

NATURE AND NATION: THE POLITICS OF RURAL/URBAN BELONGING

Public debates about the whiteness of Britain's rural areas highlight the racialised politics of belonging in Britain. For people of colour to feel at home in rural as well as urban spaces, there needs to be greater recognition of the countryside's colonial past and its enduring legacy for the modern image of the nation.

Soon after the June peak of the UK Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that took place in response to the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the BBC aired a Countryfile episode. It featured a ten-minute segment in which TV presenter and naturalist, Dwayne Fields, investigated the problem of how black and minority ethnic people sometimes feel unwelcome due to prejudice in rural spaces in the UK.¹ The episode stirred up swift controversy on Twitter.² Members of the public responded with complaints to the BBC, and unfavourable headlines followed in the UK tabloid media.³

In the current climate it is perhaps unsurprising to witness responses of this kind from people who only perceive racism as something exceptional, rather than as structurally embedded in British society. However, the Countryfile segment is a remarkably gentle introduction to a recognisable and well-researched problem, and it is communicated along the lines of educational activism rather than a revolutionary call to arms. Based on a 2019 DEFRA report on encouraging diversity in the National Parks, the segment begins with Dwayne Fields sharing his experiences as a member of the black community who loves nature and the outdoors, and his passion for giving young people from black and minority ethnic urban communities the

same positive opportunities to enjoy outdoor settings.⁴ Nature has been a source of personal solace and healing for him, as it is for so many of us. He points out that most coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests has focused on UK cities, and he goes on to introduce the perspectives of young activists from Devon, as well as other black and brown ruralists who talk about their own experiences of discrimination and their involvement in projects to increase diversity in the outdoors. Finally, he poses the question of how the post-pandemic picture of rural diversity (or lack thereof) might change as the country emerges from lockdown. He notes that many of us have realised the importance of time spent in green spaces for our wellbeing, while the accustomed habits of urban life continue to face disruption with no return to previous norms in sight.

The episode aired three weeks after BLM protesters had pulled down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston and rolled it into Bristol Harbour. It remained submerged in the harbour waters that flow out into the Atlantic, the geographic space of the Middle Passage, until curators from the Bristol museum M Shed retrieved it a few days later.⁵ This was an event with historical significance that rippled outward from the moment of impact, leaving a mark on the national imagination and stirring up public emotions ranging from celebration to outrage. Protests against colonial monuments hold great symbolic resonance in the ongoing movement to decolonise the UK's national history and education systems. Public feelings surrounding these struggles circulate in response to contested narratives of the past, and ultimately they are about the kind of society that people understand themselves to be inhabiting in the present, and the future directions they envision. While this partially explains the strength of feeling around what was a short Countryfile segment on diversity in the countryside, there are deeper layers to the story. The interrelationship of the urban and the rural in modern Britain has, after all, materialised alongside and through Britain's colonial heritage and the history of racialisation.

As beautiful and as deeply affecting as landscapes can be—and perhaps *because* the experience of being immersed 'in nature' can affect us so profoundly—rural geographies are inscribed with social and cultural meanings that signify how we understand ourselves and others in relation to the environments we inhabit. The English countryside occupies a central place in the image of the United Kingdom as an entire nation, and is inscribed with stories that invoke the past, community, tradition, and ways of life that are understood to be slipping away under the shadow of an increasingly diverse and interconnected postmodern, postcolonial metropolitan world. However, these social meanings and inscriptions attributed to the rural

landscape are unstable rather than fixed, and open to contestation and change.⁶ The stories we tell about nature and the countryside touch closely on contemporary British identity and the politics of (un)belonging: whose history belongs here, whose ways of living, seeing and knowing, and whose future?

Black and brown environmentalists as well as the DEFRA report observe that, currently, most residents of, and visitors to, the countryside are white.⁷ Urban areas, by contrast, are where we are more likely to see people of colour from a range of different communities in greater numbers. If we de-historicise these sociological facts, they quickly and problematically turn into the timeless essences of urban and rural life: we can immediately see how the city is implicitly or explicitly associated with ethnic and racial diversity, global interconnectedness, postcolonial migration, and various forms of cultural and commercial exchange, dilution and difference. The countryside, by contrast, becomes the repository of a romantic and peaceful Englishness whose integrity remains undisturbed by the noise, the racial and cultural intermingling and general busyness of modern urban life. The political struggle over the narrative of what modern Britain is—and *who* is properly British—are all influenced by some version of this essentialised binary, although with different temporal orientations towards ideas of progress, or of loss and return.

