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Landscapes of Discontent: Petrified Unrest in the Fens of Eastern England.

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ABSTRACT

In the cartographic analyses that appeared following the 2016 referendum regarding whether the United Kingdom (UK) should remain a member of the European Union (EU), an image of an old landscape flashed up. The Fen region in the East of England – once a large swathe of wetland and now a dry arable landscape divided by three county lines – appeared as a landscape disproportionately in favour of leaving the EU. This thesis attempts to read this congealed spatial form as what the German critic Walter Benjamin might call a ‘gesture’ of a history of the rural that has been covered over.

There has as yet been no geographic analysis of rural landscape that utilises a Benjaminian reading. I propose that this is due, at least in part, to the lack of a Benjaminian conceptual vocabulary of the rural. The recognition of this oversight – as well as its historicity and consequences – and the attempt to address it through a close reading of the specific limit case of the Fen landscape defines the central contribution of this thesis.

This is achieved through a mixed methods approach that constellates historical and archival research with ethnography, photography, interviews and creative writing in an attempt to read and re-read the Fen landscape. Through this process I notice the myriad disruptions and disjunctions present in the apparently solid arrangement of this place in order to engage with the contingent elements of the Fen landscape – the alterity that resides *in* its current monocultural form rather than behind or underneath it.

The form of this thesis aims to mediate the phenomenological experiences of the Fen landscape described by my participants into a textual document. Through this process I construct a rudimentary conceptual dictionary of this rural site, reducing apparently commonsense readings of this landscape to rubble and ruin and providing a momentary glimpse of possibilities beyond hegemony.

The implications of this thesis are twofold. First, I indicate an urgent need for theoretical heterogeneity in the methodological and philosophical underpinnings of rural landscape scholarship. This implication is also significant for Benjamin scholars in its identification of a distinct research agenda for cultural materialism away from the urban street: on the stage of the farmer's field.

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FOREWORD: HISTORY PASSES INTO SETTING.

1.1 Monocultural arrangements

In the mid-sixteenth century, William Herbert the Earl of Pembroke expelled villagers from long-standing settlements on the boundary of his estate. Herbert had a vision of an arcadian country park, landscaped in the vision of a bucolic and well-ordered England, ruled over by a noble upper class. In order to achieve this vision, the labourers in the village just outside the estate were ordered to leave. In anger at their expulsion from their homes, the villagers invaded the park. In retaliation Herbert travelled to his Welsh estates and ordered an army of tenants that he marched to Pembroke. This army, at Herbert's order, hunted and slaughtered the invading villagers, leaving the grounds clear for the development of a harmonious and beautiful country park.

A generation later Herbert's son Henry married Mary Sidney, whose brother Philip Sidney wrote 'The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia'. The pastoral images in this book, inspired not only by Herbert's estate but also by his political philosophy, defined literary depictions of the English countryside for the next two centuries, influencing writers from Shakespeare to John Milton. This category of territory – the rural, the pastoral, the agricultural, the arable or the countryside – is slippery, never fully or accurately described by any of its possible names. Plainly put, though distinct these categories all encompass a desire to stabilise natural forces at their root – to make ephemeral and singular phenomena reproducible – through processes of violent suppression. Neither reducible to nor attainable by discourse, the act of organised food production is always simultaneously over- and under-determined. The monocultural arrangement, by

which I mean the tending of one crop within a space whilst creating a hostile environment for all other life, can be understood as a counter-transcendental category: it literally embodies the immanence of existence in its emphatically mundane, earthbound, and corporeal form. It is the site that shows the field of force between nature – at once a tyrant and a martyr – and sovereign power.

This thesis performs a close reading on the Fen region in the East of England. This distinct agricultural landscape is interrogated as a limit-case – an essential point of contact between experience and history. I propose that the Fen landscape provokes geographers to disrupt narratives of landscape as process (cf. Bell, 2012) and to consider the agricultural field as a critical point of disjuncture – a site a ‘petrified unrest’ (Benjamin, 2006a, p 143).

The term ‘petrified unrest’ is evoked in the title of this thesis in a reference to two critical touchstones at work in this project. Firstly, the term makes reference to the German Jewish critic Walter Benjamin’s (2006a) essays concerning the life and works of the French poet Charles Baudelaire. In this body of work Baudelaire’s poetry is understood as neither symptomatic of, nor prescriptive towards the conditions of modernity. The poet’s oeuvre is analysed by Benjamin instead, as a site scarred by the aporias and ruptures, the fragmentation and destruction of modernity. Benjamin uses the term ‘petrified unrest’ to describe this site as at once alive and yet simultaneously, not living. Taken from Gottfried Keller’s poem ‘Verlorenes Recht, Verlorenes Glück’ (Lost Right, Lost Happiness) the term enacts the stony gaze of a Medusa (Leslie 2016, p76). ‘Petrified unrest’ is akin to an animation of power that suddenly freezes the actor upon the stage; the fourth wall is broken, and *something* winks at the audience in an ambiguous moment of truth. If for Benjamin ‘petrified unrest’ is the name of a site in which

an endless production of commodities creates the illusion of flows that are off stage powered by the jerking gait of the factory line (Leslie 2016), for this thesis the question is whether Benjamin's Baudelaire essays method can tell us something about the farmer's field – that most vulgar site of production in present day England.

To perform this reading I implement Walter Benjamin's particular cultural materialism of spatiotemporal frameworks. This is a theoretical grounding that is in contrast to Raymond Williams cultural materialism (2005) – which is concerned with the past as a *constructive* element of hegemonic spatial practices (see Jackson, 1994) – concentrates on the *destructive* elements of history as it flashes up in the present-day landscape. Through this reading I aim to disrupt the concept of the arable field as a site of organic process in the hope that this interruption might provide a momentary glimpse of possibilities beyond the hegemony of what I call 'the monocultural arrangement'.

There has, as yet, been no geographic analysis of rural landscape that utilises a Benjaminian reading. I propose that this is due, at least in part, to the lack of a Benjaminian conceptual vocabulary of the rural. The recognition of this oversight, as well as its historicity and consequences – and the attempt to address it through a close reading of the specific limit case of the Fen landscape – defines the central contribution of this thesis.

1.2 Duration and multiplicity in rural space.

Geographical scholarship has a long history of engaging with questions regarding the spatiality of rural life and environment. As the geographer Ron Johnston

(Head of the University of Sheffield's Geography department between 1982 and 1985) made clear in his studies of the evolution of human geography, the content of this discipline cannot be understood without consideration of its context (Johnston, 1991). This is also true for the subdisciplines of rural geography, which must be understood in the context of the complex 'industrial revolution' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This epoch shift occurred earlier in England, Wales, and Scotland than it did in continental Europe. This period followed an 'agricultural revolution' which itself unravelled in a heterogenous and complex set of spatial, cultural and technological processes. Mass rural-urban migration was one consequence of these processes – by 1851 the census recorded that 50 percent of the total population of England and Wales resided in towns and cities. This goes some way to explaining the perception of Britain as a nation whose proletariat 'roots' reside in industrial towns rather than in agricultural settings (Clout, 2008). This perception was intensified by the arcadian phantasies of the aristocracy as their estates entered the romantic cultural imagination and solidified in the formation of bodies such as the National Trust in 1885 and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England in 1925.

It was during the 'long industrial revolution' that the modern university formations in which UK academics work today were codified as humanist reworkings of the Aristotelian curriculum that had served the universities prior to the 'higher education revolution' of the early 19th century (Withers and Mayhew, 2002). It was relatively late in this process of disciplinary formalisation in UK universities that Geography emerged, in 1919, as a discrete discipline (Clout, 2008). French theorists were more highly regarded than their German contemporaries in the UK's interwar academic environment, and the emergent

discipline of Geography drew much of its identificatory inspiration from Vidalian geography. The work of Paul Vidal de La Blache provided a constellatory point that drew disparate scholars together in a human geographic discipline that acted as a natural science of lifeways. This Vidalian scholarship focused on the interrelations of people's activities and their physical environment and was concerned with the identification of enduring aspects of landscape – 'paysage' – over and above ephemeral social trends (Friedman, 1996).

It was in this context that the subdiscipline of rural geography began to form across four distinctive strands. Rural settlement studies borrowed from anthropology and biology in its aim to identify 'ethnic' explanations for distinctive morphologies (see Fleure and James, 1916), conservation studies bridged ecology and archaeology in its aims to identify and preserve 'native' treasures, and regional planning studies aimed to develop effective land utilisation surveys and strategies (see Stamp, 1931; Coppock, 2014: 221ff; Coleman, 1961). Finally, historical geography aimed to identify patterns and narratives within a 'changing English landscape'. The founding father of this subdiscipline – Henry Clifford Darby – produced a body of extensive research regarding the Fen region of eastern England (Darby, 1932; 1954; 2007; 2011a; 2011b; 2013) which has proved critical for the development of this thesis.

Darby's own work was heavily influenced by the French human geographer Albert Demangeon who proposed that human geography should not be subject to "a sort of brutal determinism, where natural factors determine one's fate" (Demangeon 1932, in Clout 2003: 15-16). This was an image of a geographic discipline in which the concept of territorial space is used to delve back into the past. British rural geography broadly followed this format, studying the patterns and morphology of

settlements through a combination of archival studies and fieldwork. This work, though rigorous, lacked an explicit theoretical engagement (see Clout, 1972) until the critical turn of the 1980s when work by rural geographers adopted a ‘political economy approach’ exploring a wide body of literature embracing poststructuralist, feminist, and other approaches (Clout, 2007). However, as the work of rural geography has expanded into new methodological territories, it has retained its grounding in French theoretical conceptions of space and place. This work can broadly be understood as falling into four categories: assemblage based contributions grounded in Deleuze (2001) and Latour (1993, 2005) that conceive of space and agency as emerging from the association of humans and non-humans to form precarious wholes (see Buller and Hoggart, 2015; Woods, 1998, 2007, 2010; Whatmore, 2013, 2017); regulatory economic critiques that combine Harvey (1989) and Foucault (via Crampton and Elden, 2007) to interrogate processes of consumption (Evans et al, 2002; Marsden et al, 1996; Lowe et al, 1993); phenomenological readings that utilise Thrift (1996) and Serres and Latour (1995) as well as Ingold’s (1992) reading of Heidegger to interrogate non-urban space as a representational medium (Seamon, 1979; Wiley, 2005, 2006; and Buller, 2014); and post-structural readings that make use of Foucault (1971), Butler (2006) and Derrida (2006) to understand the performativity and discourse of rural places (Mattless, 1992, 2008, 2019; Little, 1999, 2002; Pearson, 2006).

In this thesis I propose that these discrete strands of rural geographic scholarship share a grounding in a Bergsonian understanding of the relationship between time and space. Bergson’s 1889 doctoral thesis *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (2015) contested Kant’s concept of freedom. Bergson proposed that freedom in Kant exists outside of time and space and

condemns human action to determination by natural causality. In an attempt to overcome this problem, Bergson set out a metaphysical system that differentiates time and space. In this system immediate consciousness is understood as belonging to the temporal realm – the duration (*la durée*). For Bergson it is in the duration – in which there is no juxtaposition or co-presence between events and thus no mechanistic causality – that freedom can be experienced. The duration is for Bergson a ‘qualitative multiplicity’ where “several conscious states are organised into a whole [and] permeate one another” (2015: 122). Within this system space is conceived of as a ‘quantitative multiplicity’; it specifies material and affect, through a mechanistic process of externalising one thing from another within a homogeneous space. It is in this concept of temporal multiplicity and spatial homogeneity that we can locate not only Deleuze’s (1988) attempt to unify the two contradictory features of heterogeneity and continuity but also the assemblages and networks that characterise both Latour and Harvey’s political economies.

In this theoretical model, space and place are loaded with multiplicities and assemblages that nevertheless lack dynamism and contingency (Massey, 2005: 21). I propose that in this moment of impending climate disaster and intensifying political stratification and unrest, an alternative conception of space might be implemented to introduce new contingencies into geographic analyses of the rural. Over the last three decades geography has utilised the work of Walter Benjamin (and the Frankfurt School more generally) to provide new insights into urban sites (Gregory, 1991; Keith, 2000; Pile, 2013) and critical methodologies more generally (Latham, 1999; Dubow, 2004; Belcher et al, 2008; Kingsbury and Jones, 2009). Rural geography, however, has not engaged with a Benjaminian inspired

geography which sees historicised time as homogenous and empty, and space as filled with dynamic and responsive constellations and crystallisations.

This thesis aims to explore the implications of potentialities in Benjamin's spatiotemporal framework, which in many ways directly opposes the Bergsonian concept of duration – not only through a methodology that questions “the certainty of knowledge that is lasting” but also through a privileging of the neglected question of “the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral” (2004: 100). I propose here that Benjamin's enduring concern with the new, the outmoded and the heteronomous offers the possibility for an “agricultural metaphysics” (Nelson and Grene, 1998) that conceives of rural space as a constellatory point of radical non-synthesis, in which new political contingencies gesture. Indeed, it is in the tendency of ‘rational progress’ to become irrational regress – the technology of food production at its most corporeal level – that this thesis finds a crystallisation of the failures of modernity that endlessly continues in a succession of new guise under contemporary conditions (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002).

I propose in this thesis that the idea of ‘society’ as a delimited, bounded entity is analogous to, and in part generated by, the conception of the city-state. This urban environment was named the polis by Ancient Greek thinkers of the fourth century BCE, most notably Plato and Aristotle. In short, since the birth of ‘political philosophy’ the urban has been imagined as the situated body of society. This is a model of thinking that obscures the relational significance of rural life. The Ancient Greek polis was distinguished from other types of community through the presence of distinct activities, such as commercial exchange, judicial proceedings, and public deliberation. These systems imagined the arable land as *part of* the polis, rather than its life-sustaining force.

There is an alternative way of interrogating the rural as a site of social life. Instead of imagining the rural and the urban as two poles on an evolutionary spectrum, we might instead imagine the city as always shot through with the agricultural – a concept that is hard to parse within the Bergsonian concept of space often used in rural geography. When conceived of in this manner, agriculture is neither a starting point nor an end destination. Put simply it cannot be understood only through the movements of flows and multiplicities of assemblages. Rural space is rather an interminable force, a relationship with nature that is reproduced within social and political life. When we think of commodities, this task is fairly simple – of course plants make up 80 percent of the food that humans on the planet eat, of course they are grown in farmers' fields, and of course they are sold to people in the city (Rich, 2019). The task gets more difficult as we begin to think about philosophical, economic and political products and issues. It is nevertheless an important task.

Long before Aristotle and Plato, in the eighth century BCE, the philosopher farmer Hesiod warned that the life of the polis sails upon the sea of a dangerous and unstable nature. A farm, Hesiod explains, is a part of nature that human beings take as their own and try to direct towards expedient ends. Humans cannot, however, control the movements of nature within their bounded plot. The agricultural field is not understood as a tamed patch of earth by Hesiod. It is rather the site where we can see in action the relationship between human social organisation and the disordered, chaotic force of nature.

For Hesiod this is a bond that is at once co-operative and hostile. Nature is the force that both causes the crop to grow and destroys the self-same crop, through the actions of insects, diseases and storms. The farmer can perceive nature's

actions but cannot control its force entirely – even with the best planning. It is here, I propose, in the relationship between society's need for food and the untameable earth, that a radical rural geography may emerge. This requires an understanding of the world that does not see human life and subjectivity as having primacy even within *human society*. Indeed, this requires a conception of social and political space as variegated force, endlessly refracted through the prism of the rural.

1.3 No vision.

In the opening scene of Caryl Churchill's 1983 play *Fen*, a Japanese businessman called Mr Takai introduces the audience to the specific landscape in which, he explains, he hopes to invest his money and in which the audience will invest their time for the duration of the drama. Mr Takai explains that this land was once underwater. The Fens squirmed with fish and eels in reed-ridden currents until "in 1630 rich lords planned to drain the Fen, change swamps into grazing land, far thinking men, brave investors." (2016: 144)

The Fen people, he continues, had "no vision". They claimed to be content with their writhing mire and actively opposed the drainage. Despite this, for Mr Takai, the story ends happily ever after: "In the end" he tells the audience, "we have this beautiful earth. Very efficient, flat land, ploughs right up to the edge, no waste" (ibid).

Mr Takai's monologue describes a Fen community which is intractable and aggressively resistant to progress. In his account the Fen-dwellers are less than human, ignorant and indolent in the face of technological progress: "they refused to work on the drainage, smashed dykes, broke sluices" he tells the audience.

From Mr Takai's prospectors' viewpoint both landscape and history are broken into parcels of investment and arranged in a logical movement forward. But the bounded space of the stage allows Churchill to counter this narrative. Through the use of temporal slips and spectral traces the audience is made aware that this progress narrative is dependent on myriad omissions, or perhaps more precisely, repressions. Ghosts walk upon the stage.

The labour of working-class bodies and the land itself only feature in Mr Takai's narrative at the point in which they threaten to interrupt material accumulation. The compliance of labouring bodies is framed as natural within this temporal schema. The ghosts who appear on stage during *Fen* expose the violence of this myth. For example, the spectre of an unknown woman appears and tells Tewson the farmer that she is starving and that "you bloody farmers could not live if it was not for the poor, tis them that keep you bloody rascals alive" (p. 159). At the end of the play, the character Val (who has died in the final scenes) returns as a ghost and recounts tales of violence that namelessly bleed across temporal boundaries. "I can't keep them out", Val states, "Her baby died starving, she died starving, who?" (p. 170). These ghosts act as both the sign and effect of voices displaced from history because the recognition of these experiences would disrupt the claim of history as progress.

The agricultural labourer, like the midwife, is a constant social form that appears across history and geography. I make a distinction here between the labourer and the farmer – though some farmers are also labourers on their own land, not all make this connection with the soil and vegetative matter. In the richest as well as the poorest of countries, seed needs to be sown, stones need to be picked and produce harvested. Despite myriad technological advances this is one job that, like

the midwife, has remained a constant reminder of mortality and human dependence upon the physical realm. Long before companies like Uber and Just Eat combined the gig economy model with mobile technology, the shifting seasonal demands of agriculture meant that short-term and 'payment by task' labour relations were standard practice.

In the east of England service providers called 'Gangmasters' provide landowners and farmers with gangs of workers at peak times of the agricultural calendar. These labourers have through history been 'non-citizen' individuals, people without suffrage or rights, many of whom are 'just' legal enough to pass inspection; many who are not. In the late nineteenth century this population was made up of children and traveller and gypsy communities as well as the rural poor. In the mid-twentieth century gangmasters used the labour of rural workingclass women. After the expansion of the European Union in 2004, a web of employment agencies began to operate between some of the poorest areas of a newly expanded Europe and the furthest back waters of the rural UK. Modern slavery emerged in the small market towns that punctuate wide rural expanses in places like Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. The figure of the agricultural labourer is the image par excellence of the labour that underpins the formal choreography of alienation. It is in rural social organisation that political forces and agri-technology constellate, always in motion and in relationship. The study of the arable is not a side pursuit, rather it anticipates and helps us grasp the dark present.

1.4 The climate crisis and domination ‘at home’.

In our present moment the horrors of the intensifying climate crisis appear in the interminable cycle of twenty-four hour news across multiple devices. We find ourselves standing in the nexus of myriad ‘monocultural arrangements’. I introduce this term in this thesis to describe a system of management systems that deny diversity and contingency through the use of technology. In these systems more and more of the same is produced. Human use of natural resources for the production of goods currently affects more than 70 percent of the global ice-free land surface. Between one quarter to one third of this available land is used by society for the primary production of food, feed, fibre, timber, and energy.

This is a situation that came to fruition during the twentieth century, though it has a longer pre-history. Data shows that since 1961 global population growth and changes in consumption patterns have together caused unprecedented rates of land and freshwater use (IPCC, 2022). Agriculture currently accounts for two thirds to three quarters of global freshwater use. Areas under agriculture and forestry have expanded dramatically during this period and have contributed to increasing greenhouse gas emissions and widespread loss of natural ecosystems and biodiversity.

About a quarter of the Earth’s ice-free land area is currently subject to humaninduced degradation. Soil takes a long time to form and conventional farming practices are eroding the soil at a rate more than 100 times higher than the soil formation rate. Drought and desertification are becoming steadily more commonplace. In 2015, the UN estimated that around 500 million people lived within areas that experienced desertification between the 1980s and 2000s (IPCC,

2022). The effects of climate change and land degradation disproportionately affects areas in the Global South and this process is resulting in exponential loss of diversity as well as impending food crises in areas such as South and East Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Since the mid twentieth century, the incessant production of more of the same has been facilitated by the limited attention given to the social and economic arrangements of rural communities and land use. This is a form of alienation that leads to the acceptance of apocalyptic events as everyday inconveniences, whilst simultaneously we accept day-to-day conveniences in return for climacteric conditions – the interminable by-product of splitting of the sensuous form from value.

Land ownership remains a key underpinning component of rural land use. Property rights are used to control the way that land is used or is not used in rural areas and this has implications for sustainable development, resilience, and ecosystem services. In the UK the right to private property is central to the idea of citizenship and trumps the right to public knowledge regarding the use of land. This becomes particularly pertinent when considered through the lens of agricultural land because data protection laws mean that it is often impossible to find out which areas of land are home to specific crops. Due to privacy laws concerning land – particularly inherited land – knowledge about the production and economics of agriculture in the UK has long been obscured. Much of the history of rural policy and practice can be understood as a struggle between the rights and privileges of private landowners and state intervention in the public interest. These tussles have, however, produced far less change than at one time seemed inevitable.

When it comes to land ownership, the UK is currently a more unequal country than Brazil, where there are regular land riots. In Europe only Spain is more unequal in terms of land ownership than the UK, through the maintenance of land patterns imposed by General Franco's fascist regime (Powell, 2019). English land ownership laws date back to 1066, when William the Conqueror claimed all of England for the Crown then leased estates to lords and nobles, who in turn leased the land to tenants and farmers. Today, England and Wales remain among the last countries on earth to continue these ancient patterns of land ownership. Because these hereditary estates make up a large portion of the UK's agricultural land, this means that the machinations of political and economic systems are obscured within UK food production and farming.

It is almost impossible to work out the extent of the assets and political clout that UK land owning families exert. Whilst all land in England and Wales is required to be registered at Her Majesty's Land Registry following any significant change in title, this does not apply to land that has not changed hands since registration was made compulsory. The Land Registry currently estimates that 20 percent of the land mass in England and Wales remains unregistered – most of this unregistered property is rural land. Accurate statistics on the identity of landowners and the nature of land holding in the UK are therefore very difficult to produce. The aristocratic landowners exercise a huge amount of control over rural England. British land ownership and agricultural subsidies have been painstakingly kept out of the public eye by successive governments under the duress of the House of Lords. This is the non-elected arm of the British parliamentary system which is still dominated by hereditary peers whose families form the English land-owning class.

In 2016, *Unearthed* – an investigative journalism project run by the environmental organisation Greenpeace – ran an investigation into the top 100 recipients of direct EU farming subsidies (Dowler, 2017). They found that UK hereditary landowners as a group received a total of £87.9m in agricultural subsidies in 2015, of which £61.2m came from the single payment scheme. This is more than was paid to the bottom 55,119 recipients in the single payment scheme combined. The payments take up a large portion of the UK’s farming subsidy pot. At least one in five of these single payments went to businesses owned or controlled by members of aristocratic families – including Lord Rothschild, the long-term friend of right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch and one-time BSkyB director, and the Conservative MP Richard Drax (Lashmar, 2021). Rumoured to be the UK’s richest parliamentarian, Mr Drax has a fortune that exceeds £150 million. Much of this wealth was accumulated through his family’s sugar plantation in Barbados that was established in the seventeenth century and run using slave labour for over two hundred years.

