside as a deterministic habitus, one which is structured firmly by moorings that run beneath each social setting, everything is much less sure and fixed in this way of seeing, leaving the field freer for a range of other approaches: the flowering of a more symbolic complexity that grapples with contradiction and which can be viewed in close-up within single ethnographic sites (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006).

Whatever theoretical perspective one takes, it is at least possible to see how supposed distinctions between town and country (whether literary, artistic, political or otherwise) might begin to be troubled by such an approach. And while many country activities (such as farming, for example), are informed and, to a degree, determined by the physical particularities of the setting – the substantial shape of its structures, watercourses and topographies – it is suggested here that the extent to which actors are controlled by these landscapes is far more complicated than is often thought (Murdoch and Pratt, 1997; Watts and Urry, 2008; see also Fraser, this issue). Recent change within the nature of rural work and leisure, for example, has arisen as a result of greater mobility of information and people. Country pursuits have been decoupled from the traditional trio of hunting, shooting and fishing to incorporate immersive and high-risk activities such as live-action role play, battle re-enactment, rock-climbing and parachuting (Sheller and Urry, 2006). People now move into and out of ‘spatialities’ and communities with a degree of creativity and spontaneity (Mitchell, this issue). This has destabilised traditional ideas of the rural ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 2004; DEFRA, 2014). It is suggested here that mobility within the three-dimensional, physical countryside is vital in understanding how people develop a sense of self and other and, not least, how they make meaning from being in certain places and doing certain things (Mol and Law, 1994). This is not to treat the categories of town and country as all-powerful and all-informing; instead, the interaction between people, materials and place is best understood as messy, nuanced and contradictory.

Contents of the issue

Working through the contradictions between experience, reality, symbolism and representation, the articles here show that human actors both respond to and creatively produce meaning from the landscape. The contents share a fundamental emphasis upon meaning-making through action; action that is symbolic when (put simply) it means something beyond movement. For example, James Hardie-Bick and Penny Bonner demonstrate how those participating in climbing and skydiving rely upon the stable and timeless permanence of the physical landscape for their enjoyment but – at the same time - derive pleasure from managing their exposure to the risk of coming (rapidly and bodily) into contact with these physical forms. The acting body works to navigate these real and imagined places within a process of ‘flow’. It is this evolving consciousness within a particular setting that makes this a symbolic; that is, meaningful, process. The way in which the issue of mobility, identity and experience is explored and theorised throughout the issue, of course, relies upon a number of different perspectives.

Excavating the interplay between the ‘somatic’ – the embodied or fleshy - and the symbolic, the issue begins with Bryonny Goodwin Hawkins’s article, *Morris Dancers, Matriarchs and Paperbacks: Doing the Village in Contemporary Britain*. Goodwin Hawkins’s argument is that to call a place rural is to suggest that it is ‘a particular kind of place, and that particular kinds of things do and should happen there’. As the archetypal rural settlement, she claims that the village suggests a predictably

particular social ground; a shared imagining of what she terms, 'soil and soul'. Some of these shared (and contested) imaginings are explored carefully with a series of tales from the field. Her article acknowledges the broad literature that illuminates the ways in which physical things, places and materials structure identity and meaning (see for example, Hall, 1997), but she is also mindful of the growing body of poststructuralist work within anthropology, human/cultural geography and sociology of science, which has added new insights into the links between people, their actions and setting (for example, Halfacree, 1993; Latour, 1993; Law, 2003; Merriman, 2012; Serres, 1987; Thrift, 2000 and 2004; Watts and Urry, 2008).

Goodwin-Hawkins's participant observation in the village settlement of Snay Top (anonymised) in the Pennines region of Northern England, navigates and extends literatures of this sort by grappling with the tension between the representational and the real countryside. She argues that one way forward is to steer away from asking 'what' the countryside is and what/who it includes and, instead, asking how it is 'done'. By examining three ethnographic vignettes from country life, this article shows how village residents engage with their surroundings (and not least, each other) and points to an interesting overlap between their symbolic and lived experiences. Without seeking to resolve or explain away these tensions and contradictions, she raises important epistemological and ontological questions about the practice of ethnography. She asks how contemporary ethnographers can show the delicate, nuanced relationship between ideas and practises in rural communities without seeking to boil these down to simple categories, including those of town, village and country.

Progressing to a further close analysis of 'doings' and enactments, the issue then presents a mythic and fantastical account that subverts traditional readings of country pursuits as staid and peaceful. Turning bucolic images of the British countryside on their head, Laura Mitchell's article, *Materiality, Magic and Belief: Framing the Countryside in Fantastical Live-action Roleplay Games* takes a different approach to enactment. This takes the rural landscape as a creative palimpsest upon which a number of alternative realities can be acted out. Mitchell discusses and explores live action roleplay to highlight complex shifts between different interpretive frames, that is, the ways in which participants experience, immerse and interact in individual game settings. Drawing on Goffman's (1974) definition of a frame as part of the organization of activity which specifies meaning and expectations of involvement, she makes an important developmental point; that the physical setting – specifically the heath, hill and undergrowth of a particular patch of ground – plays an important dramatic part of its own.

This article presents role play as an unusual form of engagement with rural materiality. Here, the landscape, hill, woodland in light, gloom and darkness is made a symbolic resource to create a particular sense of location that supports creativity and imagination – and a range of ethnographic readings. Told from the point of view of a game organiser, the article identifies the creation of specific contextual frames or ways of embodied experiencing, feeling and knowing that are closely related to the physical experience of space. Here, the terrain upon which the game takes place provides the symbolic resources that inhibit or support the creation of fantasy. Three examples of disruptions to the work employed to maintain the interpretive frames of game players are used here to demonstrate their fragile nature.