One version of this racialised urban/rural divide is highly visible in popular films and literature. In film versions and serialisations of Jane Austen's novels and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a nostalgic, pastoral gaze delights audiences with period aesthetics of the English countryside. Stately homes form the backdrop against which pale-skinned romantic heroines ramble bravely across, or battle through, the rural landscape, embroiled in dramas of social etiquette and the constraints of class and gender. Off-screen, the harsher realities of imperialist wars, colonisation and the Atlantic slave trade turn their hidden wheels somewhere behind the visual frame. This rosy vision of England is associated with the inheritance of wealth, status and privilege, and with the conservative rural traditions of country houses—sites of inequality that left-wing activists have historically organised against through their mobilisation in mostly urban industrial and labour movements. Of course, we come to realise that this only presents part of the story when we recall that rural spaces are also sites of labour history, through the economic struggles of agricultural labourers against the landowning classes, and the displacement of workers from the countryside to cities, which rapidly expanded after parliament passed the Enclosure Act in 1773 and during the Industrial Revolution.⁸

It is increasingly being recognised that the English countryside was far from the rural idyll in the time period of those novels for another reason: as sociologist Sarah Neal points out, ‘many of England’s stately rural homes were built with the wealth accumulated through slavery and colonialism’.⁹ Indeed, Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, obliquely coded with the themes of slavery and abolition, represents this historical reality through the novel’s eponymous, fictional estate. The apparently controversial Countryfile episode that aired in June reveals Charlecote Park as one such real place: a 1680 painting of Captain Thomas Lucy, one of the historical owners of Charlecote, depicts a young black boy at the very edge of the canvas wearing a slave collar. His identity remains unclear, although there is evidence that enslaved people and their descendants were present at Charlecote in the 17th and 18th centuries. The boy in the painting has been traced to a possible connection with a black woman named Myrtila who was buried near Charlecote.¹⁰ The National Trust’s statement on ‘Addressing the histories of slavery and colonialism’—which reveals the direct connections between colonial violence against African and Asian populations and the wealth, art and craftsmanship on display in British stately homes—states that another black child was baptised there in 1735.¹¹ The missing details and the gaps in the records indicate how the project of uncovering the stories of enslaved people in the history of rural Britain has only just begun.

Re-writing the history of the countryside in this way disrupts the image of the rural idyll as a nostalgic window onto an old society of English refinement and cultural superiority, lost to the encroachment of modern urbanisation and its attendant multiracial diversity. Sarah Neal notes how the countryside is still seen as a place of white safety, of racial and cultural homogeneity and ‘white flight’.¹² A racialised discourse of nature lies barely concealed within the green and pleasant view of the English country garden: in the colonial era and beyond, this image came to represent the perceived superiority of English (and, by association, British) civilisation. Through their links to the slave trade and plantation economies, stately homes – with their expensively landscaped gardens and their enclosed agricultural fields – were epitomised as the achievements of rational progress, civilised cultivation, and the Englishman’s power over an untamed wilderness, displaced from the local countryside onto the colonies and their so-called ‘primitive’ or less civilised peoples. Seen from this angle, postcolonial migration and the presence of racial ‘others’ are discursively constructed as a threat to the superiority and homogeneity of the white nation, which is then projected onto the genteel countryside as a place of refuge and safety from a racially-driven or multicultural urban decline.

The construction of nature as a wild, untamed, primitive and feminised wilderness at odds with enlightened, white patriarchal civilisation is central to colonial-era stories of the ‘dark continent’—a racist representation of Africa as a dangerous, mysterious expanse of unmapped territory inhabited by an atavistic population. The narrative of the unknown and untamed ‘dark continent’ served as a convenient moral and scientific rationale for the continuation of a virtuous and progressive British imperialism, especially after the formal abolition of slavery.¹³ Romanticism, as an artistic and cultural orientation that emerged in opposition to urban industrialisation and the discourse of scientific, rational progress, re-imagined the ‘dark continent’ as a surviving image of the Edenic childhood of white civilisation. Africa’s native inhabitants were at first cast as ‘noble savages’ in need of protection from the violent excesses of European imperialism, and later portrayed as strange and primitive others in literary ‘quest romances with gothic overtones in which the heroic white penetration of the dark continent is the central theme’, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.¹⁴