Richard Drax has consistently used his family’s wealth and his resultant position in the House of Lords to restrict support, education, and individual freedoms to working people, as well as voting against environmental and democratic measures. This organisation of the landowning aristocracy and privilege of private property is a “germinate gem” (Nabokov, 1990: 29) that has refracted, bending the force of the farmer’s field into another oblique source of force. The global agri-food system can trace its origins back to late nineteenth century Britain, which was then the world’s dominant commercial power. In our current moment, although our supermarket shelves burst with

culinary variety, the production, supply and distribution of food is increasingly pooling in a handful of corporations – most notably in the hands of Associated British Foods, Cargill, Unilever and Nestle.

This pooling of force creates a dual process. On one hand these corporations operate an oligopoly – precisely a market with a small number of sellers – and on the other they also control an oligopsony – a market with few buyers. It is not only hard to grow grain, but also now difficult to sell it as well. Tenant farmers and other non-landowning agricultural workers grow poorer and less powerful each year. Max Weber’s classic definition of the state describes “a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (1946: 77-78). We have forgotten that issues regarding the production and distribution of food are a primary source of force and its uses. The arable shows how the force of domination grounds, founds and exceeds itself ‘at home’ in the farmer’s field.

1.5 Petrified unrest.

The rural holds the accrued material of centuries of political and legal domination over subordinate people, the exploitation of human and natural resources, and the construction of racial and cultural differences that privilege the nobility over the populations they rule. In other words, by identifying the urban as the primary site of social life we have understood the fruit of our social organism as the ‘evolved’ or ‘cooked’ form rather than as part of a wider *organic* form. Put a different way, the rural does not underlie the city in any mechanical or even linguistic manner. Society cannot evolve beyond the requirement of the organised production of food, and this need cannot be met predictably over the long term due to the inherent

inconsistencies of natural forces. In other words, the foundation that the rural provides for the urban is always unstable and inconsistent.

In our current moment, economic and political spheres increasingly congeal in petrified unrest. It is in the arable that we might locate some decomposing force of nature, which in purely corporeal drama might unsettle from within the interminable production of more of the same. Nature is frequently violent, and always generative.

This thesis focuses on the Fen region in the East of England as the stage on which these gestures might be glimpsed and ‘fondled’ – as a prism through which this petrified unrest might be constellated with wider spatial-temporal conditions of modernity. It is arranged in three ‘Acts’. In Act One the stage is set through an introduction to the Fens as a particular site of agricultural modernity and to the analytical possibilities offered by Benjamin’s metaphysics to an analysis to rural geography – and to this site in particular.

Act One is composed of three chapters:

- **(2) A Landscape that most approximates to Nothing**

In this chapter I offer a reading of the Fen landscape as a site at once formed by and shot through with the historical material that simultaneously saturates and exceeds it. The aim of this chapter is to read the Fen landscape against the conventional understanding of place as space made meaningful and to consider the silences and slippages that fail to signify in this site.

- **(3) Monocultural Monad — A Methodology**

In this chapter I develop a methodological presupposition that relocates the political in the material and historicised context of rural life.

The central aim of this chapter is to give methodological form to the radical non-synthesis of sensual and non-sensuous material that is always imminent within the arable field. This is enacted through the tracking of disjuncture and loss in the Fen landscape, and a discussion of a potential constellation between Hesiod's arable metaphysics and Walter Benjamin's conceptual dictionary. This chapter contributes a consideration potential for uses of this constellation in generating new understandings not only of rural landscapes but geographic objects more generally.

- **(4) The Research, the Researched and the Researcher – Positionality and Process.**

In this chapter I document the research process that simultaneously emerged from and grounded the theoretical contributions of the previous two chapters. In the course of this chapter I pose research questions, document my fieldwork and outline the sources used.

Act Two, is comprised of three empirical chapters. This trio of research chapters act to constellate Benjamin's theoretical contributions with field and archival research. This act aims – through a 'fondling of details' of the specificities of the Fen landscape – to document a conceptual dictionary composed of terms that manifest through this close reading.

- **(5) Prehistory**

In this chapter I ground my reading of the Fen region the prehistory not only of the material form of the Fen landscape, but also of the arable field as a site

simultaneously of radical contingency and the formation of statecraft. This unfolds, not as a conduit for the transmission of a research narrative, but instead as a physical medium in its own right – a spatial configuration of historical setting, a choreography of loss, rather than a poetics of place.

- **(6) The Desert**

This chapter explores the manner in which technology and politics have aimed to produce a consistently productive site of extraction in the fields in the Fens, and how these attempts have resulted in strange reversals and topological twists – the undermining of their own significances and uses over time.

- **(7) Spectral Labour**

My focus in this chapter aims to read de-historicised dominant narratives of issues surrounding the ‘domestic picker’ against the grain. This is achieved through a recent historical analysis of the domestic picker in the Fen region. I aim here to consider the social and labour force implications of the widespread ‘monocultural arrangements’ that dominate this region.

In Act Three, the conceptual terms developed during the body of this thesis are put to work to read the Fen region in our current moment of danger. This last movement is composed of only one chapter:

- **(8) Futures**

In this final chapter I aim to formulate an alternative reading of the conventional discourses surrounding the use of farmland as a financial asset from a located and historicised position. This final chapter also forms a conclusion in which widely held assumptions of agricultural land as a benign,

apolitical or 'safe space' are ruptured and take on the aspect of the detritus of a violent history. In this context I propose avenues for future scholarship.

The narrative of the thesis is constantly disrupted, deranged and re-grounded by anonymised pieces of landscape writing from my participants in the Fen region. These pieces of writing were initially intended to be worked into a published collection, but the writers expressed disinterest in this project. They stated a preference to contribute, without identification, to the thesis, alongside interviews. These 'Landscape Observations' have been placed between chapters. They generate undercurrents of dissent, intensification and anarchy within this contribution. Indeed the form of this thesis is a contribution its own right. The writing style aims to mediate the disorientation and temporal slips of the Fen landscape into a textual document. Put another way, this doctoral research project is an attempt reconfigure the monocultural landscape of the Fens in the form of a thesis in which unity seeps from a ground of discontinuity.

Landscape Observation One



I started the day off about half past seven in the morning and the boss said I had got to go and put a piece of glass in the corn exchange roof. I had to go with Henry – he was the local glazier, so he got lumbered with it. I don't know if the glass on the roof had been hit with lightening or something, but it had been broken for a little while and councillors had started complaining because the roof had started to leak. They had all the council chambers up there and the mayoral room and mayoral robes and all his chains of office and all that was up there. All the water was leaking into the council chambers, so it didn't go down too well, so they got the council to repair the roof. Unbeknownst to me Harold had been up there before and identified where the rain was getting in and identified the broken piece of glass, so he had to order the piece of reinforced glass in, and the glass had arrived.

It was the first time I'd ever done it and I didn't know what to expect. I knew the Corn Exchange existed, but I hadn't ever been in there. I thought "How the hell

are we gunna get up the top of that place?" So, we cycled down from the old council yard and when we got there, we realised we couldn't get up on the roof till we'd got the ladder so we had to send the lorry over to get the ladder from the main park cause that was the only one that'd get onto the roof. So, we stood there waiting for that to turn up, it was the middle of summer, quiet and quite pleasant really. That turned up about half an hour later, so we put the ladder up, the two of us. We had to put it up on ropes because it was too heavy to push up otherwise. Gingerly we went up the ladders, they was whipping about three or four feet every time you moved and when I say whipping I mean they were sort of like moving, swaying, but they were swaying towards the building. Harold did pre-warn me about the state of the roof before I went up, because that was the first time I'd been up there. I was quite shocked when I got up onto the top because that was a bit hairy, but when got used to it, knew what I had to do and that I was alright. Unbeknownst to me I also had to go back downstairs and down over the ladder again to tie the rope onto the piece of glass to haul it up through the roof. We put the glass on the floor and tied the rope round it, then Harold took the strain on it because he dropped the rope through the roof, then I had to go back out, up the ladder again and up and over the rooves. They were sort of like apex rooves, glass one side and slate the other side and there was a very narrow walkway right on the edge of the building. If you looked down to the ground, you'd be looking straight down to the ground in Exchange Square, a sixty- or seventy-foot drop. They'd got coping stones on the top bit, on the walkway but they were all loose so it you touched them they'd fall down but once I got to where he was putting the new bit of glass in then I had the chance to take a look around.

I saw the tower at West Walton which is approximately about five or six miles away and then I saw the church tower at Leverington. I also saw the river winding its way towards Peterborough along the A47. I thought "This is a fantastic view I'd love to get up here with a camera and take some photographs" but of course I never did. Glorious, the landscape is all lovely and flat you can see for miles and miles, you can see the flow of the river both ways, like I say you can see it going towards Peterborough but if you turn the other way you can see it going towards the Wash too, the marshes and all that. Greens and browns, the fields were lovely you could see all the shape of them, they weren't all square there were some rectangular ones and oblong ones, in fact I remember at one stage I did actually see a triangular one, but I can't remember where that was, I know it was out towards West Walton somewhere. You saw all the buildings, it was pretty much flat all the way through, the only things you did see were the farm buildings and that and the churches.

Then it was back to earth with a bump so to speak. I went out on the bike after that, that weekend, and basically sort of like looked at ground level at what I'd seen on the roof, and it looked completely different. It looked bigger, from up there everything looked smaller but when you got down to it everything was a lot bigger, cause being up above and that tends to make things look smaller. If there was a big hill or somewhere to look down from, I'd be up there every day, walking or biking, it'd give me a sense of pride. You could get some good photographs up there, scenic photographs, it gives you a different way of seeing it. I remember one time we went up to Snowden and I absolutely loved it, it was really fascinating to see the different angles and the different aspects of it.

I've always been in a flat landscape, that weren't until I went up to Scotland a few years ago that I realised what a flat landscape was. It's home basically, to put it bluntly, don't get me wrong I like other landscapes as well but once I'm back in the flat lands I know I'm home. It feels like security, you can see what's coming towards you. I just like it round here it's fascinating, I like living here anyway. Its home and it always will be.



ACT ONE

A LANDSCAPE THAT MOST APPROXIMATES TO NOTHING.

The invisible is the theoretical problematic's non-vision of its non-objects, the invisible is the darkness, the blinded eye of the theoretical problematic's self-reflection when it scans its non-objects, its non-problems without seeing them, in order not to look at them ... The invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible ... the outer darkness of exclusion – but the inner darkness of exclusion, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure.

Althusser (2016: 26)

The phases of the moon are the cause of tides, we know...that the word cause is used correctly here. Or again miasmas are the cause of fever- that doesn't mean anything either, there is a hole or something that oscillates in the interval.

(Lacan 1981: 22)

2.1. In which we find ourselves in the Fens of Eastern England.

Near the beginning of the English novelist Graham Swift's *Waterland* Tom Crick, history teacher and the novel's narrator asks his class:

For what is water, children, which seeks to make, all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing? And what are the Fens, which so imitate in their levelness the natural disposition of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing?

(2015:13)

Swift guides our gaze through his use of landscape in *Waterland* toward the Fens which lie low in the East of England. This Fen region is a fifteen hundred square mile coastal plain that looks towards the North Sea. Low land of this sort is liable to flooding and forming marshland. Time after time schemes both small and large have imagined the area free of water and in bloom. Doggedly the wetlands have been drained, reclaimed as agricultural land. But the water always returns.

The land shrinks, sinks as it dries.

Landscape comes into focus in *Waterland* as a medium on whose surface is inscribed the temporal circularities, repetitions, gaps and ‘approximations to Nothing’ that share a language with the Freudian unconscious. In a different register, this landscape brings to mind Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) notion that the unconscious is not to be found “at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our consciousness” but in front of us, an articulation of our field. It is “unconscious” by the fact it is not an *object*, but it is that through which objects are possible. The psychoanalytic and the phenomenological coalesce in Swift’s description of the silt that underpins the Fens "which is simultaneous accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay" (2015:9).

One way of educing the uncanny nature of this temporality – its synchronic accumulations and drownings out – is with reference to the topology of place. When considering a landscape, the topographic deals with the material features and structures of place whilst the topologic¹, as I use it here, pertains to that

¹ The concept of topologies can be traced back to Plato’s notion of *chora* as “protospace” and co-eval discussion in mathematics regarding the metaphysics of diagrams. The study of topology appears in mathematics, physics, and philosophy as a way to mediate between what Serres and Latour (1995) might call ‘the hard and the soft’.

This interaction between material and mind is the work of cultural geography in which the subject matter is always “a condition that is at once descriptively external and prescriptively immanent” (Badiou, 2006: 22). Consequently, the concept of topology itself twists around and within different theoretical schools. This work follows a Benjaminian topology of intermediate zones in which spaces of transition are understood as enclosures without exteriors. I am concerned here with the way that time and place together can unfold rather an *Ur-history*. The Fens of this thesis are conceived here as a prototypical space which unpacks prehistorical taxonomies. Work in other theoretical schools includes: Foucauldian readings (see Allen, 2011; Coleman, 2011; Elden, 2011; Latham, 2011; Paasi, 2011a) in which topology is used to explore the insidious nature of governance and power; Lacanian scholarship (see, Ragland-Sullivan (2015) and Martin and Secor, 2013) has considered spatial theory through a topologic lens; Heideggerian theorist (Malpas 2012) questions the ontological underpinnings of topology in relation to core geographical categories such as space and place; Scholars following Deleuze and Guattari’s work (see Thrift, and others) use topology to imagine a fluid “universe of spaces” (Thrift, 2006: 139),

enigmatic admixture of *topos* and *logos* – that is, to the nature of the relationship between the word/reason (*logos*) and place (*topos*). To add the unconscious here is to look at the concurrent doing and undoing of this relationship that call forth psychological elements that, while properly occluded from both *topos* and *logos*, are none the less connate with them. In this sense places are not and can never simply be what they are. They also open onto their own latent and thwarted possibilities, of things not cast aside but submerged, haunted within their very structure. Something of this haunting is evoked in Merleau-Ponty's reference to Jacques Audiberti's phrase "the secret blackness of milk" (Merleau-Ponty 2007: 409). Certainly, it is no revelation that there is blackness (without it, milk would not be visible) however the secret being alluded to here is a visual impenetrability. This opacity is a gap in perception, or in Merleau-Ponty's lexicon a *chiasmus*, generated by the creation of difference – of the something which renders the invisible visible. As in the psychodynamic unconscious, this unseen element is perceivable only through the de-contextualised fragments of its gestures. Indeed, its symptoms.

Simply put, nothing is what it is. The act of being thingified, brought into the net of the signifying structure, requires a severance from and loss of all that a something is not. This traumatic separation gives birth to ghosts. These ghosts or symptoms emerge as slips of the pen, slips of the tongue and, in the Fens of this thesis – this landscape which *most approximates to Nothing* – as the ephemera of

where neither time nor space acts as a bounded category. This work blossoms out into work in actor-network theory (ANT) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Murdoch, 2006; Callon and Law, 2004; Latour, 1993; Mol and Law, 1994) and has provoked a body of work that interrogates issues of materiality and agency "bringing along the promise of a spatial lexicon better fitted to account on the multiplicity of space-times resulting through their various intersections" (Latham, 2011).

accretion: stands of nettles blocking footpaths and silted up banks. Consequently, it is in the performance and repetition of these ‘symptoms’ that we see the vitalising force of the unconscious in this landscape. Neither reducible to nor attainable by discourse, the unconscious of the Fens pertains to the very topological rhythm in which the apparently given and the stubbornly withheld possibility and its refusal – the spectre and figure – are mutually constitutive of this place. Such a topology is, I propose, a method through which geographers might cultivate a curiosity in the unconscious as the secret intransience and intransigence of the silt. Through this understanding, the multiple trails and traces in landscape may be considered without a desire to find a comprehensive answer or a site of positive transformation. A topological focus can thus only function in recognition of an unconscious that can never be ‘unearthed’, ‘discovered’, ‘transformed’ or otherwise colonised. This is because as Callard (2003) so rightly states, the unconscious is not a “historical construct”, it cannot be placed in language, nor are its contents available for “resignification” (p. 304).

For clarity’s sake it is worth remembering Lacan’s 1957 Saussurean reformulation of Freud: “the unconscious is structured like a language” (2002: 138). By 1977 however, Lacan described language as the “condition of the unconscious” (*ibid*: xiii). The distinction is important. The term language is, I suggest, not simply an indication of an articulation or a communication, Instead it is a reference to that which moves an object into ‘symbolic’ existence – simultaneously rendering something recognisable and alienated. The implication of this is, as this thesis will demonstrate, a ‘topological unconscious’ of place itself.

That is to say, place as the very site at once made and riven by what saturates it and what it fails to grasp.

The aim of this work is to read the conventional understanding of place as ‘space made meaningful’² against the grain through a close reading of the Fens. This is a site where efforts to literally gain ground appear in material form as loss – precisely as that “nothing” evoked by Waterland’s narrator. Put another way, the material conditions of landscape are not bodied forth in the world of ideas. Ideas are rather the “objective virtual arrangement” (Benjamin, 2009: 34) of material conditions – the deployment of geography as the writing of place. The Fens, like any other place, can be seen not only in relationship to the events that shaped the landscape but in and through the landscape as a document in the life of statecraft.

The Fens in their spatial-temporal or indeed topological context are a site developed specifically as industrial arable farmland – a place stripped of all ecological possibilities except that of the growth and manufacture of food for economic purposes. Each failure to ‘reclaim’ the landscape for this purpose has been rectified by technological improvements, from leams and dykes to mechanised pumps. This is a landscape where the ecosystem has been transformed into industrial elements in a manner that obliterates the bifurcation between nature and culture. Here is a landscape stripped of context so that it floats, destitute of force or effect, and events appear as immanent traits. In this place successful drainage has led to a shrinkage of the land so that it sits below sea level, liable to flood. OR Its fecund soil turns to dust, blown hither and thither in its worthless state by gusts of wind. The commodification of this constructed arable has rendered it revenant through the demand for predictable quantities of single crops. Technological advances in pesticides and fertilisers have made this

² This understanding emerges from a phenomenological perspective, and highlights twoway flow of meaning and space through the flesh of everyday lived experiences of space (see Casey, 1993; Ingold, 2000; Malpas, 1999; Tuan, 1975, 1977; Cresswell 2015)

increasingly possible at the cost of biodiversity. The fertility of this soil has fallen away in and through the process of being governed. Seemingly natural processes of crop production no longer move to the rhythm of the organism; nature in the Fens moves to the mechanised tempo of the factory line.

In the conterminous movement of commodity fetishism – the land itself in the Fens – nature itself seems to act with human potency and power and people become reified. The bodies of those who live and work in this place are essentialised, naturalised in a social Darwinist narrative of ‘the survival of the fittest’. The failures of the local population to achieve economic success are seen in terms of inherent deficits with no visible link to wider structures of disadvantage. A town councillor in Wisbech told me:

You see I think the problem here is a lack of ambition, a lack of care. If the residents in South Cambridgeshire see a pothole in the road, they call the local council and get it sorted out. People in the North Wisbech see a pothole and just think, ‘oh there’s a pothole’ and do nothing about it.

This seemingly banal example is edifying in its erasure of context. The north Wisbech ward that is referred to by the town councillor is a specific site of indigence and has been identified for the last two decades as one of the most deprived places in England.³ In a conversation with Chris Stevens who runs the

³ As measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) which looks at Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA). These units of measurement are part of a geographic hierarchy designed to improve the reporting of small area statistics in England and Wales. The IMD defines deprivation across a range of living conditions or domains of deprivation, namely: income; employment; health deprivation and disability; education, skills and training; crime; barriers to housing and services; and living environment. The wider Fenland district in the North of Cambridgeshire has for the past two decades consistently had multiple areas in the ranked in the 10 percent most deprived in England – in which North Wisbech always features – whilst in the last two updates its neighbours in Huntingdonshire and South Cambridgeshire have no areas ranked in the 10 percent most deprived. It is worth noting here that when Fechte et al (2017) recalculated the scores for rural areas, this pattern of

Oasis Centre, a community hub in North Wisbech, she explained that this was due to very particular problems:

I think for children, it's in the top 5 percent [most deprived neighbourhoods] in the whole country, and then the rest is in the top 10 percent of the whole country. When they hear the word deprived, they feel it means burnt out cars and things like that and ghettos. But what it means here is lack of services and facilities. And the community here hasn't been supported in the past. Cambridge county council get extra funding because of the Waterlees ward, but they've ploughed all that money into other places. They've not concentrated on this area and when we tackled them about it, they started making their cuts and saying 'we haven't got any funding now to support you'. The community here has lost out on an awful lot of opportunities that other areas have had.

The issue at hand in the Fens is not the excesses of poverty – that flotsam and jetsam that Chris Stevens describes here as “the burnt-out cars and ghettos” – but rather an absence of choice, of possibilities foreclosed. This thesis is an exploration of a community subjected to the violent administrative logic of an agricultural landscape that is every bit as constructed as a city street. What I encountered during my time in this place is not only a fixation on the progressive potential of the survival of the fittest – precisely an erasure of context that rests the responsibility of a failure to thrive on the organism itself – but also the drive of the subjugator to make something of nothing through the governance and exploitation of naturalised resources non-human and human alike. This

entwinement of amnesia and violence in this place flashed up in the image of a bear trap when I interviewed Craig, a twenty-three year old, in the summer of

Fenland appearing as significantly deprived in contrast to its neighbours intensifies. Important aspects of rural deprivation as identified by this study relate to fuel poverty (i.e. households whose energy costs are higher than can be sustained by their income), hidden unemployment, and lack in opportunities such as poor access to services including shops and amenities, healthcare, childcare or digital services.

2017. He described to me his inability to find work after returning to his hometown of Wisbech following graduation and told me:

No one ever thinks of the east...It is hard to explain that people live in this outward little bit...there's people here ...we're not even brought into the North South divide...we're sort of tucked away...no one ever thinks about the East... a lot of people round here think this place is like a bear trap. Like...once you're here you can't leave.

Those who live in this place do not suffer like Hegelian Hamlets. By which I mean that theirs is not a lack of action based on indecision – that inability to choose between multiple options. The potholes are not reported but this is not due, as the town councillor intimated, to the fact that people elect to do something else. I suggest here that this is not laziness – the choice not to act, to recline instead. This lack of action is more akin to what the philosopher Simon Critchley (2006) calls 'languor'. It appears in this place as a specific evaporation of the motivation for action in light of the knowledge that the only available choice is already foreclosed – that this is a place that produces value that is funnelled elsewhere. Languor languishes like the sky above this drained and lowered landscape, and in its time distends, magnified through torpor.

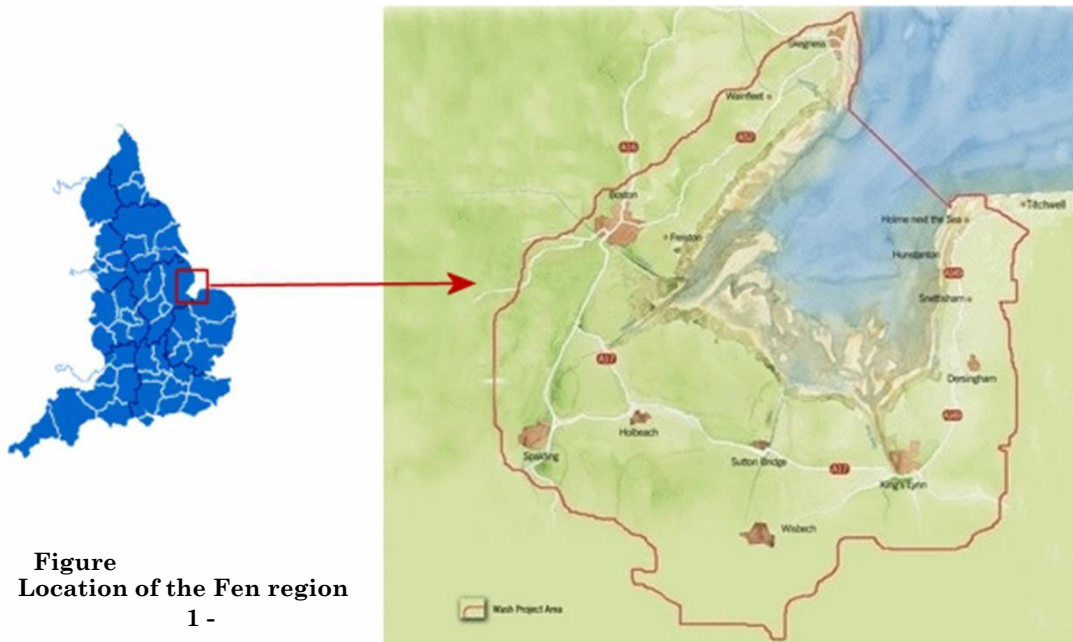


Figure
Location of the Fen region
 1 -

2.2 In which depth appears on the surface of the landscape.

The spatial arrangement of the Fens – in particular, the Fenland district that is the focus of this study and is itself a fragment of old Isle of Ely which makes up part of that seventeenth century reclamation of the Great Level – is a site where small market towns float like the islands they once were in a mire of industrialised agriculture. That the old landscape is still visible in this topography is an auger of a specific and crucial geographical structure – a constellation of force developing in and through this landscape.