The issue then turns to the rather more traditional country activity of horse riding. Katherine Dashper's article *Strong, Active Women: (Re)doing Rural Femininity Through Equestrian Sport and Leisure* explores how the backdrop of the countryside encourages certain repertoires of female behaviour that would otherwise be discouraged. Writing against traditional views of country as 'backward looking' and regressive, Dashper points to the importance of the rural landscape in 'allowing' women to straddle two masculinised social contexts – rural, land-based society and physical recreation. This study offers a number of lucid examples of the ways in which feminine identities help shape the rural leisure landscape and creatively redefine gender relations and gender identities within the countryside. She pursues this argument by presenting a series of vignettes to consider how women actively do and, more provocatively, re-do gender. Revealing the fractures between structure and micro-social settings like the stable yard, the argument presented here challenges ideas about what women are, and what they are capable of, particularly within equestrianism.

Dashper's focus on action, experience and landscape extends a key objective of this issue: to point to the importance of rural space in the meaningful development of identity. This identity work has the power to challenge social norms and raises the profile of the countryside as a vital symbolic ingredient within that process. While Dashper does not specifically draw on geographical and anthropological literature to make this point, she echoes Ingold's argument (2000) that putting together the material features of a landscape setting with that of human meaning-making provides a useful analytic frame for viewing what happens there. Dashper also imagines the relationship between person and place as a continually unfolding story, one which amplifies individual efforts to become disentangled from convention. It is, therefore, possible to think about horse riding as a terrain which at times determines human action but at other times enables more creative unfoldings and enactments, in Dashper's case along gendered lines.

Remaining with the theme of personal experience, action and identity, James Hardie-Bick and Penny Bonner present findings from two separate ethnographic studies: skydiving and climbing. Using their combined empirical data, they explore the motivations, behaviours and experiences of those who voluntarily engage in these high-risk 'extreme' activities. They take a psychological view and amplify this with first-hand accounts of their own involvement with this milieu. Their methods are intensely immersive and draw on feelings of pleasure, control and danger. Drawing on and against Csikszentmihalyi's 'phenomenology of enjoyment' (1975), their account helps us to better understand the attractions of engaging in high-risk pursuits. While both skydiving and climbing rely on the particular terrain of the countryside to support the thrill of high adrenaline experiences, the article suggests that the aesthetic of the landscape is of less significance than in more traditional pursuits such as hill-walking and running, for example, where the view is often of great significance to the pleasure gained. Here, by contrast, the appreciation of landscape appears to have less to do with enjoyment than the experience of moving in unusual ways through space. Whether edging slowly up the rock face in climbing gear or plummeting rapidly to earth under the canopy of a parachute, the argument is that much of the pleasure taken from these pursuits actually revolves around the management of risk, rather than the feeling of being 'in the country' and this is explored theoretically by moving away from 'danger' to 'flow'. This analysis offers us a new way to consider a range of pursuits, not merely those which might be thought of as 'extreme'.

Drawing on a more anthropological style of research, the final article looks at landscape as a political resource. Steven Emery and Michael Carrithers reveal some of the tensions between structural and experiential concerns within the farming community of the North York Moors. This raises important and timely issues for the study of the countryside. They show how an understanding of landscape as embodied and experienced through everyday life helps us to appreciate its political charge. The main argument is that the political manipulation and deployment of landscape is not limited to hegemonic discourses and the aesthetic representations of the elite and powerful, but is also a symbolic resource for 'ordinary folk' who dwell in the landscape, and whose experience of it is crafted by their sensory, intimate relationship with the land. The countryside of North Yorkshire is depicted as a 'media of negotiation' between various stakeholders; a space that lends itself to 'rhetorical play' in the construction and negotiation of politics. By focussing on farmers, and the routines and repetitions of their everyday lives, the aim is to shed light on the ways in which political rhetoric works in tandem with agricultural labour; making clear – if not resolving – the tension between symbolic and fleshy realities. Importantly, from a methodological point of view, the article demonstrates the importance of ethnography for navigating and making sense of these realities.

The issue draws to a close with a poem by Harriet Fraser. The poem, entitled 'Michael', is presented here as a thematic reflection and is taken from a wider body of work arising from over two years of Fraser's participation with hill farmers in the UK's Lake District. It forms part of the documentary project, "Land Keepers", which at the time of writing (Spring, 2015) is being exhibited at the Royal Geographical Society in London. The poem depicts the physical and emotional challenges of hill farming and its impact upon the individuals and communities that rely upon it. To a large extent, those involved are determined through production and the conditions of production, both of which are closely related to farming and the physical countryside. Set in their very particular landscape of crag and scree both farmers and livestock are, in many ways, tied to the land. Their experiences and opinions about their position and their future are heavily impacted by the challenges of their physical setting. But they also move. What happens, then, to land, animals and people when the ties break? Fraser explores this through poetry.

The poem reflects the journal's long-standing appreciation for evocative, literary writing; a vital part of the ethnographic imagination (Willis, 2000). But it also provokes us to think critically about the countryside in ways that are challenging to traditional bucolic ideals as well as to notions of habitus and tradition. Logically speaking, being physically 'in' one place ultimately entails not being somewhere else. But there's more to it than this. As the articles show, there are overlaps and contradictions between 'being' that can be both real and imagined, fleshy and symbolic. This is suggestive of a complexity between movement and hybridity as well as fixity and place, one that is not easily boiled down to modernist labels of urban and rural. This issue suggests that some of this labelling has, in fact, worked to segregate rural studies from the mainstream. It is hoped that highlighting the central importance of ethnographic approaches to understanding this milieu will help to challenge and to overcome this. The following articles each offer an original and different contribution to this agenda just as they raise further questions about how ethnographers can capture and evoke shifting meanings of 'the rural' and, indeed, a range of social settings where people are working to make sense of place.

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