Instead of celebrating the triumph of the wealth and power of the country house with its landscaped gardens and the rapid enclosure of the countryside by parliament and the landowning elites, the post-Enlightenment Romantic gaze envisioned Britain as having lost touch with its own pre-industrial rural wilderness. This is nostalgia of a different kind: while supposedly primitive, feminised, colonised populations were seen as remaining in touch with their authentic traditions and their connection to a wild and savage nature, overly civilised Europeans and Englishmen were pitied for suffering the rupture of industrialised modernity, and for their alienation from idyllic rural innocence. In this discursive frame, racialised others as ‘noble savages’ became the inspiration for the retrieval of Britain’s own, lost golden age, and for the desire to reclaim the folklore and customs of imagined rural communities who had lived in harmony with the land and the seasons.

The threads of this Romantic discourse are traceable in the colonial genealogies of the New Age spirituality and Pagan movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, which in Britain have tended to be predominantly white up until the present day. Although some of their earlier 19th and 20th-century forms were politically conservative in orientation, in the 1970s, 80s and 90s these alternative subcultures blended with the edges of the socialist, feminist and environmentalist movements. Their adherents opposed Tory politics and nurtured a distrust towards post-industrial, urbanised mainstream society in general. Instead, they emphasised the

quest for reconnection with an imagined pre-modern, de-urbanised (and implicitly de-racialised) British landscape, reconstructed as a scene of wild and primitive enchantment. Kevin Hetherington even suggests New Age travellers ‘viewed the countryside as a space of exile’, seeking out prehistoric sites, ley lines and other spaces associated with ‘Earth mysteries’, which became for them ‘the spaces of a negotiated, achieved ethnicity’.¹⁵ At the core of their identity was a sense of *otherness* and difference from the disenchanting urbanity of mainstream cultural and governmental institutions, tourism and commerce. The romanticisation of rural alterity here became a means of repairing modern alienation, and an important source of countercultural renewal for white British identity.

Whether the British countryside is constructed as a civilised and cultivated English garden or as the scene of an enchanted, pre-modern, prehistoric wilderness, both of these two contrasting, nostalgic discourses of nature displace black and brown people somewhere else, either imagining us as the homogenised sign of a chaotic, multicultural urban life (which leads back to the desire for a rural refuge of white Englishness), or casting us into the imagined reflection of a lost, pre-modern and primitive past. Either way the colonial gaze is applied, people of colour in Britain are implicitly viewed as the signs of a postmodern, inorganic rupture with an imagined, pre-colonial, *white* past. The nostalgic vision enacts a temporal displacement wherein the modern British descendants of historically colonised African and Asian people do not appear at all in the rural imagery of Britain and, by extension, do not properly belong to the standard image of Britain as a nation. Understood this way, it is perhaps no wonder that white rural residents sometimes stare at black and brown people when we venture outside of urban spaces.

On a more optimistic note, on-screen representations of rural Britain have begun to change, albeit slowly. An early example is the 1999 film adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, which tries to render the novel’s allusions to the slave trade more apparent to a modern audience. Here, the heroine stumbles upon a series of disturbing sketches depicting acts of violence against enslaved people, drawn by her cousin during his stay at the family’s plantation in Antigua. The family patriarch reacts with rage at her discovery. No black characters appear or speak in their own right, however, and the scene mainly serves as a moment of emotional and moral catharsis for the heroine’s own struggles as a poor female relative taken in by her wealthy, plantation-owning uncle. The existence of the sketchbook is never satisfactorily explored for its full implications, and its sudden intrusion into the English rural idyll is soon forgotten in favour of redemption, romance and marriage in the popular Austenian style. More recent dramas

such as *Lady Macbeth* (2016), the television series *Sanditon* (2019), based on Austen's last, unfinished novel, and even the final season of *Poldark* (2019) feature black characters in pivotal (although not protagonist) roles, and suggest a gradually increasing attentiveness to the countryside's colonial past as well as to the complex dynamics of race and gender it entailed. This trend is not the result of an automatic, liberal drift towards social progress, but a response to decades of black and brown antiracist activism and efforts to claim platforms in British institutions—much as Dwayne Fields and the other black and brown naturalists are doing in the short BBC *Countryfile* segment mentioned above. The public resistance to their narratives is due to the way the mere presence and platforming of people of colour in the natural landscape and in countryside affairs disrupts the double-sided nostalgic imagination of the rural idyll and its significance for the image of the British nation. Heightened denial that racism exists at all in the countryside, when compared to urban spaces, is one of the ways the differential racialisation of the urban and the rural operates, amplified against the whiteness of sparsely populated rural spaces.¹⁶