The drainage that famously occurred in the Fens from the late sixteenth century onwards was unique in neither form nor function, used as it was in many similar areas of northern Europe such as the very large-scale projects in the

Netherlands.⁴ The ground on which these specific drainages occurred was however, already fetishised – enclosed in a projection of future value which short circuited in the very material of this site since long before the Roman occupation.

⁴ It is worth noting here that the structural similitude between wetlands and the psyche appears as part of one of Freud's most often quoted passages. It appears at the end of Lecture 31, during Freud's précis regarding his theory on the division of the psyche into the ego, id and superego. He states:

It is easy to imagine, too, that certain mystical practices may succeed in upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind, so that, for instance, perception may be able to grasp happenings in the depths of the ego and in the id which were otherwise inaccessible to it. It may safely be doubted, however, whether this road will lead us to the ultimate truths from which salvation is to be expected. Nevertheless it may be admitted that the therapeutic efforts of psychoanalysis have chosen a similar line of approach. Its intention is, indeed, to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where id was, there ego shall be. It is a work of culture-- *not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee.*

(1933: 80. *My emphasis.*)

Religious scholar William B. Parsons (1999: 79ff) notes that Freud refers in this metaphor to the Zuider Zee drainage project not as *Urbarmachung*, which is the proper German term to denote the reclamation of land for agriculture, but as *Kulturarbeit*, that is, a work of culture or "labour to achieve culture". It is this Nietzschean theme in Freud's (and Marx's) metaphysics – precisely that of the potential of historical man to grow past the sky without overturning it – that Benjamin problematises in the 1921 fragment "Capitalism as Religion". (1999a) Benjamin's criticism is concerned with a conception of linear time that as an image of the aims of psychoanalysis (of renunciation, sublimation, and structure building) emerge through a Benjaminian gaze as simply a continuation of the same old violence. Both Marx and Freud inherit from Nietzsche. This teleological scheme (one that Heidegger (1996) would later conceptualise as an unclear Platonism) situates its turning point "at the last minute" and thus traps the subject in the compass of the destructive framework of capitalism as religion. Benjamin stresses here that it is only through an alternative understanding of time, in which history is understood as a destructive force which in its violent acts produces so much rubble – indeed so much landscape – that the potential for real political revolution might be realised. Freud's Faustian invocation of the Zuider Zee

For the purposes of this thesis it is worth noting that Flevoland, the area created by the draining of the Zuider Zee is at this point in time a key area of support for Forum for Democracy and the Party for Freedom, namely the far right and populist base of the Dutch political system. It seems as Callard so rightly states in her 2017 article that the aggressive and intractable elements of the unconscious are not so easily tamed.

I put forward here that these early accretions that appear as ‘nothing’ in the Fens are in truth naturalised force. Benjamin called this phenomenon

mythic violence’ and describes its movement as the construction of an empty, progressive time that is the history of the victor (Benjamin, 1996a).

The power of this narrative is reliant on the casting into oblivion of all that it was *made* not to be. This is the naturalised history of ownership. This is an important distinction between my project and the more abstract theoretical arguments with which it engages. ‘Not being’ – the quality of ‘nothing’ – is not a reference to something that is a priori a metaphysical condition, rather it is human action that could as well have been otherwise. In short, the ‘nothing’ that defines the Fen landscape in Swift’s (2015) novel *Waterland* is articulated in this thesis as a spatial configuration. Not only of the devastation of the English agricultural working class – their history covered over by a constructed and constricting ground – but also of the genesis of that specific delirium that calls itself ‘English identity’. The Fen landscape, I argue here, is a place in which the notion of progress constantly fights in hand-to-hand battle with the historical material in which it is grounded.

I am concerned in this work with the place-based material repercussions – the uncanny repetitions of what Freud calls the unconscious. These material repercussions are what anthropologists Nancy Scheper Hughes and Margaret Lock might call “the marks on the bodies” (1986: 138) and can be understood as the violence enacted in and through the acquisition that is meaning making. In the Fens this appears as a progressive imposition of stability through a

hagiographical myth, by which I mean the Anglo-Saxon⁵ Christian geographies of England, exemplified in Bede's (1990 [c.731AD]) *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which aimed to create an internally consistent material and metaphorical sovereign state. This is understood in this thesis as a gesture of something prehistorical. Precisely a historical geography 'invented' to celebrate the heroic deeds of the victor and to arrange the causes so that they appear innate. As though given by fate, the present situation appears as dead nature. It appears in the Fen landscape as Bog Oak, prehistorical matter that neither lives nor decomposes.

Central to the national identity that was authored in Bede's work was a progressive narrative of landscape reclamation, salvation and a belief in territory's immanent quality of sanctified ownership. Bede paints a picture of England's uncultivated land – places like the Fens of that period which had shifting political boundaries as well as material conditions – as desolate wastelands synonymous with a post-Fall subjectivity. In the Fens of this thesis, saints stumbled so that they might suffer and through their creaturely suffering purify their mortal souls in, as and through landscape.

The Fens materialise in our current epoch in dual movement. I put forward here that the planets of contingency have shifted into new constellations in the past five years. These shifts gesture to something prehistorical – a glimpse of something ever falling away materialises in the landscape. In a moment of

⁵ The term Anglo-Saxon is used critically in this work to refer to the *myth* of a unified pre-Norman point of English (or indeed “white”) origin. The term itself was coined by early medieval English Christianity as part of the creation of an origin to create a stable ground between past and present and between warring factions through the creation of an origin myth. When used in this thesis the term should be read as the crystallisation of an ageless drive to appropriate and a refashion the past.

movement, the interminability of this particular place-based iteration of 'business as usual' flashes up. Indeed, new archaeological work in the Fens (see Oosthuizen, 2017; Pryor, 2019) has disturbed a history of repeated failures in the taming of this landscape. Even the earliest known attempts to corral the unpredictable Fen landscape into a perceived inevitability of production do not appear as original. As is explored in chapter five of this thesis, these histories were in themselves repetitions of a much older interaction between this site and a form of meaning making specific to landscape. This signifier is correlate with the body that aims to create a stable position. A grounding on which to stand.

Benjamin located this mimetic drive in simultaneously the most interior and exterior of abstract forms, namely Freud's concept of the unconscious and Marx's theory of capital. In both concepts he glimpsed a spatial choreography of the modern city, namely that of a drive towards an internal consistency – a durable arrangement of figures in space – in which one can find one's footing and take a stance. This production of solid state exerts force over the surface of place and through this pressure animates interminable iterations of phantasmagorias. These are the histories "crossed out but not nullified" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 131) which accrete, sediment and form the ground beneath our feet – precisely a mimetic repetition of the ground that it covers over.

Throughout this thesis mythological geographies and their material iterations are on my mind. I am particularly interested in the Venerable Bede's narrative cartography as neither an origin nor destination but rather, a repeated utterance of the empty history of agriculture. The 'nothing' which floods the Fen landscape is understood here as a gesture of that phantasmagoric ground on which England stands – the mythical violence of landownership. This was not an organic,

inevitable process but rather a culturally generated process of avulsion and accretion; traumatic tearing and its resultant debris which takes the form of the legend of an English race. I refer here to a national identity structured around a fragile myth of progression through landownership legitimised by the nubile nature of this empty history. This occurs through a phenomenon synonymous with the optical illusion caused by what is known as Troxler fading. First described in 1804 by the philosopher and physician Paul Vital Troxler:

Troxler fading refers to the apparent disappearance of a visual stimulus that remains stationary on the retina.

Visual images that remain stationary on the retina become dim and eventually fade from one's awareness even though they are still physically present and can be readily seen again simply by moving the eyes or moving the stimulus.

(Mennemeier, 2017).

The repetition of sensory information in the presence of stable stimuli habituates the nervous system as it is processed. When nothing new occurs our perception of established sensible data fades from awareness. Simultaneously, that which is moving and changing in the perceptual field remains clear, within our grasp. In this iterative process, new information floods our impressions whilst recognition of the stable forces that ground our experience decay, regardless of how restrictive or painful they might be. Troxler's fading is not a vanishing of enduring phenomena, it is rather a 'filling-in'. Information about the apparently withdrawn object steadily falls away and is replaced by the blank slate of an empty stage. *Mise en scene* is superseded by *remettre en place*. I propose in this thesis that this process occurs geographically in and through the relationship between the urban and the rural. This is of key concern in a rapidly urbanising world in which the material of the metropolis enacts seemingly new forms of violence through

eyecatching gestures. This thesis is an exploration of the underlying and yet omitted prehistoric violence of agriculture that underlies English democracy. It gestures through the constructed ground of the Fen landscape. The repetitive geometrical patterns of agricultural boundaries appear in stereo with the progressive narrative of empty time as though it they were a 'Magic Eye' image in which the oppressed history of England becomes momentarily perceptible.

The specific iteration of the act of nation building that happened in this landscape – itself formed by silt – is, I propose, a congealed clot – a gesture indicating an oppressed history of a particularly rural trauma. Not the trauma of the spectacle, a horrific event that cuts through or ruptures time, but rather the trauma of a violently silent flow of time that conceals loss through a narrative of progress. For what is trauma, but an inflicted loss? Indeed, the word itself emerges from the root *tere*, meaning to rub, turn, to bore, to drill, to pierce – to rub cereal grain to remove the husks, to sift the grain through the steady rhythmic violence of trampling or beating. The separation of the land from the water, of the crop from the field, the production of silt. That is, the process of fluvial comminution, the constant abrasive force of channelled liquid as it moves forward, pulverising that which cannot move with it into a fine flour. These tiny crystals form masses over time. Accretions themselves shaped by the action of the water that themselves undermine and constrain the progressions of progress.



2.3 In which the rural appears as natural history.

Though Benjamin's chance flashed up to him in the form of the city street, this does not make him an urban geographer. His project was, rather, the development of a critical materialist methodology which understood place as a site of transference in the Freudian sense, between the past and present. Following Marx, the commodities in Benjamin's place writing are imbued with a stagnant and short-circuiting life that provokes endless repetitions. The street, that commodity which anchors these recurrences in a temporal spatial location, acts as the dialectical image par excellence. Although never explored explicitly in his work, the metaphysical preconditions of Benjamin's work mean that these streets are always haunted by the rural – precisely that which is excluded from the urban site. We see this in Berlin where “the little streets in the inner city reflect the

times of day like a mountain hollow” (1999c: 263) and in Marseilles where the countryside and the urban do battle on the edges of the city in a struggle of “telegraph poles against agaves, barbed wire against thorny palms, the miasmas of stinking corridors against the damp gloom under the plane trees in brooding squares, short-winded outside staircases against the mighty hills” (1999b:235).

Regardless of this, the rural itself is not a site of critical interrogation for Benjamin and his conceptual dictionary has rarely been used to understand the permutations of mythic violence in rural landscapes. This is perhaps at least in part due to Benjamin’s own critical blind spot regarding rural landscapes. This can be seen in a 1911 letter to Herbert Belmore where he describes the Wengen landscape through purely visual terms, as though it were a pre-fall piece of art:

From Griitschalp to Myrrhen, a real Engadine road. This suddenly became obvious to me after I had been walking for quite a while. And with that I believe I have discovered a main characteristic of the Engadine landscape. Namely, the interplay of grandiose elements that complement and harmoniously temper each other. For you will surely concede that you can speak about something's being purely grandiose and overwhelming in only a very few instances; and that an austere kind of charm predominates much more often. And, as I said, in my opinion it is based on contrasts: primarily the contrast between light-green and white; the opposition of barren rocky areas to bright masses of snow (in comparison with which the glaciers seem charming); the grass of the meadows, the deep blue sky, and the gray rocks again produce an interplay that I would call "austere charm." The lakes, of course, should not be forgotten.

(Benjamin, 1994:12)

Benjamin’s correspondence –particularly during his time in Switzerland, Italy and Ibiza – is littered with descriptions of the countryside. In these landscapes his critical gaze seems to have been swayed by the romanticism of the rural peasantry. Put more precisely, Benjamin seems to fall into a fallacy he has himself identified, an understanding of place – in this case rural place – as somehow

‘natural’. A striking example of this appears in a letter he wrote to Scholem from Ibiza in April 1932:

I am living on my own in a house, with three meals of a very provincial kind included and with every kind of *gout de terroir*- on the whole, however, they are quite delicious-and pay 1.80 marks per day for everything. It is obvious from this that the island is really far removed from international trade and even civilization and that it is therefore necessary to do without every kind of comfort. This can be done with ease, not only because of the inner peace given by economic independence but also because of the composure the landscape provides; the most untouched landscape I have ever come across. Farming and animal husbandry are plied here in a very archaic fashion. Not more than four cows can be found on the island, because the farmers firmly hold onto their traditional goat-based economy. There are no farm machines to be seen, and the fields are watered by well wheels turned by mules. The interiors are likewise archaic. Three chairs along the wall of the room opposite the entrance greet the stranger with assurance and weightiness, as if three works by Cranach or Gauguin were leaning against the wall; a sombrero over the back of a chair is more imposing than a precious Gobelin tapestry. Finally, there is the serenity and beauty of the people not only of the children-and, on top of that, the almost total freedom from strangers, which must be preserved by being extremely parsimonious with information about the island. The end of all these things is unfortunately to be feared because of a hotel being built in the port in Ibiza.

(Benjamin, 1994: 390)

The Ibiza that Benjamin is describing here, much like the Fen landscape, is as constructed as any city street but production recedes in this description, concealed by the concept of ‘nature’. Indeed, the Ibiza that Benjamin depicts in this letter to Scholem is itself a work of culture, dominated as it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the Catholic Church. The island was restructured through the building of churches and the introduction of faith-based governance to extract value through the exploitation of the peasant population in the island’s salt mines.

At the time of Benjamin’s overtures about protecting this serene and beautiful landscape the imminent threat to this place was not, as he predicted, from

impending tourism arriving from outside. It came from the already present and placed crypto-theology that structured the island's geography in the guise of the Spanish Civil War. By 1936 Republican and Franco-Nationalists, often from the same families, were pitted bloodily against each other by the ruling classes. This digression, spurious as it may seem, reveals something of the danger inherent in an understanding of the rural as 'natural'. This project does not aim to reclaim the rural but rather to understand the very impossibility of such a task. Instead, my ambition here is to understand the Fen landscape as a site in which specifically rural chances of remembrance flash up. I aim to bring to mind, rather than to tame, the intractable and aggressive foundations of landscape itself.

In this work Benjamin's project is understood as the political task of perceiving possibilities as they flash up in spatiotemporal positions. These configurations are conceived as revolutionary opportunities that materialise in the present moment, in and through place. These possibilities can be grasped through the act of remembering obscured histories that have been covered over by the empty teleology of the victor. These histories are not nullified, rather they are suppressed and they gush forth in place as gestures and symptoms – the accumulation of sediment that simultaneously forecloses movement and activates the flood. That Benjamin neglected the rural is not an indication that his project is only valid in the city but rather that his blind spot was symptomatic of a wider omission – something covered over previously that I propose is luminous in this moment. The location of a specific flaw in the democratic project's relationship with territory as it manifests through the tyrannical repetitions that characterise industrial agriculture.

Walter Benjamin is closely associated with and yet always somehow adjacent to the Frankfurt School, from which critical theory emerged and which was devoted to the project of understanding how the horrors of the Nazi Regime came to pass. The work produced by this school of thought provided ground-breaking discussions regarding elements such as personality and class (see Horkheimer, 1936; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944; Adorno, 1950, 1951; Marcuse, 1964). Although Lukacs, Adorno and Benjamin all interrogated the dominance of humankind over nature in their work this was never extended to thought about the role of agricultural land in the history of Western thought.

This body of critical work regarding the conditions of fascism shares Benjamin's omission of a rigorous study of the agricultural rural (as opposed to the romantic rural of the Wandervogel and Sprechsäle). This is a particularly significant lacuna when considered in light of the rural support base for Hitler's National Socialist German Workers Party. The policy and propaganda of the Nazi party initially targeted urban workers but it was the rural electorate who initially responded to their messages.

The Nazi party's 1928 agrarian programme was developed in response to the unexpected popularity of Hitler's party in particular kinds of rural areas. The Nazi party's rural stronghold was concentrated in those Protestant agricultural areas where land was divided into small and medium size plots – those areas where estate managers and landowners held a specific kind of power over their workers (Geary, 1998). Rural labourers inhabited a different world to that of the city dweller and factory employee, they were often paid in kind and were subject to intense scrutiny and control from landlord and estate managers at least in part due to the monopoly that these figures held over employment opportunities and

the way in which these rural economies managed the lives of their workforce within these agricultural areas. The feudal system may have wasted away in Europe following the Black Death. However, the development of these intensively managed agricultural areas did not permit rural workers the same form of suffrage as their urban counterparts. It is the conceit of this thesis that we continue omit the histories of these places from critical conceptual discussion at our peril. If Benjamin and his contemporaries did not see this in their own time, this hints at this history of the rural – a continuation of old, naturalised forms of power, dominance and violence – being covered over. In our current moment of danger this oppressed history of the rural has congealed in spatial form – precisely that of old landscapes flashing up on electoral maps.



2.4 In which the author meets some ghosts.

The Fens first appeared to me in late June 2016. I was ‘temping’ that summer in the liminal period between submitting my masters dissertation and beginning doctoral research. My plan at that time was to write a thesis focusing on urban farming in Detroit. I wanted to interrogate how and why old spatial patterns of segregation and racialised accumulation appear endlessly in the city, regardless of good intentions. My interest in these spatial patterns of historically contingent forces and their effects on individuals’ most private thoughts and feelings had emerged from a decade working as a mental health social worker in North Norfolk. I had found myself increasingly troubled by the way that old ideological undercurrents of governance could surge into people’s personal lives.

I am thinking here of an elderly man called Charles with who I worked in 2012.

Charles had been diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1980s and had experienced a series of long hospital admissions in between chaotic living circumstances. When I first met Charles, he was settled in a long-term supported living placement where he received help with the day-to-day tasks that he found difficult due to a combination of his condition and the high doses of anti-psychotics prescribed to treat it. The economic reforms of the new Conservative government's 2010 Health and Social Care Bill decreased Charles's funding and the care provider decided to end his tenancy. Charles' mental health was impacted by this instability and he began to experience positive and negative schizophrenic symptoms which made him increasingly resistant to changing accommodation. I advocated for an extension to the tenancy on the grounds that we needed to assess the risks to Charles' health and wellbeing involved with a change of placement. The accommodation staff agreed that this should happen alongside an application for extra funding to attempt to retain the tenancy as this was Charles' wish. Whilst we were waiting for the regional funding panel to discuss the funding application Charles waved a butterknife at a member of staff during a mealtime disagreement. The police were called and when they arrived Charles was distressed and non-compliant. He was tasered and broke multiple ribs. Whilst Charles was recovering in hospital the care provider cancelled his tenancy on grounds of risk.

This was not a standalone case, rather one of a series of punctures and ruptures in my sense of the judicious nature of my social work role. These jolts disrupted the sense of a progressive history of the provision of care, support and respect that I had previously believed in – moments that unfolded in a series of site-specific regressions between time and space, the inner workings of the psyche and economic markets, the body and the site of its life, between the force of law as

protective and the legalised implementation of violence. They constellated in the dialectical image of a force that administrates the placement of people by unceasingly wielding the power to displace them. I understand now,⁶ that what I glimpsed here was a limit case that sits right at the centre of things. That site where business-as-usual appears as at once always excessive and insufficient.

The North Norfolk region that I worked in was notable in neither its deprivation nor its affluence, though both existed in polarity within small geographical regions, obscured by their idiosyncratic spatial dynamics rather than nonexistent. In many ways, as one of my participants articulated, the East of England sits beyond the bounds of imagination as the ground beneath the phantasy of England – North Norfolk is startling only in how average it is. It precisely because of this that the violence that grounds much treatment of those who receive interventions from the state always appeared as both disproportionate and comically lacking. Simon Critchley (2006) defines the distinction between tragedy and comedy as such – in tragedy the mechanics of loss are visible and it is plain that things could have been different. Consider, for example, Romeo's note to Juliet. Comedy's sadism, however, operates by obscuring the grounds and workings of fate. Things occur endlessly without falling into a structure of meaning.

If we take the case of Charles, who benefited from unsettling this vulnerable man? Certainly, any money saved by the government in the reduction of Charles' accommodation benefits would have been lost by the time the police, hospital treatment and psychiatric reviews were factored in. Not to mention the fact that Charles had originally been placed in the original accommodation against his will.

⁶ Though it is of course impossible to say how reliable narrator I am to myself.

It appeared to me at that moment in 2011 as a reanimation of the spatial management of privation seen in the Elizabethan Poor Laws of the seventeenth century: precisely the requirement of a local point of origin, a settled status in order to receive relief – much of which was carceral in nature – from local administrative bodies. Legislation ensured the continuation of the ‘mastered man’, that placeable and accountable post-feudal free man who is simultaneously interned⁷ by his status as a legal citizen. The lack of diversity in Norfolk rendered me unable to interrogate these forces through identity politics. It was precisely because of this that the despotic nature of belonging, as a force that is exercised in and through place, appeared to me as a portrait in England’s attic.

⁷ The later Poor Relief Act of 1601 essentially positioned poverty and relief in relation geographic location. It achieved this through establishing in law that individual parishes were responsible for their local poor. This legislation was national. However it was interpreted at a regional level leading to variation in levels of relief and application processes. As a result, people attempted to migrate to those parishes which offered more generous conditions. This led to the Poor Relief Act 1662 (also referred to as the 1662 Settlement Act) which intensified ideas around places of origin in relation to state responsibility requiring people to prove their settlement status at a local level through birth, marriage, or apprenticeship in order to access poor relief. Those poor people who could not prove their local claim were either “sent back to where they came from” or put to work (Kiddey 2017:178ff). These ideas still haunt our current social care legislation, in which a local connection still must be proved to be considered eligible for support with homelessness. Individuals are often passed back to a housing authority where a local connection exists (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government & UK Government, 2018: para 10.2).

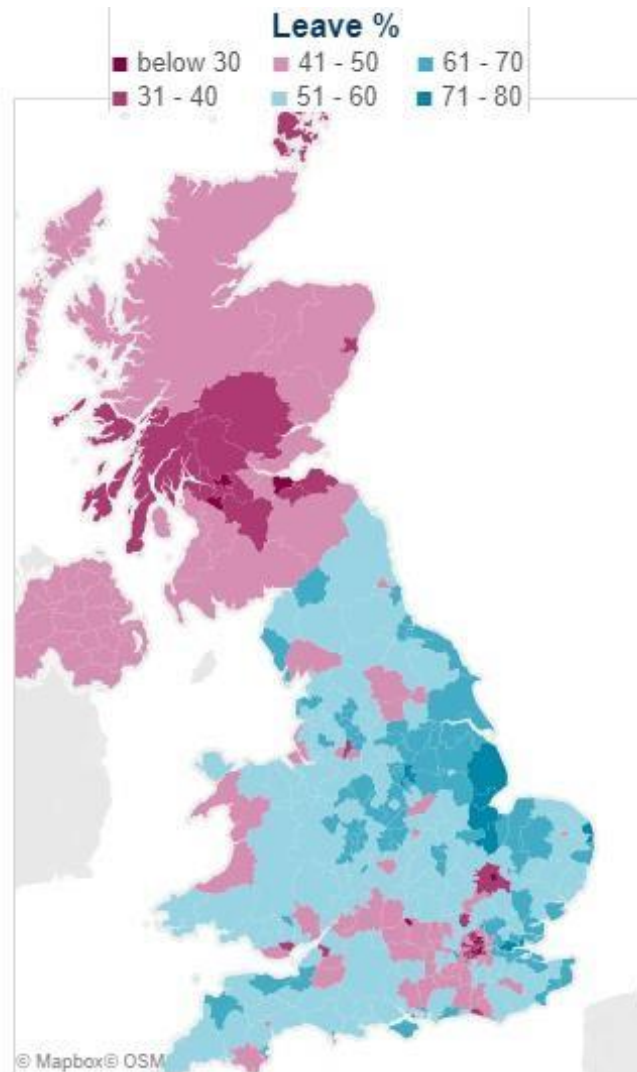


Figure 2 - European Union Referendum 2016 - Leave votes by electoral ward (ONS, 2016)

2.5 In which a chance glimmers.

By the summer of 2016 – those months when the Fen region first appeared to me – time and place were re-constellating in the form of a new epoch. That summer I found myself preoccupied by a shape. It appeared as the deep shading of a crescent moon inland of the Wash, that bay that curls around the boundaries between Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Norfolk. It flashed up on the electoral heat maps produced in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum as a representation of a large swathe of territory in favour of leaving the European Union. This arc drew

my attention persistently as endless streams of these maps appeared in the newspaper editorials, televisual reports and academic blog posts that attempted to provide explanation for a result that had not been predicted: the British public had voted in favour of leaving the European Union.

This crescent was on my mind in the weeks and months that followed whilst expert analyses focused on attempts to correlate factors such as education, class, and deprivation with voters' decisions, landing the blame at a specific workingclass population's door. The philosopher Beth Lord wrote a 2017 paper about her surprise at her academic colleagues' reaction to the referendum. She writes:

A few weeks after the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, I overheard a colleague say, 'The working class shouldn't be allowed to vote. They're not intelligent enough.'

(Lord 2017:4)

The position that accompanied this was, as I overheard a university colleague later that year opine, "we all know educated people in the cities voted to remain and ignorant people outside them voted to leave". Spatial analysts however, were consistently clear that there was no evidence that the results of the EU referendum could be imputed to either working class or rural voters (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2016; Los et al. 2017; Antonucci et al. 2017).⁸

⁸ The narrative of the "left behind" voter – the blue-collar worker with little education and few skills – as a marginalised group likely to support right wing parties and policies is certainly not new (Evans and Tilley 2012; Evans 2017), nor is it the whole story. Evans and Mellon (2015) examined data following the 2015 election and found that whilst UKIP (notably voting UKIP in the 2015 election was one of the few reliable indicators of the likelihood for a leave vote in the referendum) had support amongst those who work in routine occupations their key support comes from large employers and the self-employed. Whilst many of the votes for Brexit and UKIP and later the Brexit party came from people

This thesis aims to read the image of the old Fen landscape that appeared in cartographic analyses of the EU referendum against the grain and to move against the flow of empty time so that it splinters. Put another way, I will not be attempting to uncover the reason for the high level of support for Brexit in Fenland District. The 2016 EU referendum appears in this thesis as a ‘gesture’. Precisely that phenomena that Adorno describes as “a trace of experience covered over by signification”. Gestures or indeed wordless symptoms are understood in this work as the reanimation of what has been covered over by the empty history of the victor – precisely that barbaric history of the agricultural landowning class whose administrations appear as natural forces.

This requires a method that resists the teleology of progress through being playful (Graeber, 2014) and using curiosity (Phillips, 2012) in a familiar manner. In my social work practice I might have called this practice ‘therapeutic play’, the very serious process of creating a boundary within which something different might happen. This is a deeply optimistic method that jettisons the search for a tidy linear narrative in favour of an attentiveness to material processes – letting my toes follow my nose. Put another way, the ethos of this thesis aims to be attentive to that strange mingling of what has been forgotten from the prehistoric world as it materialises in and through the Fen landscape. This requires attending to these

who usually vote Conservative, the preferential interpretation is that this is the political home of the angry and disaffected working-class man.

“forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds” as they yield “a constant flow of new strange products” (Benjamin, 1969b:131).

Time in the Fens moves in uncanny circulations. The wind whips across the flatlands and holds the body back against forward propulsion. Vocalisations are blown back so that they fall fallow in the speaker’s own ears. The rhythmic pulse of the agricultural calendar is that of recurrent loss. The Fens are that English site where the ruling class aimed to tame this divine force – the ever falling away of progress. They formed solid ground from that silt which heralds both the flood and the harvest. When drained this silt provides a huge expanse of the most productive arable land in England. Drainage creates a blank slate for agriculture. Strips of farmed fields appear as nature. The complex ecological system that nourished this rich soil is crossed out and covered over. In this biodiversity desert the land opens like a flower so that it seems it might touch the sky without turning the world over. Progress’ teleology, however, is truculent in nature. The land itself degrades under intensive agricultural practices and this self-same silt washes in waterways during rainstorms. Off stage and out of sight, the silt slowly chokes the waterways whilst power and property pall time. This congestion threatens peril; seeping, bleeding, weeping and flooding are unconquerable.

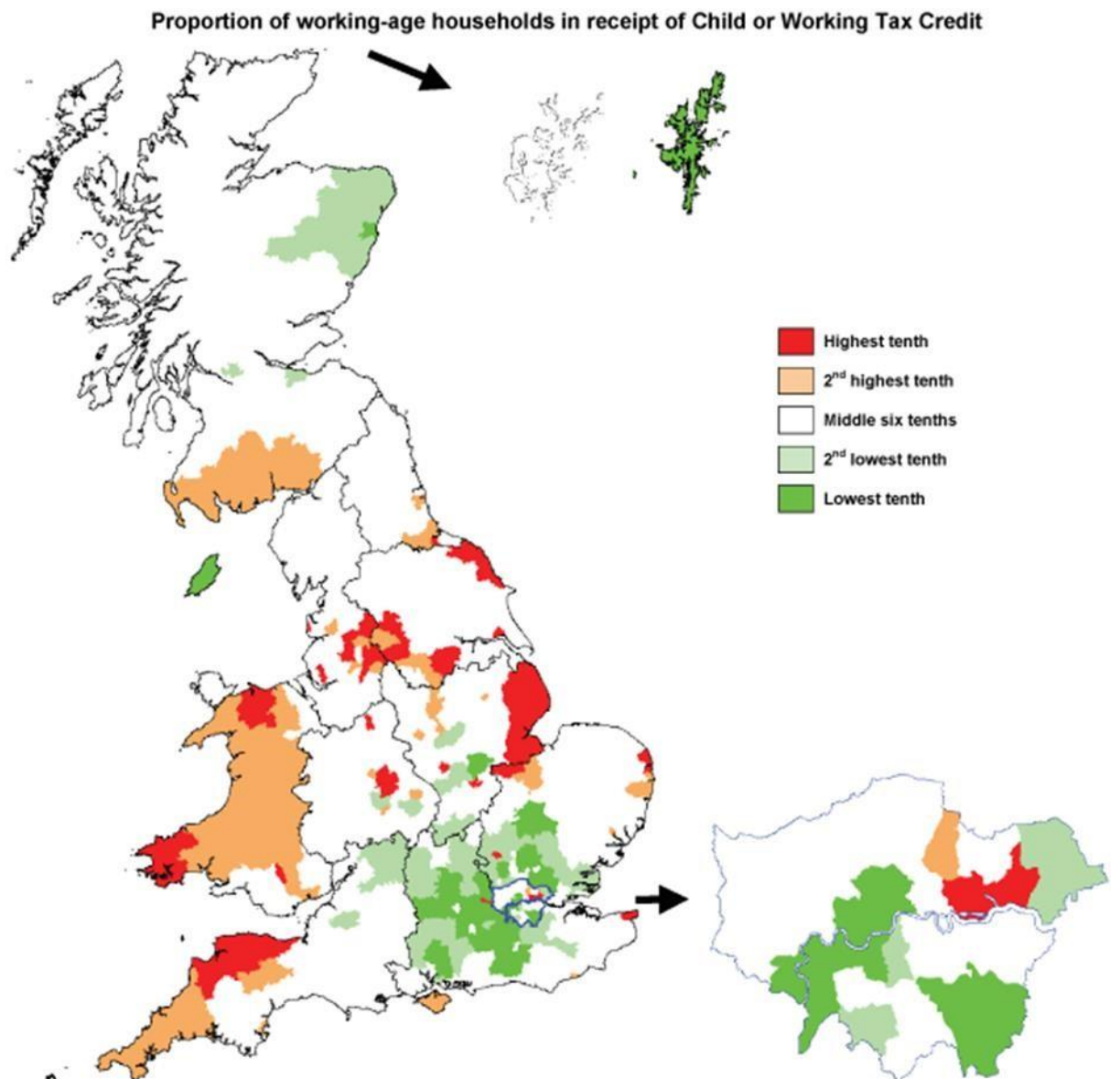


Figure 3 Working Age Adults in receipt of Child or Tax Credits (HM Revenue and Customs 2011.)

2.6 In which we find ourselves in a desert.

The danger flashed up to me in the spatial form of a crescent moon in the summer of 2016. It appeared as the shading of a swathe of territory from Kings Lynn in Norfolk that swept through Wisbech in Cambridgeshire and round to Boston in Lincolnshire. This was the shape of an old landscape, what used to be a great mire, underpinned by silt and dotted by the small islands that now appear as market towns. It is now the largest area of Grade 1 agricultural land in England and central to the country's food security. An area that crosses county boundaries and yet congealed in the EU referendum into the shape of the old wetland. One landscape heavily in support of leaving the European Union.

I met with East Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrat councillor Lorna Dupre in August 2018 to explore her understanding of the political climate in the area. She was keen to discuss the referendum and described to me that:

There is an area around the Wash, the far west of Norfolk, the north of Cambridgeshire, and the east of Lincolnshire that voted very strongly in favour of leaving the European Union. Within this county the city of Cambridge and south Cambridge were two of the strongest remain areas in the country. These areas have growing economies and improving living conditions and yet only a few miles up the road here we are in Fenland District [the section of Cambridgeshire that lies in this area]. You look at all the charts and everything; housing, education, health, and Fenland is the exact mirror image of South Cambridgeshire. It is completely the reverse, all the things that South Cambridgeshire has going for it, Fenland doesn't.

Fenland is certainly still one of the areas that is very much more pro Brexit than the average. I think there is there is a tendency for some parts of the country that have felt marginalised, or felt that life isn't going as well for them as for other people, voted Brexit because they bought the story that this is something that the Europeans have done to them and that as soon as we are an independent nation that all of that will be solved. I think that people who feel that life has not treated them as kindly as it has treated others were more likely to vote leave. This area did very, very strongly and still would today there is no doubt about. It has felt marginalised.

In Fenland there has been a decline in many of the market towns and I think people see that decline. It has been fairly easy for those who want to persuade them that this decline is the because of the European Union to do so. That argument has had quite a loud voice in Fenland. It has been difficult to persuade people of the contrary view. And if there isn't that robust debate up here, then those ideas will sink in and take root and they find a ready audience here because the economy of Fenland is not good.

The swathe of territory referred to by Councillor Dupre as the “area around the Wash” is the same crescent moon that appeared to me on the thematic maps of Brexit support. Later in the research process this shape appeared in thematic maps (see appendix 2) representing high levels of migration following the expanse of the European Union in 2007 (a rise in non-UK population from 2,641 to 8,209 in Fenland between 2001 and 2011 (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2016) as well as low educational attainment, children classed as living in poverty and an employment market dominated by low paid manual labour in fields and factories. Whilst these issues were recognised by Councillor Dupre, her analysis failed to acknowledge the impact of the high percentage of uncontested Conservative seats in the wider Fen region. The area has been referred to as a ‘political monoculture’ filled with ‘rotten boroughs’ due to the lack of political opposition here. Whilst this issue is explored at length in chapter 6, the term ‘political monoculture’ requires some unpacking.

In 2019 the Electoral Reform Society reported that large parts of England are effectively “democracy deserts” stating that in May 2019’s local elections:

300 council seats in England have been guaranteed for one party or individual before a single ballot has been cast, weeks before...polling day – affecting around 850,000 potential voters. This includes nearly 150 councillors who will win their seats without a single vote being cast. In these wards the number of nominated candidates equals the number of councillors to be elected. Around 270,000 potential voters in these ‘democracy deserts’

will be denied their democratic right of expressing a preference about who will represent them locally.

The Conservatives are set to gain 137 of these uncontested seats, with the Liberal Democrats picking up five, four going to independent candidates and Labour securing two. Across the country, parties have picked up a further 152 guaranteed seats long before polling day, as multi-member wards up for election go ‘undercontested’ across 54 councils. This is where there is insufficient competition to make the ward fully competitive.

The Conservatives will secure 130 seats in these under-contested wards, with Labour gaining an additional 15 seats. The Lib Dems pick up six and one will go to an independent candidate. There are 74 councils in this round of elections which have either uncontested seats or ‘guaranteed party seats’ where a party is certain to win. The East Midlands has the highest number of uncontested seats, followed by the East of England, West Midlands and the Southeast in close proximity. Fenland District Council in Cambridgeshire is the worst offender by council, with 12 of the district’s 30 seats going uncontested. That means nearly half of this year’s council intake will be decided without a single Electoral Reform Society 2 ballot being cast. (Electoral Reform Society, 2019)

Despite the availability of data regarding the absence of democratic choice in Fenland District the issue was excluded from Councillor Dupre’s reflections regarding the causes and impacts of Britain leaving the European Union. The omission was not limited to the Councillor. The issue of perversions of democracy in relation to agricultural land ownership in the UK is rendered arcane through on-going legislation. At the time of the last Land Registration Act in 2002 around fifteen percent of UK land was unregistered. Further to this the principal law on which the 2002 act is built is described in the 2002 legislation as “obscure and confusing, and its language not easy for even professional users.” It is therefore of no surprise that:

[...] generations of researchers have found, reliable information regarding UK land holdings – public or private – is hard to come by. Massey and Catalano (1978:7–8) lamented the paucity of dependable data in a landmark 1978 study of patterns of UK landownership; decade later, Kivell and McKay (1988:169), focusing on urban UK landholdings, similarly found “an almost complete absence of reliable and comprehensive information”. The situation

is not much better today. “While in theory it is possible to look up ownership through the Land Registry”, observe Thomson and Wilkes (2014:16), “this often leads to a company registered overseas which is difficult to get in contact with” [as highlighted by the 2016 Panama Papers leaks]; and, as for the public sector, “at least one council that we spoke to had ‘no idea’ how much land they had”

(Christophers, 2014: 17)

This thesis aims to contemplate a glimmer that appears in this white-out when it is read through the Fen landscape. This lack of data appears as the organic state of a relic – something immovable that has petrified over time. As the blog “who owns England” states, typically this fifteen percent of unregistered UK land “belongs to wealthy families, old institutions, the Church, or the Crown” (Powell-Smith, 2019). I put forward in this thesis that this obscured history is not an organic unfolding, it is rather something made that could just as well have been otherwise. Nor is this fabricated element ossified, it is alive and active and gestures forth from its forgotten past into the current moment. I put forward here that in our present epoch, agricultural land in the Fens appears as the Frankenstein’s monster of prehistory. More precisely, agriculture in the Fens of this thesis appears as a mimetic reproduction of something organic – a derivative created by human hands that will destroy us.

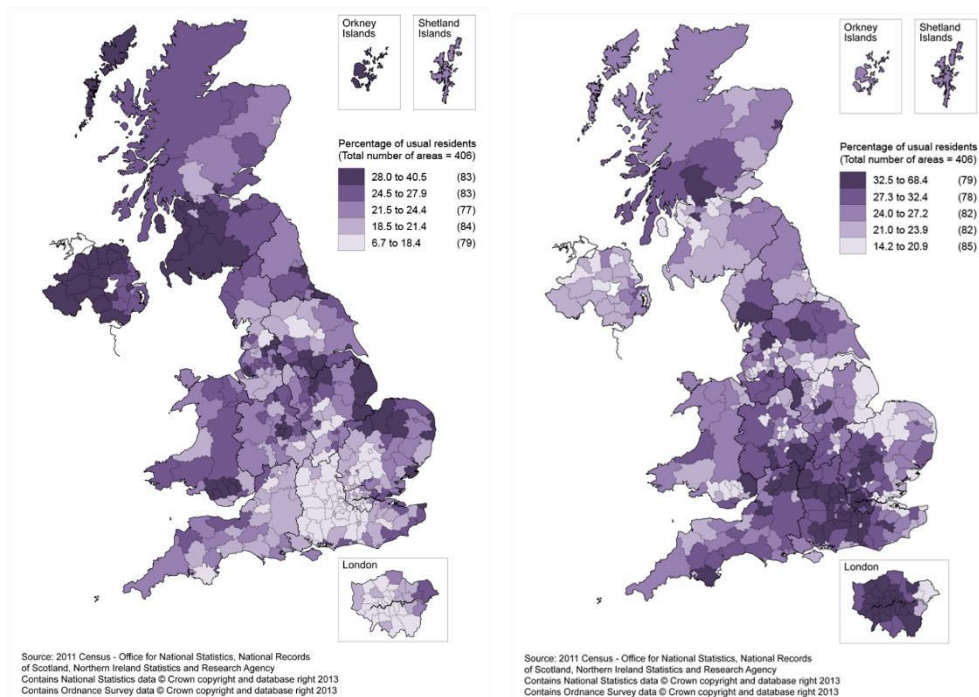


Figure 4 Working age adults with no formal qualifications/ Working age adults with qualifications at level four and over (ONS 2011)

2.7 In which sand appears as snow.

The most up to date Land Registration Act (2002) regulates land conveyance rather than the registration or inheritance of land. The enduring and deliberate nature of this concealment is expounded in historical context by the historians Beckett and Turner:

A long history of proposals for land registration from at least the 1530s produced positive results only in Yorkshire and Middlesex, and it was not until 1925 that a skeleton land registry was established on a national basis as a result of the Land Registration Act. Even then, registration took place on a rolling basis, starting in London and reaching the final fourteen districts across four counties only in 1990. These properties will only become registered when next they change hands, but since many of these unregistered estates are held in trusts, with the current owners merely tenants for life, the land is not likely to be sold. Unless and until compulsory registration is introduced, these properties are unlikely to appear in the register. In consequence of this history, neither researchers in the past nor the legislature, has managed to construct a convenient catalogue of land and property ownership.

The oppressed history of this landownership reproduces itself endlessly in the omission of analysis. It appears here in an uncanny repetition of the critical theory canon's rural lacuna. The areas identified by the electoral reform society as the five councils in England (where the highest number of councillors are elected without voting taking place) all sit within the old Fen region. Precisely that great mire that was drained to produce a huge swathe of high yield agricultural land. This area of democratic failure and high value land appears in current cartographic representations of land registered in England as unregistered.⁹ Local Authorities, however, have a legal obligation to provide access to a comprehensive list of their assets – including land – to the public. When these assets are scrutinised it is possible to see that these 'top five' democracy deserts all appear in areas with large Local Authority owned tenanted farms.

These council owned small holdings date back to the late nineteenth century and are known as County Farm Estates (CFEs). From as early as 1915 this land was utilised in government initiatives in support of soldiers returning from the first world war. Under the provisions of the Smallholdings Acts of 1916 and 1918 and the Land Settlement Act of 1919, local authorities bought up a quarter of a million acres to offer smallholdings for 24,319 men. Between the mid-1920s and the late 1970s, these were an integral part of a stability-seeking Keynesian economic project in which state-owned enterprises made work for the population. Between 1977 and 2017 the country wide acreage of CFEs has halved, in a wave of disposals as Thatcherism and its austere wake de-regulated the sector and allowed local authorities to plug their deficits through the disposal of assets. Cambridgeshire

CFE appears as an outlier in this process. They did not dispose of any of their CFE assets during this period. Since the inception of CFEs up to the time of writing, Cambridgeshire CFE is in possession of the largest area of Grade 1 arable land in the UK. This high yield land is framed in Cambridgeshire County Council documents as a financial asset that the council has been engaged in actively expanding since 2016. In 2017 a Cambridgeshire County Council spokesman explained:

Our investment strategy in rural assets enables us to create and generate new income in excess of £4.5m every year to support the delivery of essential services. We only dispose of assets where this is commercially sensible and prudent.

(Harris, 2019).

To be clear, Cambridgeshire CFEs own the largest farms estate on the best and most high value arable land in the least democratic areas of England. Due at least in part to the obscuration of data regarding land ownership in Britain, little is known about CFEs as financial assets or state apparatus (Prince, 2012). In the conclusion to this thesis, I explore how this high yield arable land under the stewardship of an undemocratically elected council blossoms into a “germinate gem” (Nabokov, 1990: 29), a multi-asset class investment. This occurs alongside the interminable ordeal of ‘business-as-usual’ for those who labour on these farms.

When read against the state-owned tenanted farms of the Fens, England’s seemingly democratic electoral system appears as the dream-infested commodity of the modernist city. Viewed through the lens of this site the democratic project appears as something always outdated, interrupted before it was available. The political geography of the Fens appears in this thesis as an unfolding. Not as one might unfold a paper aeroplane and smooth it out so that it reads clearly. It

appears rather as “a bud unfolds into a blossom” (Benjamin 1969b: 130). This political geography discloses that the 10 districts reported by the Electoral Reform Society in 2016 as most lacking in democratic choice all voted in favour of leaving the EU in 2016. This is not something that can be taken at face value – as the Lacan quotation in the epigraph to this introduction asserts:

The phases of the moon are the cause of tides, we know [...] that the word cause is used correctly here. Or again miasmas are the cause of fever – that doesn't mean anything either, there is a hole or something that oscillates in the interval.

(Lacan 1981: 22)

This correlation of democracy deserts and high Brexit votes is understood here as a gesture from a forgotten past – or in Lacanese “a hole or something” – that extends into the present. By this I mean that these political gestures appear as though on the horizon of a background that is blank with forgetting and thus has no aspect. They look like ‘strange new products’ – natural forms propelled by numinous forces. Their tyranny is that they are anything but new; they are rather an endless stream of more of the same.

This opening out is facilitated by the amnesia of a featureless history. These democracy deserts are all located within areas boasting high quality agricultural land, the ownership of which in many cases remains unwritten, or rather written out of history. Without transparency over who owns England's productive arable land (which itself blooms into wealth of rents and subsidies and commercial capital) the influence of these areas over England's political landscape appears as ‘nothing’ – precisely as a construction of fate. What can be made, without a record of the ownership of England's agricultural land, of the fact that the intensity of

'leave' votes increased with the quality and economic value of the land? Four of these districts with the most uncontested seats (all of which are held by the Conservative party) are located within Grade 1 arable land – defined by Natural England (2021) as “land with no or very minor limitations. A very wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can be grown. Yields are high and less variable than on land of lower quality”. All four of the districts located within this gold standard agricultural land held majorities of over 71 percent in support of exiting the European Union.