Projects that encourage diversity in rural affairs and the outdoors, that recognise the countryside's colonial history and its enduring legacy in the national imagination, and that openly recognise and oppose racism, could lay the groundwork for the emergence of new narratives about the urban and the rural, and for a more welcoming space for the histories—and therefore futures—of people of colour in Britain. There are signs of hope: a branch of the Black Lives Matter movement, called BLM in the Stix, launched in August, provides rural communities with a toolkit to engage in antiracist activism.¹⁷ An organisation called Black2Nature (featured on the *Countryfile* segment) was set up by young activist Mya-Rose Craig to give inner city minority ethnic children from Bristol the chance to enjoy nature on the Somerset Levels.¹⁸ Colonial Countryside, another youth-led project established by Professor Corinne Fowler and organised in collaboration with the National Trust, creatively engages school children with the historical realities of Britain's rural past and gives them the space to imagine and understand their own connections to it.¹⁹ For policy-makers who wish to encourage diversity in rural spaces and organisations, it is important to recognise, promote and work alongside these projects and to provide funding and support for the activist efforts of black and brown naturalists. The long-term future of rural Britain may yet be rewritten.

Notes

¹ *BBC Countryfile - Charlecote Park* (June 2020) Episode is available from <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000kk36/countryfile-charlecote-park>>

² The Twitter response can be found at: <https://twitter.com/BBCCountryfile/status/1277277327639154688>. A Google search displays tabloid headlines reacting to the episode from *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and others.

³ A record of the complaints is available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/complaint/countryfile-0>

⁴ Glover, J. (2019) *Landscapes Review: Final Report* [online] DEFRA. Available from <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf>

⁵ See the following thread for an account of the statue's retrieval: <https://twitter.com/mshedbristol/status/1271124598780821511?s=20>

⁶ Neal, S. and Agyeman, J. (eds.) (2006) 'Introduction'. *The New Countryside? Ethnicity, Nation and Exclusion in Contemporary Rural Britain*. Bristol: The Policy Press, pp.2-3

⁷ See, for example, Khatwa, A. (2020) 'Black and Brown Faces in Green Spaces'. *National Lottery Heritage Fund*. Available from <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/blogs/black-and-brown-faces-green-spaces>. Another example is Parker, L.A. (2020) 'We Need To Call Out Rural Racism. Nature Is For Everyone To Enjoy'. *Huffington Post*. Available from <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/we-need-to-call-out-rural-racism-nature-is-for-everyone_uk_5f2bd54ec5b64d7a55ef3c16>

⁸ Williams, R. (1973) *The Country and the City*. Nottingham, England: Spokesman

⁹ Neal, S. (2002) 'Rural Landscapes, Representations and Racism: Examining Multicultural Citizenship and Policy-Making in the English Countryside'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (3), p.445

¹⁰ Benjamin, A. (2007) 'Beyond the Grave'. *The Guardian* [online] 21 March. available from <<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/mar/21/communities.raceintheuk>>

¹¹ *Addressing the Histories of Slavery and Colonialism at the National Trust* (no date) Available from <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust>>

¹² Neal, S. (2002) 'Rural Landscapes, Representations and Racism: Examining Multicultural Citizenship and Policy-Making in the English Countryside'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (3), p.445

¹³ Brantlinger, P. (1985) 'Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent'. *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1), p.168

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.188

¹⁵ Hetherington, K. (2006) *Visions of England: New Age Travellers and the Idea of Ethnicity*. ed. by Neal, S. and Agyeman, J. Bristol: Policy Press, p.190

¹⁶ Neal, S. (2002) 'Rural Landscapes, Representations and Racism: Examining Multicultural Citizenship and Policy-Making in the English Countryside'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (3), p.457

¹⁷ Mohdin, A. and Campbell, L. (2020) 'Black Lives Matter Group Offers Rural People "Insight into Prejudice"'. *The Guardian* [online] 8 August. available from

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/08/black-lives-matter-rural-insight-prejudice-blm-stix>>

¹⁸ *Black2Nature* information available from <<https://www.yearofgreenaction.org>>

¹⁹ Verma, R. (2020) 'Colonial Countryside: Facing up to Britain's Murky Past'. *BBC Culture* [online] 28 July. available from <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200724-colonial-countryside-facing-up-to-britains-murky-past>>