I propose here that analyses of the force of agricultural landowners over democratic processes in our current political moment have been covered over by a selective engagement of the UK government regarding land registration. The term 'agricultural landowner' – as this thesis will explore – is not correlate with the term 'farmer' who is more often than not a tenant on this high yield land. The Fens, that largest swathe of grade 1 agricultural land in England, appeared to me through the gesture of the high proportion of votes in favour of exiting the European Union in 2016. This symptom fails to manifest as an action set in chronological time. Put another way, it appears as in Critchley's lexicon as comic rather than tragic. The closer I looked at the thematic maps of UK population data, the more eerie that crescent moon that curls around The Wash appeared. Each time I felt I might have glimpsed some phenomena that could be framed as a cause, I attempted to follow it. However, I never found myself on a linear path.

Instead, close attention revealed this site to be an impossible object: a twodimensional figure that opens into three dimensions in the mind's eye. This place and the events within it crystallised, each emerging from and returning to each other – materialising in a form “both single and double, a mirage in an

emirate, a *germinate gem*, an orgy of epithelial alliterations” (Nabokov, 1990: 29 *my emphasis*). The Fens appeared to me not as a snarl of threads to untangle, they materialised rather, as a snowstorm. This is at least in part an image generated by my participants in the area.

In 2018 I spent time with local people facilitating pieces of creative writing about their phenomenological experiences of the Fen landscape (this method is described in more detail in chapter 3). A disproportionate number of my participants talked about the landscape under snowy conditions. Snow, it seemed, expressed something of the strange temporality of this landscape. Pete, a photographer from Whittlesey described to me:

Dead flat light. Grey, the greyness reflected by the snow. Feels like the world has been wrapped in a blanket. I find it strangely comforting. The best mornings have a bit of mist, it adds atmosphere, you imagine more. It was the snow falling across the trees that drew me out. They are incredibly beautiful and peaceful. The snow deadens the sounds from the A47 and even though I love birds, they are quiet too. When you get those rare moments where it is quiet (fog and mist do it too) it takes you out of time, the landscape transcends, but it only lasts a moment. All around the barrows face southeast and towards the rising sun.

In a barrow near the McCaines chip factory I once found Bronze age lamb bones in a small depression, an offering to the house. As I cupped them there was a flip. It was the closest I’ve come to time travel. You can sense the past in other landscapes. It is not specific to the Fen, but I know it here; not that you can ever really *know* it.

If you go down Thorney Dyke, there’s an emotion. Because it is grey and snowy, I find it comforting. Equally it is covering the landscape in a blanket and taking away the manmade things: making it a wilderness.

Poverty, low educational attainment, migration: all these and more glittered down around me during my research. They melted at my touch but nevertheless accreted, crystallised into a container filled with moments, ever falling and ever in the same place. The Fens are correlate with the dialectical image that I glimpsed in the image of Charles’ placement – belonging appears here in the form

of the enclosure rather than the nest. A limit case that sits right at the centre of things where 'business-as-usual' appears as at once always excessive and insufficient. The Fen landscape exhibits on its surface the thwarted gestures of England's prehistory. Precisely a geometric arrangement of the power to simultaneously possess and devour the civic and territorial body.

The Fens of this thesis are bounded not by geopolitical boundaries but rather by the spatialisation of oppressed history. They are a site where visibility and perceptions of time and distance are lost due to the uniformity of the covered ground. The old landscape and its uncanny reflection appear time and again. It flashes up as a lake of flat fields – a young girl on a quad, her hair fluttering as the breeze moves against her, a lorry park, a glass house, an American style diner, an orchard, a port, a Lithuanian supermarket, a dog food factory.

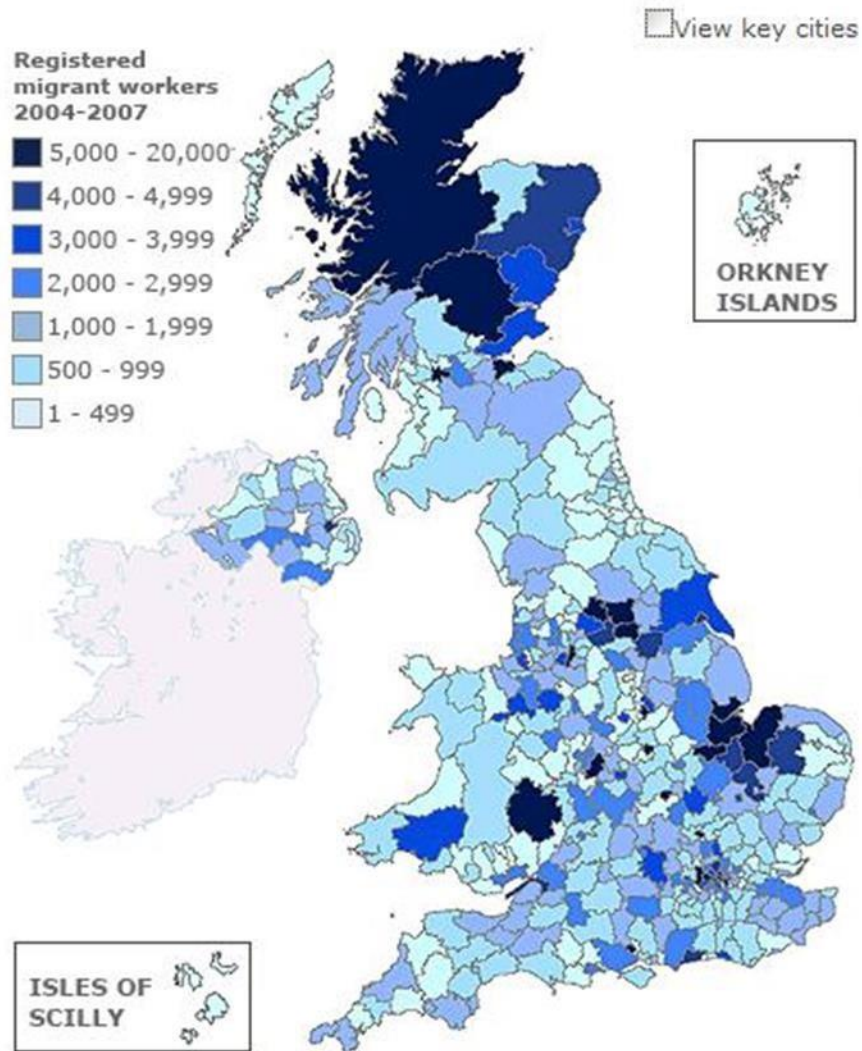


Figure 5-Registered migrant workers 2004-2007 (ONS, 2011)

2.8 In which something made appears as something organic.

In 1867, following widespread urban discontent and political pressure from Gladstone's liberal party, the minority Conservative government passed the Second Reform Act, which is widely understood as an actuation of UK democracy as launched through the first reform act in 1832. This second act granted the vote to all householders in the (urban) boroughs as well as lodgers who paid rent of £10

a year or more. It did not extend the franchise to the rural working class. This would not happen until nearly twenty years later with 1884's Third Reform Act which gave the same rights to men in the counties as were extended to those in the boroughs. However, this was to a large extent a false move. There were still property restrictions on this extension of the franchise and the agriculture dominated labour market in rural areas like the Fens had not generated a propertied bourgeoisie. Most people who lived and worked in the Fens were agricultural labourers and tenant farmers who were disenfranchised by their lack of land. Alongside this, landholders with multiple properties retained plural votes (the one for each constituency in which they owned the requisite amount of property) until 1948.

The political historian Maurice Cowling (1967) asserts that it would be a mistake to understand either the intentions or the implementation of this reform as an attempt to establish a democratic constitution by the Conservative or the Liberal leaders. This materialises in the Fen landscape of this thesis as precisely the problem that Leslie (2000:viii) identifies in Benjamin's critique as the "conformism of the left". It appears in the form of Cambridgeshire's undemocratic, Conservative led local authority that owns and rents a large portion of the most important land for domestic food production in England. As is explored in chapter 6, England's political left conceptualise this area as a *naturally* Conservative area. A lack of left-wing representation and research into the Fens have resulted in their being recurrently omitted from political debate.

The architecture of the British state has its foundations in land like that of the Fens. In chapter 5 this thesis explores how 'wasteland' was claimed as territory through a reclamation from nature. These waste sites, as James C. Scott discusses

in his 2017 book *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, were more often than not places like wetlands with an over-abundance of life. The Fens are that swampy soil whose “dirty voluptuousness” (Benjamin, 1969: 131) is covered over so that it remains lifeless but undecomposed on the surface of the landscape. The generative force that has been enshrined in this site appears as the agricultural project – that interminable labour of producing surplus and maintaining stability, whilst petrifying life.

The arable land of the Fen region appears as a prehistoric revenant of Britain’s political conformity – the intractable element required to project a progress narrative in and through the provision of cheap food to England’s cities. To be clear, the accretion of empty time in the Fen region appears as an obstruction to changes in the management of land and bodies in industrial agricultural sites. Any such changes would at least temporarily raise food prices. Food insecurity is notoriously destabilising. It is an age-old harbinger of conflict, protest, and rioting. Democracy is not possible without the fateful presence of disturbance, and stability is not possible without a constant supply of affordable food. This affordable food requires cheap labour, a quotation of the soil’s ability to bear fruit for free. In England, the Fens are the most important site for food security in the country. This fabricated gold-standard arable land is also the home to a rightwing political monoculture.

England’s political left are bound with their Conservative opposition in a Platonic political philosophy that aims above all else to create stability and in doing so forecloses the possibility of disruption. I put forward here that the natural harmony that Platonism looks to for its ideal of political stability is not the mire or the wasteland but the farmer’s field. To be clear, the idea of a social good to be

aimed at regardless of individual desires appears in this thesis as denaturalised nature in the form of agriculture. The site on which Machiavelli's Prince might grow his own luck. This thesis puts forward that it is in the work of maintaining this stability in England's agricultural land that it is possible to glimpse "the ultimate, hidden truth of the world [...] that it is something that we make and could just as easily make differently." (Graeber, 2009:514)

The veneer of democracy that was battled over in the streets of English cities appears from the oblique angle of the Fen landscape as a commodified social contract. The dream of this fetish is made fat on the obscured labour of the rural poor. In 1843, a decade after the Factories Act, the Royal Commission published their report on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture which focused on the Fen region. The report is little known and produced few shockwaves at the time despite its description of a level of poverty analogous to that in Manchester — made famous by Engels (2009) striking portrait of the city. It is clear in the parliamentary discussions surrounding this report that the conditions of the rural poor had been obscured. The report described that from the age of five or six children working for 'gang masters', these were local men who sourced and managed gangs of labourers for farmers. Gangmasters employed mainly women and children who walked up to ten miles in the dark to reach the fields to begin work by daybreak and laboured, picking stones and weeding crops, for between eight and eleven hours. Public health reports at the time describe the market towns of March and Wisbech as places ravaged by poverty where infant mortality rates were higher than in the slums of Manchester (HC Deb 02 April 1867, vol. 186). This system of labour was directly linked to the creation of the high yield agricultural land in the Fens:

The gang system was spoken of by the Royal Commission as a recent thing. It had only been in existence about twenty years, and arose mainly from the reclamation of large tracts of land from the sea, which now had become, through the ingenuity of our engineers and the energy of our farmers, from mere marsh, the most fertile part of the country.

(Mr Dent, HC Deb 02 April 1867. vol 186: c 1006.)

Mr Fawcett – the Liberal Party Member of Parliament for Brighton – questioned the house regarding this omission from parliamentary debate:

Were not those counties represented in that House? and how was it they had heard nothing of that before? The hon. Member for Lincolnshire came down to that House and made piteous appeals to the Government to save the country from the murrain which was raging amongst cattle. Why did he not tell them of that which was far more frightful—the sacrificing of the minds and energies of a large class of the people in the country? Could anything bring out more strongly the fact that the interests of those who were not directly represented were too often little regarded [...] and how did it come that under the very shadow of that beautiful cathedral [Peterborough] there existed a degree of ignorance, of immorality, of depravity, which if they found in any foreign country would at once confirm them in saying, "this is indeed a country devoid of the blessings of civilization?"

(HC Deb 02 April 1867. vol 186: c 1011-12)

This report did not result in legislation regarding the labour conditions of the rural working-class. It led instead to the 1867 Gangmasters Act which required gang masters to be licenced. The objective of this act was not to improve the working conditions of the rural poor but rather to block immoral, lower class ‘gangsters’ from corrupting rural women. In the words of Mr Dent:

A tradesman of Chatteris, in his evidence before the Royal Commissioners, said the death rate in that district of children under two years was very great. He attributed this to the conduct of the mothers towards their infants, and to the drugging them with opium. He added that out of seventy-two burials in the year, thirty of them were children of one year old and under.

However healthy and hardy and strong these women might be, and however admirable labourers the men might make, the system, if continued, must have a considerable effect on the diminution of the population in those districts In a moral point of view, nothing could be worse than the

description they found in the Report of the Royal Commission. He would not quote the evidence of the clergy, knowing the prejudice that existed against them in the minds of some persons. He believed their labours had been, and still were, most meritorious and painstaking in the agricultural districts; but he would quote some of the evidence given by the women themselves and the employers of this description of labour. The first effect of the system on the women was to produce a hard, rude, bold manner, which perfectly unfitted them for all kinds of domestic service. They found that ganging was a more free and independent life. It enabled them to stay out at night, and to spend the Sunday as they pleased, which they frequently did immorally, wildly, and recklessly. The consequence was that it unfitted them hereafter to become good mothers of families or comfortable wives. What possibly could be more uncomfortable or wretched than for a labourer to marry a woman who had never been trained to anything like domestic habits? Such a woman could never make him happy or bring up his children properly. The women themselves admitted that they did not like their daughters to work in the gangs, and that if they remained out too long they did not make good wives. One said it was not fit work for girls, and another that she would rather her girls had to go into the workhouse than join the gangs. The employers of labour themselves condemned the system for girls of tender years, and said they should be glad indeed to see women and girls excluded from the fields. He was inclined to believe that the evil did not arise from the scarcity of male labour in those districts, but rather from the cheapness of female labour. In different parts of Norfolk agricultural wages were as low as 10s. or 12s. per week, and in other districts he found that the farmers were complaining that the labourers were emigrating because wages were so low, and this lowness of wages was attributed by many persons to the competition of these gangs of women and young children of both sexes...

The Royal Commission had suggested the adoption of several remedies. First, they suggested that no gangmaster or middleman should be allowed to take out gangs without a licence from a magistrate. When they considered that these middle-men were many of them convicted felons and thieves and men who had committed gross and indecent assaults on members of their gangs, all must acknowledge how desirable it was that there should be a check, some hold upon them, that some course should be adopted to ensure as far as possible their respectability....His opinion also was that no child should be employed for hire under ten years of age, though some wished to fix it at eight. Some decided restrictions also should be adopted to prevent the sexes from working together, for he left it to hon. Gentlemen who knew the Fen districts which were without hedges or places of shelter, to say, if they mixed the sexes in gangs, what decency or morality they could expect to prevail?

(HC Deb (02 April 1867). vol 186: c 1011-12)

The rural here appears as the site of the natural history of English sovereign territory and those who live and labour on arable land are considered assets of the

land. If there is a lack of democratic representation in these areas this is because assets are not a *demos* – they have no rights or valid agency. They gesture languorously from that obscured element that is central to territory – the foreclosure of desire. This formless absence (dis)appears in something like a double exposure photograph of the Fen landscape. The tessellation of two separate points in time: this 1867 House of Commons debate regarding the Royal Commission’s report on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture and my 2017 conversation with Chris Stevens, manager of Wisbech’s Oasis centre. Between these points a constructed absence appears. A lack of schools, houses, medical provision, choices, opportunities and the interminable trauma of this yielded nothing. This appears in the 1867 House of Commons debate in a speech by Mr Dent who describes this site as a place constructed so that labour arrives from outside, like a force of nature. There is no responsibility for these labourers from the state, and no schools nor cottages. He is clear that this lack is directly correlated with the violence of the gangmaster system:

Much might be done towards checking the employment of women or children in gangs by improving the dwellings of the labouring classes, and by their being located near the farms on which labourers were required, instead of their having to reside a distance off. The blame in that respect did not wholly lie with the landlords. In some districts, such as the Fen district, where the land had been but recently reclaimed, there had been no opportunity of building the cottages required – a great portion of it not being fitted until lately for the habitation of man. In other districts the farmers were to be blamed as much as the landlords for not having cottages erected on their farms for the labourers, having been anxious to drive them away to save the poor rates; but he believed they were now beginning to appreciate the fact that a labourer who had to walk four or five miles daily to his labour had so much good work taken out of him. Another thing that would in a great measure tend towards removing the evil complained of was better schools and more attention paid to education. Mr Long, the Assistant Commissioner, stated, in his Report, that children were less worked where there were good schools, and he had found that in almost every instance where there were no day schools these agricultural gangs existed. In the diocese of Norwich

there were at the present time no less than 120 parishes in which no day schools existed.

(HC Deb (02 April 1867). vol 186: c 1008-10)

The Fen region of the present day is the most important site for food production in England and it is also a site in which time has stood still. Analysis of real wages between 1670 and 1850 analysis carried out by Clarke (2001) found little change in agricultural earnings despite the rapid productivity advances in agriculture during this period. By 1946 conditions had not improved:

The Motion to which I direct your attention is divided into three sections. First, wages, then cottages, and, lastly, additional food rations. In all three respects the agricultural worker is at a disadvantage compared with the industrial worker. The minimum wage of the agricultural worker is 70s.; the minimum wage of the miner is 100s. The railway worker gets 84s, and the average for the engineering worker is 95s. 6d. But we are told that benefits are conferred upon agricultural workers which are of immense importance, and that these have to be taken into account. I do not deny that, but what are these benefits?

(Lord Beaverbrook. HL Deb. 12 February 1946. Vol.139. c.445.)

Between 2002 and 2009 standard agricultural wages were £4.10 per hour, or around £200 a week; average earnings in the UK during that period were £503 per week. The repetitive references from people I spoke with to the Fen landscape as 'behind time' manifest in an area dominated by agricultural labour where conditions have stagnated since before the Industrial Revolution. The Fens gesture to a previous iteration of a prehistoric force that coats the surface of the landscape in the form of landownership. I refer here to the feudal system and its construction as the denatured ground on which capitalism blossomed. This thesis puts forward not only that it is possible to glimpse this feudalism as covered over but still in action in the obscured history of the Fen landscape, but also that both feudalism and the Fen landscape are neither related nor distinct. They constellate

with capital and the unconscious as manifestations of a prehistoric drive to construct a denatured ground.

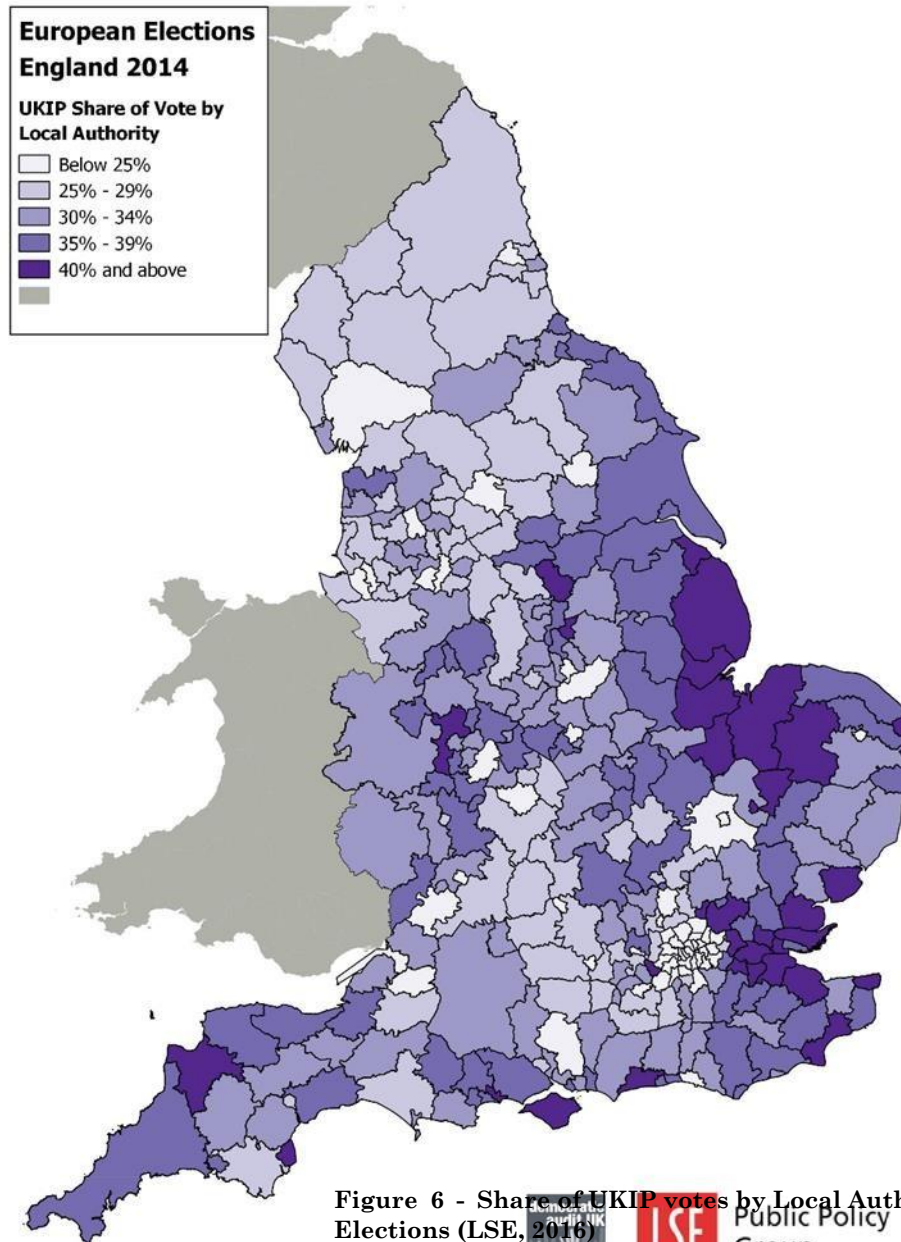
Though feudalism is widely understood to have been abolished in the seventeenth century,⁹ the Fen landscape gestures to its continuation out of the site/sight of the city. The gangmaster system, characterised by low wages and lack of alternative employment options, was developed in this new landscape of the drained Fen during a period of time that was ostensibly characterised by the improvement of working conditions in urban factories. In chapter 6 I explore the Fen landscape as a site where iniquitous governance retreats to establish itself as a product of natural law. Benjamin and Kafka saw prehistory reaching into the industrial revolution's present. Lowly born men and women once had beastly qualities, now they clapped with "hands [which] are really steam hammers." (Kafka in Benjamin, 1969b: 113). The Fen landscape here appears as an "exilic centre" (Rosenzweig, in Dubow, 2021: 69). Put another way, something forgotten right at the centre of things. That site where prehistory reaches up and integrates itself into the stable ground of natural history. It appears at the time of writing in the dual images of climate change and food security right on the surface of the Fen landscape.

The centrality of food production to sovereignty materialises here as 'nothing'. It appears in Shakespeare's *Richard II* as the centre of a "hollow crown" (Shakespeare, 2011: 213) – that tended garden which demands constant vigilance

⁹ The Statute of Tenures of 1660 is recorded as the abolition of feudalism in England. The feudal system that came to an end with this statute concerned the aristocracy, not the common man or woman. The statute concerned Crown Tenures, abolishing *tenens in capite* and tenancy by *knights-service*. After 1660 crown tenants no longer received stewardship of land in exchange for fealty (military and religious service to the crown). Instead they were required to pay a money rent thus converting all tenures into freeholds and creating a land market.

that serves as metaphor for the English state. This is a crown that twists, mobius strip-like around that particularly agricultural gesture of keeping organic matter, crops, herds, and populations alive and in place for the purposes of appreciation. Put another way, the development of the democratic process in Britain is seen here as correlate with the story of Esau, who sold his birth right for a mess of pottage (Genesis, 25:29-34).

At the climax of the Industrial Revolution a vision of democracy was projected onto the city as a movement forward to a healthy, well-nourished working class. The truth that this could only occur through maintaining 'business-as-usual' in the form of feudal working and living conditions in rural areas was oppressed. This forgetting "mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless, uncertain, changing compound, yielding a constant flow of new strange products" (Benjamin 1969b: 131). The 'Nothing' that Graham Swift (2015:13) identified as characteristic of the Fen landscape is understood in this thesis as the container from which the inexhaustible, intermediate world of these elements crossed out – not nullified – press towards the surface. In the Fen region of the present moment this old, unarticulated history animates the blossoming of myriad derivatives, all of which accrete and beckon a moment of danger.



2.9 In which no one is sure if this is England.

It was not until nearly 50 years later with the 1918 Representation of the People Act – which abolished most property qualifications – that the non-landed class in rural areas could vote. However by that moment, that ancient gesture of the

Platonic state had twisted topologically into the form of state capitalism. The omission of the rural electorate from the 1867 extension of the franchise is to be understood in this thesis as a gesture of that same mythic violence that also granted large landowners multiple votes. Precisely that prehistory that animates the democracy desert – that which Craig my participant described as the sensation of being caught in “a beartrap”.

Migration was interpreted as a key issue in the rationale of Brexit voters. This was due at least in part to the rhetoric of the mainstream media who framed the referendum as a vote for or against migration. In a double movement both the wider project of the EU referendum and the geographical intricacies of migration in the UK were obscured. Through their conformity to a neat pro-migration argument the British political left obscured a history of violence happening in the present. In reality, both the leave and the remain campaign wanted to retain the use of cheap migrant labour in the Fens. During the mid-nineteenth century this gesture not only sanctioned but actively created and covered over the conditions in which serfdom appeared.

This interminable agricultural iteration of our current epoch manifests as a particular interaction between deprivation and migration in the Fens. It appears hidden right in the open as the naturalised nothing of industrial farmland. In November 2017 I met Nyra, a computer programmer in her mid-thirties from Delhi. Nyra told me that she had moved to Lincolnshire when her husband – a medic – was sent on rotation to Boston’s Pilgrim Hospital. The shock that Nyra expressed as we spoke brought to mind an action of finding oneself in the centre of a hollow crown:

Sometimes when I'm going down certain roads, I wonder "is this the UK?" I don't understand how this place ended up like this, we pay the same amount of council tax as other areas.

If you go out on the streets and look at the houses you will see they are all so old. To be honest nobody would want to go and live in that house. That is how it looks in this place, apart from small areas that are really posh. The majority of the place, it is underdeveloped. When we lived in Sheffield I'd never see houses that were so neglected. It is really sad to know that people are going to have to suffer in the houses here. It must be so cold in winter. If you just look at the houses you can see that they do not have good insulation and people. It is the people who are do farming jobs that live in these places. The landlords rent them out by the room mostly to single men, and I know that they cannot really afford high gas bills. I think about them having to compensate with the heating and live in the cold.

At one point in time, I thought maybe it's been neglected due to a high population of immigrants but there are different kinds of migrants here. There is this Pilgrim Hospital and there are a lot of Asians who work there. Right behind the Pilgrim Hospital I see a sudden difference in wealth. The houses on Pilgrims Lane are all very posh and very developed. They belong to the professional migrant community who work at the hospital: the surgeons, consultants, and doctors. The community there is mostly Asian. If you come to Boston to a decent posh area, you'll find them. In the other areas you'll find the people who work on the farms. I sometimes think this place is so neglected because of the migrants who work on the farms. No one wants to develop this place and make it a good place for these immigrants.

Boston and the rest of the swathe of territory of the Fens, that great mire that was drained and reclaimed as high yield farmland, experienced large scale European Union immigration following the 2004 expansion. This issue is explored at length in chapter 7 in the context of the widespread labour abuses that occurred as part of this concentrated pattern of migration. I argue that there was a failure of the left in politics and the media to acknowledge these abuses and their implications. Further to this these areas were actively targeted by Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the political right's associated tabloid presses (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). The rural working classes were framed as work-shy bigots – people who did not want to work hard and resented those who arrived to

do so. The sociologist Alina Rzepnikowska (2019) records that this discourse was present in her work with EU nationals, they “often discussed racism, xenophobia and fear with reference to class and spatial characteristics. Racism and xenophobia were attributed to poor white working-class Brits”. All of these narratives displayed a complex juxtaposition of “a genuine fear of anti-immigrant attitudes, racism and xenophobia, and racialised othering of the poor white working class” (*ibid*: 71) .

There was no push back against this narrative by the left-wing press. Instead, freedom of movement and multi-culturalism were presented as utopian ideals to be retained at all costs. As part of this process agricultural migrant workers were reified, transformed into the commodities of globalisation. These workers are well-educated, young, and healthy. Many represent the dispossessed middle classes of a newly outward-looking Eastern Europe. When I met with the Town Clerk of Wisbech in 2017 he described how the aspirations of Eastern European workers made them more appealing subjects than the domestic working-class population:

People seem to be looking for a bad news story about Wisbech because we have high levels of migration here. The media focused on that in the run up to Brexit. The local news programme “Look East” focused on Wisbech as part of their referendum roadshow and they were looking for stories that said the Eastern European migration to Wisbech has caused significant problems. They interviewed a local GP and suggested to him that the large-scale immigration must of caused problems with appointments your waiting lists. The GP replied that ‘actually, the Eastern Europeans cause me no problems because most of them are young, they're healthy, and they work. The ones who cause me the problems are the ones who have lived here for a long time. These are people who have probably never worked, who smoke and get heart disease and type two diabetes. That is where the problems lie not in the migrant population.

This sentiment sedimented into the widely use trope of ‘the good worker’. Eastern European migrants were framed as naturally harder working than the domestic

working class and this was used to obscure arguments about poor labour conditions in the Fen region. This concept is explored in depth in chapter 7. I argue here that all context was lost as history leapt into these bodies. The opposition to the leave campaign's right wing anti-immigration discourse was the invocation of an ethnic stereotype of an Eastern European labourer with a natural affinity for low paid manual labour. This trope flashed up in my conversation with Ivo, a Latvian man in his early thirties. Ivo told me he found the concept of the "hard working Eastern European" amusing in multiple ways, not least because in Latvia he could never find work as an agricultural labourer: "the Asians come over and do that work" he told me.

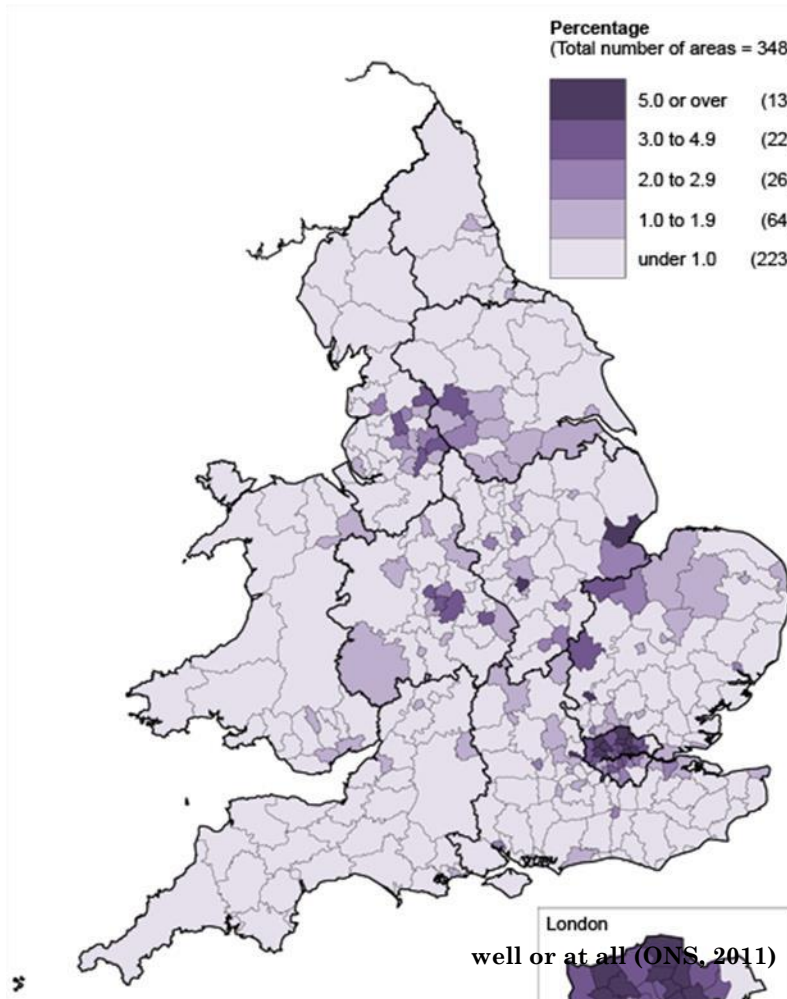


Figure 7 - Percentage of population not able to speak English

2.10. In which freedom isn't free.

During my fieldwork, I spent time at The Ferry Project, a homeless hostel in Wisbech. It transpired that the hostel was often unable to keep up with the demand for their services due in large part to the ill treatment by gangmasters of migrants from Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Many of these people were promised abundant work and pay in England but had instead found themselves in debt bondage to landlords cum labour agencies.

The extent of the labour abuses in the Fen region was by no means unrecognised. The multi-agency taskforce Operation Pheasant has been attempting to combat

modern slavery in the Fen area since 2012 when the issue was acknowledged in wider legislature. At this point organisations such as the Ferry Project and the Rosmini Centre in Wisbech had been reporting serious concerns for five years. The absence of wider debate regarding the issue of modern slavery in these rural democracy deserts is understood not as an act of omission, it is conceptualised rather as an act of commission. A 2014 government-commissioned report by the Migration Advisory Committee found clear evidence of large-scale exploitation of migrant workers in the area around Wisbech in Cambridgeshire. It documented a process of debt bondage in which companies use social media to post attractive advertisements for work in the UK. They charge individuals to arrange employment, transport and accommodation. On reaching the UK people have their passports confiscated before being taken to an overcrowded house of multiple occupation, where they are made to pay up to three weeks (inflated) rent in advance. Each day these people are told to wait at a petrol station just before dawn. The gangmaster cum landlord takes some of the workers and those who are left behind are not paid and fall further into debt. Arrears to the gangmaster are taken out of wages before they are paid. People work hard for weeks for nothing because they have nowhere else to go. They – like many before them – languish in languor under the huge Fen skies.

It would be a mistake to see the exploitation of migrants in the Fens area as something new. It appears in this thesis as the gesture of obscured history. Impoverished East Londoners, children, prisoners of war and the Gypsy Traveller community all materialise as previous iterations of this exploitation in the Fen area. The area between Peterborough and Wisbech has the highest number of traveller sites per population in England. The Gypsy traveller communities and

the Fens relied on each other from the late eighteenth century onwards. The itinerant labour provided by this community was cheap and the workforce actively avoided being placed as sovereign citizens. In other words, they placed no demands for health, social care or education. Work here was guaranteed at certain points of the agricultural year. Intolerance towards the travelling community takes a form analogous with their role as obscured, undeclared, off-the-books labour in the Fens. Imagined as a force of nature, arriving with the change of the seasons, the itinerant culture of this community was subjugated like nature itself in the Fens.

Until 1960 enough common land existed in Britain for Gypsy and Travellers to sustain their nomadic way of life. This ended with the passing of Section 23 of the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 in which local authorities were granted the authority to close the commons to Travellers. For more than a quarter of a century after the passing of Section 23 local authorities rigorously cracked down on illegal encampments whilst denying their concomitant duty to provide suitable sites for Travellers in compensation for the closure of the commons. Not only is there still a chronic lack of these sites; those that are provided such as the large sites just outside Wisbech St Mary in Fenland are of a poor standard. The traveller sites and houses of multiple occupation of Wisbech materialise as a quotation of that requirement of a local point of origin that I explored in an alternative iteration in the case of Charles – whose expulsion from his care placement gestured to the Poor Laws. In the Fens of this thesis migrants, travellers and domestic workers appear as that placeable and accountable postfeudal free man who is simultaneously interned by his status as a sovereign subject.



2.11 In which we find ourselves caught in repetition.

It is now almost five years since the UK voted in favour of leaving the European Union. During this period there has been growing concern regarding the legislating of increasingly authoritarian agendas. The passing of the first draft of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill in March 2021 sparked widespread protests in cities across the UK due to its criminalisation of disruption caused by political dissent such as protests. The provisions of the bill disproportionately place Gypsy Traveller communities at risk, it proposes fines of up to £2500 and three-month prison sentences for unauthorised encampments, the seizure of vehicles and trailers (which, in this case means homes) at the discretion of police, being held until the conclusion of criminal proceedings, and the sale of vehicles and trailers to pay fines. There has been a sense of an intensification of a beartrap, a snare that had faded from perception closing in. With this movement, clotted

violence from the past oozes from the surface of rivers bloated with the ephemera of accretion. Throughout the spring of 2021 point-blank accusations of authoritarian governance have been levelled by both the media and politicians.

Journalist Rachel Shabi wrote for the Independent on the 21st of March 2021:

Increasingly, it has felt as though parts of the British press are not up to the curbing democratic practice of holding our government to account. As the Conservatives metastasised into a nativist populist project and won a parliamentary majority, there were too few alarm bells or flashing lights. Instead, a normalising media patter set up Boris Johnson as a scones and jam eating, freedom-loving, socially liberal prime minister. Well, now his government has passed a shockingly authoritarian policing bill, a severe crackdown on protest that also criminalises Gypsy and traveller communities. One MP described the bill's rules as "so loose and lazy they would make a dictator blush". The contrast between political reality and media portrayal could hardly be starker.

Three days earlier on the 18th of March 2021, multiple MPs expressed grave concern during a debate in the House of Commons regarding the Independent Review of Administrative Law. This review was launched by the government on the 31st of July 2020 to examine the case for reforming the judicial review process in the UK. Whilst this thesis is not directly concerned with judicial reform, the implications of the proposed review are intimately bound up with the broad interests of this project.¹⁰ In short, the review follows pledges in the Conservative

¹⁰ Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis it is worth noting the importance of Brexit to the unfolding of this political moment. I am referring here to the August 2019 suspension of Parliament which was later ruled as unlawful. This ruling was directly connected to evidence that intimated that the prorogation was an attempt by Johnson's cabinet of to avoid parliamentary scrutiny of the Government's plans in those final weeks leading up to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Johnson and his Government defended the prorogation of Parliament as a routine political process that ordinarily follows the selection of a new Prime Minister and would allow the Government to refocus on a legislative agenda. The matter was originally ruled to be a political decision, outside of the remit of judicial review by judges in the High Court of Justice, and the Outer House of the Court of Session – the English and Scottish civil courts of first instance. An appeal to Scotland's supreme civil court overturned the decision and ruled the suspension of Parliament unlawful. The disparity in rulings was then subject to an appeal to the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom. On the 24th of September 2020 it was ruled

manifesto to guarantee that judicial review ¹¹ is “not abused to conduct politics by another means or to create endless delays” (Ministry of Justice, 2021: 8). The terms of reference make it clear that the review aims to consider whether judicial review has encroached too far into the work of the executive branch of government. The review recommends introducing ouster clauses. These are provisions included in individual pieces of legislation by a legislative body to exclude judicial review of acts and decisions of the executive by stripping the courts of their supervisory judicial function. During the House of Commons debate on the 18th of March, David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham noted that:

[...] as feared, the Government are considering making certain decisions of Parliament beyond the reach of judicial review [...]. The Government should exercise extreme caution in expanding the use of ouster clauses to

prevent the Executive from being challenged in the courts. That is a fundamental right, and this is particularly worrying, given the

unanimously that the prorogation was justiciable and unlawful. As a result, the Order in Council requisitioning prorogation was quashed, and the prorogation was deemed "null and of no [legal] effect". When Parliament resumed on the following day, the prorogation ceremony was expunged from the Journal of the House of Commons and business continued as if the ceremony had never happened. The Independent Review of Administrative Law is considered by some to be a direct retaliation from Johnson's cabinet to the courts.

¹¹ The term judicial review refers to a relationship of accountability between the courts and the executive. This bond serves three main constitutional purposes. First, it holds the government to account through providing the means for citizens to safeguard the exercise of executive power by appeal to the judiciary. This is crucial to ensuring that state power is exercised responsibly. Second, judicial review is central to the rule of law. It provides the means through the court can supervise the limitations of the duties imposed and the powers bestowed by government. Judicial review thus brings into effect parliamentary sovereignty. It achieves this through holding the parliament to account with respect the executive as well as ensuring that the executive complies with longstanding common-law principles, such as rationality and procedural fairness. The existence of judicial review serves a crucial function in impelling government decision makers at all levels to ensure that their decisions, policies, and procedures are lawful, even if a particular decision, policy or procedure is never in fact the subject of judicial review proceedings. The principles drawn from the caselaw provide a framework for decision makers to ensure that their decisions are reached in a lawful and fair manner, compliant with the principles of good administration (Public Law Project 2020).

Government's disdain for parliamentary scrutiny and No. 10's history of hoarding powers.

In my 20 years in this House, I have never encountered a Government more disdainful of our rights, freedoms and rule of law than this one. One of the Prime Minister's first actions was to unlawfully prorogue the House; after he was re-elected, he sent his Secretary of State for Northern Ireland out to boast about how the Government would break international law in a specific and limited way; and on Tuesday we saw the Government launch an unprecedented attack on the British public's freedom to protest. At each of these moments the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice has chosen to stay silent, ignoring his special duty to uphold the rule of law.

Judicial review is the only mechanism by which members of the public can challenge the Government and public bodies when they break the law. ...On the surface, the review has looked at technical aspects of judicial review. The formal scope focuses on potential codification of grounds, the parameters of judicial authority and the procedural changes, but its political purpose is sweeping and dangerous.

A responsible Government would seek to consolidate and protect the democratic legal right of judicial review, not constrain and undermine it. Just as we condemn foreign Governments for attacking the rule of law, as in Poland and Hungary, Members must also condemn our own Government for doing the same. Members from all political traditions should be just as outraged that the Government decided in the middle of a pandemic to use their precious time to launch an attack on judicial review. Madam Deputy Speaker, be in no doubt: this cynical, misguided and politically motivated move is from the same authoritarian playbook.

(HC Deb. 18 March 2021. v.691. c.506-508)

Later in the debate Rachael Maskell, the Labour Co-operative MP for York Central, asserted that the government is "taking our rights, as they run roughshod over the human rights of others, further exposing the hostile, *authoritarian* environment festering at the heart of Government." (*ibid*: c.514) The relationship between this national political trend and the particular landscape of the Fens forms a constellatory point that brings to mind William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and the violent expansion of his country estate. The monocultural arrangement, is precisely an authoritarian, totalitarian choreography. I propose that rural sites like the Fen landscape contain myriad

truth values regarding the nature of domination in our current epoch of impending climate change. These truth values, however, do not necessarily manifest in an easily digestible manner – they gesture silently, encoded on the surface of the landscape.

It seems that we are in a new or indeed exceptional moment where the current cabinet have executed a backslide on democracy. I propose here that the democracy on which they have reneged is a phantasmagoria, a projection that requires the covering over of agricultural land, by the myth of a state of nature. Places like the Fens have acted like a screen – indeed a white out – on which the spectacle of an imagined England has burgeoned. This thesis aims to read the Fen landscape as it flashed up to me and its flatness revealed itself as illusion. It appeared to me as ‘a germinate gem’ – a site in which time can, as Bob described, “suddenly flip”. In this site, moments that seem novel reveal themselves as nothing more original than a longstanding leitmotif in a different key. The political monoculture of the Fens is on my mind here. As this moves into view so too does the longstanding obscuration of agricultural land ownership in England. It casts a shadow that brings into relief relationships between high value agricultural land, failings of democracy and disproportionately high levels of support for exiting the European Union. To be precise, I propose here that the current political climate is a repetition. In the etymological sense, to repeat emerges from the Old French *repeater* – “say or do again, get back, demand the return of” – or indeed another assault, a leap from the past into a present form. The Fen landscape holds old forces that are hidden but nonetheless active on the surface of its substance. I refer here to force of an obscured agricultural landowning class as they distort their practices topologically under new global

powers. The past is flashing up in new constellations of old methods for exploiting both bodies and land whilst accreting power and suppressing the histories of the present.

The political theorist Henry Thomson (2017) asserts that under authoritarian regimes agricultural policy making is as much about placating rural elites as it is about providing cheap food for the people. This work reframes Thomson's assertion: it is through agricultural policy-making that we see the prehistoric violence that was emerges in the English state as agricultural land.

Agricultural land, in this thesis, signifies the material manifestation of potential that Graham Swift identifies as the 'nothing' which characterises the Fen landscape. By this I mean that latent possibility of force that gives birth to mythical violence as humans attempt to suppress the destructive nature of life as it repetitively sweeps all accretions away. The Fen landscape is read as a manifestation of the desire to make something from nothing. That is, not only to have the power of genesis but also to keep the bounty it produces. The Platonic fetishisation of enforced stability is the ground on which the English state stands. It appears as an economic and political system in which violence is justified in pursuit of what Walter Benjamin refers to as "just ends" (2003: 247) through the metaphysical impossibility of possessing this self-same nothing is also held in the Fen landscape. Mythical violence cannot suppress divine violence, that constant falling away, the unceasing loss which governs life. This godlike force – I refer here to that unbiddable element that emerges when human hands begin to govern nature – is relentlessly reanimated on the surface of the landscape. Indeed, in Graham Swift's (2015) *Waterland*, the protagonist Tom Crick does not only signify the Fen landscape as "the landscape which most approximates to Nothing". This

Nothing also appears in the form of water which always holds within it the possibility of divine violence:

When you work with water, you have to know and respect it. When you labour to subdue it, you have to understand that one day it may rise up and turn all your labours to nothing. For what is water, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing?

(Swift, 2015:13)

This force is what Lacan imagined as the impossible number whose sole function is not only to designate the impossibility of but also to inspire the desire for completion – a provocation of the desire to grow past the sky without turning it over (Benjamin 2003). The Fen landscape in its current manifestation as Grade 1 arable land is read in this thesis as the material manifestation of an imagined English state “with no or very minor limitations” (Natural England, 2002). It thus bears an uncanny structural similitude not only with the psychoanalytic unconscious but also with a sovereignty that manifests in the space around which the Hollow Crown circles. I refer here to that signifier that represents something on the edge of perception that can never be attained. Around this Hollow Crown the rubble of an imagined England accretes in intensifying violence as power and thus the stakes of loss pile up in a proliferation of rubble – a mimetic reproduction of the ground on which the English nation is imagined. This brutal geography can only be dissolved in the flash of a moment of divine violence – a torrent of rain as it overwhelms the silted-up waterways and leaps into the intractable present. It is only in these moments that it is possible to catch a glimpse of the precarious nature of territorial power and the violence it enacts in service of maintaining the ‘business-as-usual’ of natural history.



Landscape Observation Two

On Boxing Day in 1962 it snowed and it snowed for three days. It was sub-zero temperatures until March or April, everyone wore as much as they could. Hats were a must. To start with you'd be helping people up when they fell, the pavement was lethal. You stopped helping them eventually because there was no point. No one looked up from their feet and I was free from bullying on the way home from school for a while.

People say the river didn't freeze up but I remember that ice flowed down and gathered at the bends snowed over and impacted. I slept under Dad's RAF greatcoat and when I woke it would be iced up from my breath, no central heating so the windows iced up in pretty patterns too. Everything was snow grey and black, very desolate. For the whole winter the sky was that steely grey, always ready to

snow. Because it was so flat it was featureless. What people don't understand is that the wind here is cold from travelling so far across cold lands, but it is also damp because we're surrounded by water.

The Gasometer was big on the skyline in those days, the sound of the docks hooting in the fog, the swans on the frozen river. When you look back you realise how many buildings are gone. Whole streets ripped down. In those days it was a proper place, a proper market town economy, even in that cold the markets ran despite being depleted and packing up early. Errand boys, shop keepers in suits and ties. I remember it in black and white. The shops all privately owned with proper shop fronts from the 1920s and 1930s people walking round all terribly well dressed – suits, gloves, trilby hats.

It was a working class place with middle class aspirations. Factories turned out at certain times, the hooter or the bell would go and people would pour out on bicycles. That year there was a permafrost and the winter wheat and barley failed, but the frost killed off the pests and bird life. Our house had a beech tree in the back garden, ball shaped, small, about my height then. It turned brown in winter but didn't drop its leaves until the spring arrived with new leaves so it provided a good hiding place for sparrows. One of our jobs in the morning was to go down to the garden and kick the tree so that the dead sparrows would drop to the ground. My brother and I would take bets on how many, sometimes there would be none and we'd realise Dad had beat us to it.



MONOCULTURAL MONAD - A METHODOLOGY.

‘Lightly he makes a man strong,
And lightly he maims one who is strong,
Lightly he lessens the famous
And will exalt the obscure’ (Hesiod WD 7-9
in Nelson and Green, 1998: 9)

Agriculture will remain a tragedy so long as it is kept separate from the problem of the human condition. And the human condition will remain a tragic problem as long as it is kept separate from the problem of agriculture (Jackson, 1984:161).

3.1 The ‘black magic of sentimentality.’

In the summer of 1931 Walter Benjamin was to be found on the French Riviera in Antibes. He begins the collection of fragments titled *May-June 1931* (1999b: 469-

486) with the resolution to save his remaining paper for a diary project. In description this pursuit takes on the appearance of a suicide note. The next entry veers onto a different track altogether. A reverie about Hemingway dovetails into something like a diary proper – a description of days, places, meetings with friends, conversations and private contemplations. In the latter half of this collection of fragments Benjamin begins to apply his critical gaze to the countryside around him:

Every gnat that hums in his ears, every gust of wind that makes him shiver, everything near that strikes him gives the lie to his dreams, but every distance rebuilds them again. They spring to life at every mountain ridge in the dusk, or every lighted window. And the dream appears at its most perfect when he succeeds in removing the sting from movement itself, in translating the trembling of the leaves above him into the top of a tree, the flitting and darting of the birds above his head into a flock of migrating birds. To command Nature herself to stand still in the name of faded images – this is the black magic of sentimentality. But to utter a call that will freeze it anew is the gift of poets.

(1999b: 474)

Nature appears, in this fragment, as an essential point of contact between experience and history. This chapter pursues this point of contact as a methodological tool that is of particular importance to cultural geographic studies of rural sites and landscapes. The narrativised beauty of a comprehensible nature appears in Benjamin's fragment as phantasie. It is present in the dream of a sting that can be removed and the flock of birds whose movements indicate migration. Benjamin is describing the de-formation of apparently natural forms that render the methodological contributions of reflexive consciousness futile. This is a concept that is explicated at length in the prologue to *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (2009). It glows with a particular lucidity in the non-urban context of this so called 'diary project'. The deformation that phantasie stimulates in the form –

‘gnat that hums in his ears, every gust of wind that makes him shiver, everything near’ – alters not the form itself but the temporal scheme in which the form exists. This is the ‘black magic of sentimentality’ that encloses forms in the time of human meaning. By which I mean, a comprehensible teleological order – indeed, the translation of ‘the trembling of the leaves above him into the top of a tree.’ The temporality of complex origin is covered over by this narrative, and contingency – the ability to call into question the narrative of progress – is foreclosed in its absence.

Benjamin states here that it is the poet – who grasps the nettle of the dialectical image – not the sentimental nature lover, who holds the potential to touch the phantasia image on its own terms rather than in the guise of ‘natural history’. The methodological and epistemic orientation of the poet is receptive to “the objective interpretation of phenomena” (Hassen, 1995: 812). Apparently natural forms reveal themselves through the poet’s method as phantasia – they ‘freeze themselves anew’ in a dialectical image. This crystallised image pulls the poles of the landscape apart by pausing the teleological trajectory of a time empty of origins. In this pause an oppressed past is simultaneously revealed and re-veiled (Dubow, 2021: 67-68). Like groundwater, the past forms a layer beneath the unsaturated zone of empty time. It exceeds the spaces between sediments and accretions. When it reaches the surface, it does so not as it once was, but as a strange new admixture, thick with the material of the moment that has just passed.

Later in his diary project Benjamin writes of taking a trip to the city of Saint-Paul de Vence with his friend, the writer Wilhelm Speyer. Benjamin describes the city with a droll but characteristically dialectic gaze. His tone changes, however, as

the friends linger on the ancient ramparts that encircle Saint-Paul de Vence as it blooms over the Provence countryside:

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

(1999b: 476).

With the strange benefit of what Freud would call *nachträglichkeit*, translated as deferred action, retroaction, après-coup, afterwardsness – precisely that ‘mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of [...] traumatic meaning to earlier events’ (1950: 282) – the rural flashes up in this fragment as an oppressed element within Benjamin’s historical materialism. The assertion that ‘one would have to know all the plants by name in order to be able to decode their geometry’ appears in the current moment as the absence of a conceptual dictionary of the rural. We are used to thinking of agricultural landscapes as too ordinary, too inescapably part of life to be of philosophical interest. Benjamin is explicit about the way this ‘ignorance’ results in an inability to read rural sites so that ‘the untutored townsman stands baffled, like a Westerner confronted by a page of Chinese script.’ In our current moment the dual images of the impending climate crisis and the rise of authoritarian political regimes pull the poles of the rural into tension. We are, at present, in a moment of danger. In the past century yields of agricultural crops have increased more than ever before in human history and as

a result the twentieth century was a time of great plenty. As a global society we had more food than we needed, though we did not distribute it evenly. The great wealth and decadence enjoyed by some – predominantly in the Global North – was fuelled by the introduction of a technological agriculture that has driven degradation of land productivity, water resources and soil health, as well as biodiversity loss at multiple spatial scales, ultimately compromising the sustainability of food production systems. Native habitats, such as forests and grasslands have been transformed into large scale, monocultural agricultural systems. With new pesticides and fertilisers these systems have, in the last century, developed the ability to wipe out all growth in an area, apart from the profitable crop. Nature appears to have been denatured.

An oppressed past gestures, contemporary rural battles simultaneously operate within and against ‘nature’ and outside and within ourselves. They demand a critical analysis of the rural as a site of complex origins and contingent futures. We are, at present, in a moment of danger. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, arable land prices have steadily risen in anticipation of predicted growing food shortages resulting from a combination of population growth and climate change. In addition, rural areas have been correlated in geographical research with the growing success of right-wing, populist and nationalist movements that have outperformed the established centre-right and social democratic parties in ballot boxes since 2016 (Manley, Jones, and Johnston 2017; Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Coleman 2016; Los et al 2016).

In Benjamin’s observation of ‘inexorably geometric lines of the groves, beds, and fields’ that he gazes down upon in May 1931, a crystal formed within my doctoral research into the Fen landscape of Eastern England. I had conducted over 30

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

Through Benjamin’s confession that he did not know how to decode the rural, an older past flashed up. It appeared in the writings of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod, author of *The Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Hesiod was writing from the arable landscape to the north of Athens during the development of the *polis*, or city state in the latter part of the eighth century BCE. Hesiod’s closest contemporary was the epic poet Homer, who described an aristocratic world of war and honour, ruled by an intelligible divine order. Hesiod, on the other hand, writes from the small farmer’s perspective. The earth, he declares in *Works and Days* is a *dis*-ordered earth, characterised by a relationship between the farmer and nature: a bond that is at once co-operative and hostile. Nature is the force that both causes the crop to grow and destroys the self-same crop through the actions of insects, diseases, and storms. What Hesiod’s farmer knows, and that he warns we should keep in mind, is that nature is neither benign nor sensible to human need.

The cosmos as described by Hesiod, in which humans are entangled with a nonsensical and unsympathetic nature, evinces an uncanny structural semblance to Benjamin’s metaphysics of spatial-temporal relations. It was in and through

this constellation that the Fen landscape of my doctoral research emerged in contingent form. The disjuncture and fragmentary nature of the material that I had collected surfaced through the porous and low Fen fields in a collection of jewels – dew drops that glittered. The monocultural field appeared as a crude sign, covering the landscape with a progressive story of man as victor over nature.

In what follows I discuss the specificity of the Fen landscape. Not only the progressive tale that has been constructed to cover this landscape but also the disruptive and anarchic forces that are revealed at play when the Fens are viewed through poetic, indeed dialectical images. The central aim of this chapter is to contribute a critical commentary that gives methodological form to the tension between the sensory and non-sensual operations of material rather than synthesising them. The chapter is arranged as follows: first, I track disjuncture and loss in the Fen landscape; in the next section I critically engage with a dialectical image produced by a participant during fieldwork in the Fenland district in North Cambridgeshire; I move on to discuss the key themes that emerge from a constellation between the Fen landscape, Hesiod's arable metaphysics and Walter Benjamin's conceptual dictionary. In so doing, I aim to open new spaces of disjuncture within the Fen landscape. I conclude by considering the methodological by-product of this constellation and its potential for use in generating new understandings not only of rural landscapes but geographic objects more generally.



3.2 Arable aspiration

Water escapes me yet makes me and there is not a thing I can do about it

Ponge (1972:51)

The Fen landscape in the East of England is a swathe of ‘reclaimed’ wetland that curves from Boston in Lincolnshire, through Cambridgeshire and past Kings Lynn into Norfolk. It shares parts of its history and its contemporary form with other drained wetland landscapes such as areas of Kent, Essex and Suffolk. Since the introduction of intensive agriculture in the Victorian period this area has developed an idiosyncratic set of spatial characteristics: the islands and areas of high ground that functioned as settlements prior to drainage retain their island form. Market towns like March, Wisbech, Chatteris and Whittlesey in the Fenland district in the North of Cambridgeshire now appear as isolated satellite market

towns. They hover over a mire transformed from a wetland teeming with biodiversity into an agricultural monoculture. The local economy is organised around low paid work in food production in fields and factories. There are few traditionally middle-class service roles in this place outside of local government, health and education. The local authority struggles to fill these roles.

There is extensive evidence of landscape management including drainage projects from the Bronze Age onwards (Ooustuizen 2017; Pryor, 1992). The Romans referred to this sickle shaped network of wetlands as *Metaris Æstuarium*. *Æstuarium* describes the area as an estuary and *Metaris* alludes to pastoral intentions, the full name imagining the area as a zone of arable potential that *will be* harvested. It was, however, the political theology of the Elizabethan commonwealth that drove the first state-initiated large scale drainage programme in the latter years of the sixteenth century. New approaches in natural philosophy, influenced primarily by Francis Bacon (2019 [1620]), imagined the human as separate to all other living beings in their ability and, following Aristotle,¹² their subsequent obligation to understand and control the natural world. This was a period of aporetic aspiration that sanctioned great violence in the name of ends. It set ticking a process of weeding that is active in

¹² The neo-Aristotelian notion that the human alone is defined by its rationality – by which I mean the ability to sense the world as it is and make good choices – became hegemonic in the Early Modern period in Europe. This emerged mainly from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ameriks and Clarke, 2000), for example: ‘But perhaps saying that the highest good is happiness will appear to be a platitude and what is wanted is a much clearer expression of what this is. Perhaps this would come about if the function (*ergon*) of a human being were identified. For just as the good, and doing well, for a flute player, a sculptor, and every sort of craftsman – and in general, for whatever has a function and a characteristic action – seems to depend upon function, so the same seems true for a human being, if indeed a human being has a function. Or do the carpenter and cobbler have their functions, while a human being has none and is rather naturally without a function? Or rather, just as there seems to be some particular function for the eye and the hand and in general for each of the parts of a human being, should one in the same way posit a particular function for the human being in addition to all these? Whatever might this be? For living is common even to plants, whereas something characteristic is wanted; so, one should set aside the life of nutrition and growth. Following that would be some sort of life of perception, yet this is also common, to the horse and the bull

the present Fen landscape, an ethics of eradication of all life that exists in the present but not in the envisioned future.

The drainage and enclosure of the Fens was widely debated and documented during the seventeenth century¹⁴ but they disappear from political discussion during the Industrial Revolution. The widespread migration of rural workers to the factories of the cities led to new, large urban populations who, due to their concentration, could leverage and pressure the government in ways that had not previously seemed possible. The political classes looked back to their classical educations to establish peace in the cities and to continue the production of commodities and capital. Over the course of the nineteenth century successive governments introduced both democratic processes and a steady supply of cheap food to England's cities. If the French Revolution had shown the proletariat that democracy is not possible without the threat of revolt, it had also reminded the ruling classes that stability is not possible without a constant supply of affordable food. This affordable food requires cheap labour, a quotation of the soil's ability to bear fruit for free.

By this point the drained Fens had matured into the largest swathe of high-grade agricultural land in the country and, though industrial production methods were

and to every animal. What remains, therefore, is a life of action belonging to the kind of soul that has reason.' (N.E, 1.7 1097b 22–33)

¹⁴ See Eric H. Ash (2017). It is also worth noting that the area was very much part of the imagined geographies of England and their documented ephemera prior to the Early Modern period when the area was largely a monastic territory. See Blanton (2005 and 2007) for contextual discussions concerning the place of Fen landscape within the English monastic cosmology.

introduced to the farmlands of the Fens, democracy was not. The franchise was not extended to landless rural workers until 1918. This disparity regarding the civil rights of urban and rural workers is due, at least in part, to the spatial arrangement of drained English arable land which was often owned by absent landlords and managed by tenants who sourced labour through gangmasters from small, insular communities. Revolt and revolution from these communities was unlikely and improving conditions for these workers would at least temporarily raise food prices and spark more instability in the city. As well as practical considerations, there was a monotheistic theological concept at play in the obscuration of the rural poor's civic interests – the idea of one deity, and one chosen species made in his image, the good of this species that may reap the benefits of the natural world without labour.¹⁶ This necessitates a view of rural workers as either less than human, less than good, or both. This can be seen in the urban myths of web-toed Fen dwellers, as well as myths of inbreeding, bestiality and mental abnormality associated more broadly with rural populations. It can be seen in the mid-nineteenth century parliamentary debates,

¹⁵ See for example, Deuteronomy 8:7–9:

‘For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper.’

that increasing civil rights for the urban poor went hand-in-hand with an intensifying conception of rural labourers as of less significance than livestock.¹⁷ There was, it seems, no ethical or political imperative to change the living conditions of rural labourers, and the question of the ethics of the intensification of arable production methods that occurred during the nineteenth century was not raised.

The technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution supported the increasing demands of a rising urban population. These new tools and practices are known as the 'high farming' system, referring to the 'high input' including but not limited to the intensive use of imported artificial fertilisers, high calorie 'oil cake' animal feed and machinery that were used to sustain the phantasia of very high yields. The Fen region was at the forefront of these agricultural changes and was acknowledged widely during the late nineteenth century as the birthplace of 'modern' farming. These processes resulted in an arable space in which all contingency is crossed out. This is analogous to Benjamin's concept of natural history, precisely a violent process stimulated by the desire to sustain phantasia – that narrativised idea of a comprehensible and controllable nature. Natural history appears here as the forcibly imposed stabilisation of phantasia time

through an interminable discourse of progress 'that knows no holiday' (2002: 260). Indeed, the drainage of the Fen landscape is commonly celebrated as a great feat of engineering, a successful step forwards towards the golden age of farming. It was however, a process marked not by progress but rather by recurrent failure.

The Commonwealth state's drainage projects of the Early Modern period aimed to transform this landscape of interconnected wetlands into a singular landscape of

arable productivity. However, the material conditions of this land proved difficult to transform. For example, in 1650 major drainage channels were cut in order to drain the southern fens. These channels formed the celebrated engineering feat of the New Bedford River (also known as the Hundred Foot drain) that runs from near St Ives in Cambridgeshire to Downham Market in Norfolk. By 1673 this land was flooded once again. Whilst the northern silt lands – always more stable – were held somewhat in check by ‘dreins and gotes’, keeping the loamy soils of the wetlands free of water proved more complicated. This soil, consisting of waterlogged, partly decayed plant remnants is incredibly rich and fertile. However, it decays rapidly when it is drained. Put simply, the drainage schemes dried out this soil and it decomposed, shrank and lowered the water table, making the land liable to flood once more. The more successful the drainage, the swifter the wastage. Even the advent of wind and later steam, diesel and electric technology struggled to maintain an equilibrium. Widespread flooding was common well into the twentieth century.

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

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

Similarly, when looked at closely, the fêted golden ages of Victorian farming were not a success story. Rather this was a system of farming with large outlays and

high risks. It seems in retrospect that the management of the land through the use of imported fertiliser and pesticides was largely inefficient (Oates, 2002). The narrative of success associated with this period is also one agricultural inefficiency covered over by inflated food prices – a process that increased international imports of cheaper food. In short, a phantasia.

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

As noted previously, due at least in part to the obscuration of data regarding land ownership in Britain, little is known about CFEs as financial assets or state apparatus (Prince, 2012). This concealment has been facilitated by a chronic lack of opposition in local government in the wider Fen region. In 2019, the Electoral Reform Society published data concerning both the councils where the highest number of councillors will be elected without voting taking place, and the councils which hold the highest number of guaranteed councillors for one party before any voting has taken place. Drained wetland districts with large CFEs were disproportionately represented as lacking democratic choice, most often appearing as ‘safe’ Conservative seats. The report refers to areas hosting councils elected without democratic competition as ‘democracy deserts’. This phrase resonates with the term ‘biodiversity deserts’ that John the ecologist used to describe the Fens fields. Both images intensify when considered in light of the council ownership of a large portion of this arable land.

The myriad resonances and allusions in this landscape raise methodological questions for geographical research. Primarily, what theoretical and practical tools can be used to understand the ghost of a landscape flashing up on a map?

And more specifically, what methods and means can be used to understand how this constructed monocultural arable landscape appears as an area defined by issues relating to a lack of diversity – not only in its ecological systems but also the social, political and economic structures that it is home to? Are these elements related? Or distinct? If they are related, is it possible to locate the cause, or causes? Furthermore, what would be the ethical risks in attempting such an analysis? In short, is it possible to attempt to understand this phenomenon without succumbing to the pitfalls of environmental determinism?



3.3 An ekphrastic landscape.

...every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it:
each 'now' is the now of a particular recognisability.

(Benjamin 2007a:51)

The Fen landscape resists narrative analysis, as an ecologist John - who I interviewed in September 2018 - explained to me: 'when a place has no biodiversity it is impossible to work out what happened and when. It removes perspective.' When perspective is lost, the past is not nullified. The past in the Fens is not gone, it has been covered over by the phantasia of an abundantly productive arable landscape. This is a landscape where the past flashes up in surreal montages of images – crystals formed of congealed fragments of time whose organising contexts have fallen away. A Whittlesey resident, Pete, who had worked on local architectural digs shared one such image crystal:

One afternoon I was digging in a barrow, near the McCain factory, I found Bronze age lamb bones in a small depression. The archaeologists said they were the remains of sacrifice.

As I cupped them there was a flip. It was the closest I've ever come to time travel.

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

These histories gesture through images. In the case of Must Farm, in 1999 a row of prehistoric posts appeared from the depths of the quarry, disrupting both time and geography. Pete's image does not only contain the barrow and the dig. He locates himself 'near the McCain factory'. The context that is being disrupted is one of food growth, harvest, and processing by multinational corporations. The image of the McCain factory simultaneously links Pete's image to an unknown future Fen landscape. McCain foods has been instrumental in pioneering a new

iteration of monocultural farming known as vertical farming. Plants in this system are grown without soil, in hydroponic greenhouses. Vertical farms are free from the pressures created by weather, isolated from pests and facilitate crop growth at a wider range of latitudes. The introduction of soilless agri-tech prophesises the end of epoch in the Fens, whose rich soils have been coveted and prospected since before the Roman occupation.

I propose that images like Pete's remind us that the Fen landscape is not only a product of the processes that constructed this monocultural arable arrangement. It is also a manifestation of the prehistories of the dreams that wished it into being, and the 'wish worlds' that it has been part of creating. The monocultural arable geometries of the Fens conceal the violent oppression that both made and maintain this landscape. Pete's image acts as a reminder that the material life of monoculture preserves traces of the histories that it simultaneously obscures, and that the Fen landscape demands a depth, rather than a top-down approach. Archaeologists Mark Knight and Matt Brudenell (2020) – who also worked on an excavation in Whittlesey – describe that they had to shift their metaphysical orientation to research in order to work with the dense layers of material in the Fen landscape. This change in methodological orientation required abandoning the search for a single all-encompassing representation of the prehistoric Fen landscape. Instead, Knight and Brudenell focused on process and change, the way in which moments have physically marked the Fen landscape – and the way the Fen landscape has shaped and reacted to these marks.

This methodological orientation is not only suited to the material conditions described by Knight and Brudenell – small, deep areas of extraordinarily wellpreserved material history amongst a larger area stripped of context by

monocultural arable practices. An attention to images is demanded by what I want to call the *ekphrasis* of the drained Fen landscape. By spatialising this literary term, I aim to elucidate this landscape in which endless repetition and similarity is always simultaneously shot through with irreducible difference. Ekphrasis here is used to indicate a specifically Janus-faced form of mimesis that “stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it” (Wagner 1996:13).

Following Cosgrove and Daniels (1989, the analysis and understanding of landscape as a ‘flickering text’ has been used extensively to read complex spatialtemporal arrangements. I propose that the notion of ekphrasis presents specific opportunities for a disenchantment of critical theory through ekphrastic rural sites like the Fen landscape. This is a place which is not only a retelling of other landscapes through visual elements – perhaps most strikingly it is a reiteration of the drained alluvial planes of the Netherlands – but also a visual recital of notional elements, of dreams and prospects of bountiful crops. The Fen landscape asks geographers to let go of firmly held assumptions of landscape as process (cf Bell, 2012) and to consider it also as the constellation of points of disjuncture. I propose that the landscape of the drained Fen presents an opportunity to consider landscape in its symbolisation of what literary critic Murray Krieger calls “the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships” (1967: 5). These relationships are imposed upon landscape’s mutable form to “‘still’ it”: and, to glimpse the “the atemporal ‘eternity’ of the stopped-action” nature of the layers of visual retellings as they appear in place (Steiner, 1988: 13–14).

The study of this ekphrastic landscape requires a methodological orientation that aims to notice moments in place where this constructed landscape “aspires to the atemporal ‘eternity’ of the stopped-action painting” (*ibid*). Another way of parsing this is to say that the Fen landscape of the moment that has just passed is a place where images gesture towards petrified history in the material of the landscape. Walter Benjamin described spatial-temporal configurations like these as “moments of danger” (2006:391).

In Pete’s image the barrow that he is excavating links a cited time – the Bronze Age – to an unquoted prehistory of the barrow itself. This occurs within a visual configuration that also holds a citation to a technological shift – soilless farming – that premonishes an epoch shift for the drained Fens. This raises the questions: ‘what would happen to this landscape in a world that did not need soil to grow produce?’ and; ‘what could this landscape have been if its soil had not been so highly valued?’ A picture of the past flashes up in Pete’s image in an instant and then recedes. His picture closes with the following words:

You can sense the past in other landscapes. It is not specific to the Fen, but I know it here; not that you can ever really *know* it.

If you go down Thorney Dyke when it is snowing, there is an emotion. I find it comforting. It covers the landscape in a blanket, taking away the manmade things and making it a wilderness.



3.4 The prehistoric origins of phantasie

But Zeus in the wrath of his heart hid our living from us [...] because
Prometheus of crooked counsels cheated him.

(Hesiod, *WD* 47 +49: in Nelson and Grene:1998: 10)

In his 1916 essay '*On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*' Walter Benjamin (1996) interrogates the lost nature of the things that humans attempt to communicate with language.

After the Fall which, in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity, linguistic confusion could be only a step away. Once men had injured the purity of name, the turning away from that contemplation of things in which their language passes into man needed only to be completed in order to deprive men of the common foundation of an already shaken spirit of language. Signs must

become confused where things are entangled. The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence. In this turning away from things – which was enslavement – the plan for the Tower of Babel came into being, and linguistic confusion with it.

Confusion appears in this essay as a by-product of an epoch shift that allowed humans to escape the enslavement of the world of things – precisely that prehistoric existence that bound humans to their bodies and senses through the actions of a temperamental and unforgiving natural world. What Benjamin describes here is an unfolding of abstraction, precisely the conception of a contrived and controlled nature that appears in *Critique of Violence* (2007) as *natural law*. It is a mythology that obscures a ‘more precise critical approach’ to the concept of justice and sanctions the use of violence in the name of the phantasmagoria of ‘just ends’. Just as this concept is active in legal philosophy and theology, so too does it ebb and flow in natural philosophy. In the Darwinist parsing of Benjamin’s moment, a violence of ends is imagined ‘as the only original means, besides natural selection, appropriate to all the vital ends of nature’. The temporal movement of ‘natural selection’ appears as the manifestation of a seal that moves time forward towards a utopia free from enslavement to the natural world. It appears in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1969) – the last major work Benjamin completed – in the form of the class struggle:

[...] which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical

materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.

(2006:390)

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

It is in the relationship described by Hesiod between nature – that which both causes the crop to grow and destroys the self-same crop through the actions of insects, diseases and storms, and the farmer, who can perceive nature's actions but cannot control its chaos – that the problem of 'political philosophy' emerges. The polis was distinguished from other types of community through the presence of distinct activities, such as commercial exchange, judicial proceedings and public deliberation. We might identify the origins of political philosophy as lying in the conversion of traditions of wisdom literature, under the pressure of the needs of democracy, into analytical accounts that relied increasingly on an abstract and

systematic conceptual vocabulary. These systems presented the farm as part of the polis, rather than its origin and life sustaining force. In other words, political philosophy is a structure that covers over the farm – the at once tender and violent relationship between the human and the natural world – with an empty temporality of human progression.

The wisdom of the polis, Hesiod advises us, is built upon the force of a dangerous and unstable nature and we forget this at our peril. A farm, like a garden or city state, is a part of nature that human beings take as their own and try to direct towards expedient ends. Humans cannot, however, control the movements of nature within their bounded plot. Hesiod theorises that by paying attention humans might dance with – rather than battle against – a nature that is at once generous and violent. In other words, Hesiod's cosmos was a divine heliocentric universe in which human life and subjectivity have never had and never can have primacy.

Hesiod's writing emerges from a period in which small agrarian communities had clustered and solidified into city states, known as the polis. This was the immediate aftermath of the Greek Dark Ages, and the beginning of a period of territorial reorganisation during which the predominant proportion of the most productive land became private property, owned by an aristocracy.

The flowering of the city of Athens was facilitated by the transformation of land from diverse, community subsistence farms into accumulation-focused monocultures, tended to by slaves. Hesiod's argument is not that this transformation is immoral, but rather that it is profoundly unwise. It is vital, he warns, that the rulers of the polis do not forget that it is difficult to grow grain.

To forget this fact, Hesiod cautions, is to construct a polis that is exposed to nature's inconsistent and often violent nature, through its inability to see this violence coming. Hesiod alerts us to the fact that the agricultural element of our political life is *chthonic*. Simply put, the problem of civic life resides in the untamed and inaccessible earth that founds and grounds the polis.

There is much to suggest that political philosophy has always been haunted by the idea of dependence on agriculture for life itself. Not least the fact that Hesiod has been excluded from the canon. Whilst Homer – Hesiod's contemporary – is celebrated for his early philosophical contributions towards the conceptual dictionaries concerning war and divinity, *Work and Days* has been split – relegated to either its form or its content. The classicist Stephanie Nelson (1998) explains that when scholars ceased to view the *Works and Days* as simply an agricultural handbook, the application of Hesiod's critical theoretical contributions regarding form and content disappeared the importance of farming from the text. With the removal of farming from the analysis of *Works and Days*, Hesiod's philosophical points are lost. In turn, his fragmentary use of narrative appears as a vicissitude of a lack of culture – compared to Homer's clear, ordered form and content – rather than a formal choice that nurtures sense on the field of unstable meanings. If the metaphysical connection between systems of food production and their monocultural landscapes has been hard to glimpse until this moment, this is because of myriad oppressions of the significance of farming to cosmological constellations. In the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Benjamin asserts that:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in

the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.

(2006:391-392)

When read through Hesiod and the Fen landscape, Benjamin's philosophy of history casts new light on the way that the temporal domain of phantasie ticks to monocultural time. If Homer's poetry – *The Iliad* in particular – formed an important part of current philosophical conceptual dictionaries, this is because his descriptions of an aristocratic world of war and honour, ruled by an intelligible divine order, both sanctioned and sedimented the social order that had emerged as victorious in the early classical Greek period. The cosmos as described by Hesiod, in which humans are entangled with a non-sensical and unsympathetic nature through the site of the farm, was covered over by this history of an imagined human supremacy. With this movement the farm as a site of anarchic disruption was lost and replaced by the monocultural field which is precisely the image of man as victor over nature. This view has been transmitted 'from one owner to another' and has bound technological advances in food production systems to a violent war against nature, both outwith and within the human subject.

In the concluding section I discuss the methodological by-product that emerged through this constellation of the monocultural arable landscape of the Fens with conceptual elements from Benjamin and Hesiod's metaphysics. I propose that in

the application of this methodological by-product it is possible to find contingent spaces not only within the Fen landscape but also within critical theory.



3.5 A trick filled cosmos

‘There is no way out of trees by the means of trees’

Ponge, (1978: 47)

In Hesiod’s cosmology, morally right and practically right actions are one and the same. This is because the poles of good and evil are not the prime forces in his ‘arable metaphysics’. What is needed, Hesiod states, is *understanding*. Even if a person intends to prosper from evil intentions, actions and outcomes do not work in this way. This is because for Hesiod, Zeus-like nature is not a benevolent force, he is a trickster who covers the world in what Benjamin might call a phantasie.

The sensible world retreats from contact in Hesiod's *Work and Days* in two ways, which Hesiod explores through the myth of Prometheus and Pandora, in which Zeus fashions a woman – Pandora – who embodies the form of an evil concealed within a good.

Hesiod describes here that things can be concealed in the way that that Zeus hid fire – or in our current epoch, as bacteria live in soil – so that it seems as though nothing was there. He also describes a second kind of hiding: the abstracting and alienating act that Prometheus used to conceal fire in the fennel stalk. In this concealment it is clear that a form is present but that it is not what it appears to be. The metaphysical implication for this covering over appears in the image of Pandora – an evil hidden inside a good. It is in Prometheus' arable abstraction that this layer of phantasie emerged in the new monocultural arable of the rural outskirts of Hellenistic Athens. It appears in *Works and Days* as a trick, 'a bane to men that live by bread'.

Benjamin too saw the divine realm as a trick filled cosmos. He wrote in a piece of marginalia in a review in 1930:

Collectors may be loony – though this in the sense of the French lunatique – according to the moods of the moon. They are playthings too, perhaps – but of a goddess – namely τύχη (Tyche, Goddess of Luck)

(in Dolbear et al, 2016:19)

This very trickery – or indeed play – is also an animating force in Benjamin's revolutionary methodology, and it is from this position that I propose that a conceptual dictionary of the rural might begin. Hesiod locates the origin of empty time in Zeus' mimetic reproduction of Prometheus' concealment. Zeus

prophesises that humans from henceforth will deliberately choose their own destruction due to his concealment of evil inside a good. But Zeus forgets that humans too are playful. The simultaneous naturalisation and mythologisation of social and historical forces that appear as fate in Benjamin's Arcades Project (2007) constellate in the drained monocultural landscape of the Fens in an ekphrastic form. It is through the intensification of this ekphrastic landscape, through detailed descriptions that hold within themselves dialectical crystals of loss and rupture, that the opportunity arises to crack the phantasie that life can be sustained without labour. Even in a world where food might be grown without soil, it cannot be grown without toil.

The Fen landscape appears as a manifestation of the desire to make something from nothing. That is, not only to have the power of genesis but to keep the bounty it produces. The metaphysical impossibility of possessing this self-same nothing is also held in the Fen landscape. It is a joke that lies in a layer under the mythical power of the English state, and that is shared in a transhistorical transmutation with prehistory and the future. Jokes always require a comic pause and it is in this pregnant silence – the moment of danger – that the methodological orientation of a conceptual dictional of the rural might be founded.



Landscape Observation Three

Early morning, very windy, a little overcast. The sort of day where you would expect it to rain very heavily later. We go out nice and early to make sure the birds get as much sun as possible, the opportunity to weather and to preen before going in when it is raining.

I walk around the aviary and make sure the birds are happy and healthy, make sure that in the wind the doors are secure, that bird baths haven't been blown

over, roof panels not blown off. I bring out the flying birds on a glove one by one; weigh them, check their eyes and make sure they are ok then out onto a perch they go with a bath. I place them along the line of Laurels so that they don't have to bathe in the wind. On a windy day like today some still choose to sit on the ground so as not to get blown around on the perch. On the other hand sitting on the floor could be a sign they are poorly so I have to check.

I take Galapagos the Peregrine out, he is six months old, very confident, very relaxed, unusual for a Peregrine; usually their fight or flight is definitely on flight. We only feel the wind from the ground, we don't know what the wind is like up there. Exceptionally turbulent, normally I would put Galapagos out on his post to go through his ritual, his pre-flight checks- scratch head, lighten the load, the rouse, fluff up feathers and shake and lay them down in flight order. They do this as a matter of course before they fly.

You can tell it is windy, the trees are blowing. The bird works mostly on sight and movement, he sits facing the wind so that his feathers don't get damaged and he doesn't get knocked off where he's sitting. Like a coiled spring he flies up but he can't gain or hold height. Usually they power towards the wind and use the trees to gain speed and lift from the upward rushing wind as they descend but the wind today is too strong and keeps changing direction so he can't use the updraft to gain or hold. Birds that have valleys available to them would typically gravitate towards those areas. Those birds would struggle here. Change of plan, instead of asking him to gain and hold height I ask him to do some diving work instead.

It is more impressive to watch from a distance than close up like I am now. From a distance you can see the height and perspective. Here, without trees and

features it is hard to tell their speed and movement. They camouflage their speed by moving through the long grass. They couldn't do that without a big stretch of open ground, trees and hills make it hard for them to show off their skills. It is a very different environment from others, the only thing that people seem to know is that it's flat but there's so much more to it.

I throw up the lure, he catches it in the air, spread wings, fanned tail, mantling, facing the wind, he catches his breath and starts eating. In the open he takes cover with his food as he feels threatened. Flying in this landscape is good for working in arenas, birds from other places wouldn't be used to the open space.

I offer a fair exchange to Galapagos so that he lets go of the lure. Falcons work on an "out of sight out of mind" basis and traditional falconry techniques work on this principle so that the birds want to give the prey they have caught. Then birds here mainly hunt rabbits and pigeons.

Traditionally Peregrine Falcons would have lived in a coastal environment with cliffs catching pigeons. They would usually hunt in the day which is why water birds tend to move at night. Urban areas are like a big cliff face so they are often found in cities these days. They don't like the hustle and bustle of day time in the city but at night it is quieter and still light. They have to catch their food in the air, travelling at a hundred miles an hour they don't want to hit the ground or the water. So this is a natural terrain for them, spacious, not much going on: the only thing we're missing is a cliff. It is harder for them with the flat Fenland environment.

Two or three circles round the trees to gain height. I get out the lure and Galapagos turns on his side folding his wings into a stoop, a teardrop shape, giving as much gravity assistance as possible. Down to the lure and do it again.

The sky is so big you can lose him in it. Small bird, he makes himself smaller still when he drops down. Even more amazing. The most wonderful thing, such a privilege to watch a wild animal do their daily routine.



THE RESEARCH, THE RESEARCHED AND THE RESEARCHER - POSITIONALITY AND PROCESS.

Every great writer is a great deceiver, but so is that arch-cheat Nature. Nature always deceives. From the simple deception of propagation or the prodigiously sophisticated illusion of protective colours in butterflies or birds, there is in Nature a marvellous system of spells and wiles.

(Nabokov 1982; 4)

4.1 A Road to Nowhere

On summer days in the flat and low-lying Fens the sun is unfiltered by topographical aspect and it blazes without mercy. On this particular afternoon in August 2017, sunshine reflected and refracted across the windscreen of the van

that I was driving. It formed an envelope, a hot caustic network. The leather of the steering wheel sweated, releasing the dusty perfume of all summertime cars. As I looked out across the landscape, time and space made no mark. The repetitive nature of the regulated grid of fields and dykes that surrounded me failed to indicate where exactly I was as I trundled down an increasingly unkempt road.

If you look at a map of Fenland district you will see numerous roads like the one on which I found myself on that day. They run along the edge of dykes which suddenly end, beginning again in geometrical alignment a few miles later. The roads ebb and flow with the dykes. These roads that gradually narrow, degrade and fade away act as eerie documents of the territorial geographies of the modern drainage schemes that began to transform this landscape in the seventeenth century. They are in many cases markers of failed economic prospectorship. Imagined webs of ownership that collapsed whilst others, within sight, ensnared the landscape, in the words of one of my participants, 'like a bear trap'.

On this particular afternoon I had turned down a well-maintained side road off the main bypass from Wisbech towards March. It was the summer of 2017 during which I had spent a month – as well as a few shorter periods – living in a converted Ford Transit van in the Fenland district in the north of Cambridgeshire. I had found it difficult to find a place to stay to conduct my pilot research project.

Between 2001 and 2011 there was an increase of 168 percent in private rented sector properties in Wisbech (Christiansen and Lewis, 2019). In 2009 over one fifth of the rented properties in Wisbech were registered as houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) and this trend was indicative of the wider Fen region (Fenland District Council 2020). HMOs in the wider Fen region are a new phenomenon. The

area has not traditionally housed the student or young professional internal migrant communities that often give rise to these kinds of accommodation arrangements in urban areas. The HMOs that sprang up in towns like Wisbech, as well as March and Chatteris, were indicative of a shift in labour geographies in the area.

The accession of eight East European countries (A8 countries) to the EU in 2004 led to a significant increase in the inflow of EU citizens to the UK. The average annual Long-Term International Migration (LTIM) more than doubled between 2003 and 2011 (Vargas-Silva, 2013). The income gap between the A8 countries and the UK provided an incentive not only for migrants to enter low skill, low pay jobs such as the agricultural labourer positions that characterise the Fen region's labour economy, but also for a new iteration of the gangmasters – those individuals who have long organised and overseen the work of casual agricultural labourers in the area – to manifest.

These 'new' gangmasters differed to the previous iteration in their geographic networks. Rather than being local people, who arranged labour for farmers and factory managers through networks of social capital, these gangmasters sourced their labour from the new EU countries. This involved complex new networks of agencies that arranged travel and accommodation as well as work for individuals in the newly integrated A8 countries.

The success of this new generation of gangmasters lay partly in the property market which, in keeping with the low wage economy of the area, boasted some of the cheapest property in the UK. In July 2004 a terraced house in the Fenland district cost, on average, £86,043 against an average national price for this kind

of property of £123,490, whilst in London a terraced house cost on average £231,683 (HM Land Registry 2021). A new labour market was formed partially on the basis of this low-cost housing, which allowed gangmasters to secure property in which to house their workers for a relatively small investment. The labour arrangements managed by the gangmasters – in which pay is received after deductions for housing and transport – artificially inflated rent costs whilst lowering accommodation standards. More than one of my participants told me that when they arrived a gangmaster would have control of both their rental and labour contract, and that there would be multiple people in similar positions sharing rooms in ill maintained properties. Further to this, they also explained that rent was not cheaper than it was for friends and family members who had stayed in HMOs in London.

At the height of this labour boom it was common for three bedroom houses around Canon Street in Wisbech to house nine individuals, each of whom were charged on average £50 a week for rent on a property that would, in other circumstances, be advertised for £600 a month (Gentleman, 2014). In short, these properties paid for themselves and made profit within four calendar years. This shift changed the fabric of accommodation in the Fenland district and by 2019 around a thousand of Wisbech's twelve-thousand dwellings were reported to be used as HMOs (Hatchett 2019).

These were not rooms that were advertised on Airbnb. Further to this tourism in the wider region is characterised by day visitors travelling a relatively short distance (PACEC 2004; 148). This is not a holiday destination. Relatively poor road and rail connectivity limits travel into this area. The area's economy has historically grown modestly, and the value of the economic output is lower here

than it is in other areas of the UK (CPIEC, 2018). In short, Fenland District is not a place where business people, academics or holiday makers often visit for short trips. The economy in the Fen region is defined by low paid positions in agricultural work and food production in factories – this is not a place that people generally visit for conferences or meetings.

Visits to the region are centred around the Nene Washes RSPB conservation site and the archaeological site at Flag Fen, both of which are on the outskirts of the district, nearer Peterborough than the centre of Fenland District. Despite the idiosyncratic nature of the landscape, the Fens are an area that slips out of the imagination of English landscape. When people do visit the area, Oates (2002) notes that visitors complain of a lack of attractive landscapes, long distances to travel and a general lack of car parks, cafes and toilets (see also, Doncaster 2006). The region, although crossed by motorways and railways, has limited local infrastructure and public transport. Nyra – who had recently relocated to Boston, Lincolnshire with her doctor husband – put it this way: “Sometimes, I look at this place, and I wonder - is this really England?” Nyra and her husband had moved from India to Sheffield in 2015. In 2017 the couple had relocated to Boston in Lincolnshire, and I met her a few months later. She explained to me that she had wanted to take part in the research because she was shocked at the deprivation that she saw in the Fen region: “It feels forgotten and uncared for, like somewhere very poor, or in the past. It is not at all what I imagined I would find in England.” Later, once I knew the place better, I found an eccentric admixture of accommodation to stay in whilst carrying out fieldwork. More than one of these places required me to pay by cheque and conducted all business through a combination of a landline telephone and the postal service. On the hot summer's

day when I found myself trundling along what was fast becoming little more than a dirt track, I had travelled from Sheffield in my converted Ford Transit van for a meeting with a local service provider, in the hope of organising interviews to take place later in the summer. I wrongly assumed that I would be able to book a caravan site for the night if for some reason I needed to stay.

When I arrived, the service provider, the Rosmini Centre in Wisbech, expressed more enthusiasm for my research than I had anticipated and it transpired that they had arranged for multiple people to meet with me the following day. Keen at the opportunity to make connections and meet participants I had stayed late before realising that I had not booked accommodation and decided to find a quiet place on a highway to pull over for the night.

To begin with I quite enjoyed driving around in the evening light, but I quickly began to feel disoriented. The rectilinear field system stretched out into more of the same, as far as my eye could see. The low, flat ground played with perspective and I seemed to be moving along land and through sky, as though the boundaries of what usually separates “the region of the same from the region of the other” (Bachelard 1994; 222) was subsumed in this landscape. Another way of saying this is that without spatial coordinates I found myself unable to form that sense of meaning that transforms space into place and I found myself moving through a landscape that felt more sky than surface.

I was reminded of Gaston Bachelard’s invocation of the French literary critic Supervielle’s phrase: “too much space smothers us much more than if there were not enough” (in Bachelard 1994; p221), precisely that an unending and unchanging horizon takes on the aspect of a prison. This is not a carceral

geography of space alone, it is rather a spatio-temporal phenomenon. The film theorist Eugenie Brinkema (2022) describes the particular horror that low, flat expanses can generate as “the wide-open expanse across which every coming thing is visible but ineluctably unalterable” (p. 11).

The road had become too narrow to turn around the van and so I had no choice but to carry on. The extensive vista closed in towards a single point. This is the form of the joke that in *Works and Days*, Hesiod locates as the temporal-spatial metaphysics of human life – not only that we live in a world where an evil can be concealed within a good, but also more broadly that something is always concealed within nothing (see Grene and Nelson 1998). In a realm of seemingly endless phenomenological and psychological possibilities, time brings us to a single point endlessly. In other words, we cannot perceive what is *good* in a world where radical contingency is always intertwined with phenomenological consistency. Put simply, our bodies always need safety, sleep and nourishment despite our more ambitious plans. This creates a difficulty. How do we know what good to privilege and strive for in an embodied world of radical contingency? Is it better to eat food now, or save it and risk it spoiling? For Benjamin, as for Hesiod, this tension underpins the means-ends contradiction, generally understood in the form of the following question: should we aim for an ethics of means – of what we do? Or should we strive for an ethics of ends – of an intended result? The means-end contradiction is thus central not only to political, economic and philosophical thought but also, more pressingly in the current context, to the epistemological rules for research. This is a matter of both scale and temporality. In short, of topology – the queer collision of space with time.

The Aristotelian critique of the good posits this as an ontological matter – namely that it is not humanly possible to realise or to possess the “Idea of the Good” (*EN* 1096b; 34). This criticism underpins the critical-rationalist stance, perhaps most famously bodied forth in Karl Popper’s (2002 [1959]) rejection of Platonic ‘deas and ‘forms’, including – perhaps most importantly – the ‘form’ of the ‘good’. For Popper, if the idea of the ‘good’ sits outside human perception, then the Platonic form of the ‘good’ is not only empty, but perhaps more critically it is a logical contradiction, like a round triangle. The significance of this lies in the success of Popper’s falsification theory – precisely a monocultural rationalism that denies the constant existence of radical contingency as posited by Einstein’s ‘risky’ 1905 (2010) theory of general relativity. Falsification theory fostered a preference for an epistemology of ends. Precisely the commodification of research, a severing of the bonds between science and ethics or indeed between the phantasy of human life and its chthonic ground. Another word for this position is neoliberalism – that political economic structure of flows and developments that represses its own congealing, stagnating inverse.

This appears perhaps most strikingly in the biologist Peter Medwar's 1959 Reith Lectures, in which he speculated in a fashionably Popperian fashion on the ‘future of man’, surmising that the issue of biological fitness might best be understood as an economic phenomenon. Precisely “a system of pricing the endowment of organisms in the currency of offspring, i.e., in terms of net reproductive performance” (1963; 38, footnote 3). In other words, an empirical stance that considers that real knowledge “can be obtained only from observations undertaken as tests (by ‘attempted refutations’); and for this purpose criteria of refutation have to be laid down beforehand” (*ibid*) is intertwined with a

metaphysics that assumes a connection between nature's hidden hand and the fluctuations of the economic market.

In short, a positivist social sciences empirical framework is liable to read the countryside through a framework that underplays the differences between the needs of biological life and the desires of economic life. In this framework the rural appears as something outside of the city rather than a distinct phenomenon. As a result, this thesis does not pose questions or hypotheses which I aim to prove or disprove with data. Instead, I aim to undertake a critical reading of the Fen landscape from a non-positivist perspective, and thus the thesis proper is organised into two sections. The first act of this thesis locate the Fen region and explore the theoretical possibilities that emerge from considering the arable field as the chthonic ground of political life.

This trio of chapters lays out the rationale for considering the urban as the site of mourning, that act of bringing the past into the structure of the present, and thus also a site of flow that appears to offer the potential for salvation – the transcendence of biological form. The arable field in this framework is illuminated darkly as “the essential inner side of mourning” (Benjamin 2009; 125-126) which, like the lining of a dress at the hem or the lapel, makes its presence felt. In Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* this active underside to the secular takes the form of the comedic element bodied forth in the figure of the official or the scheming advisor – that being on whom one depends but can never trust. In Hesiod's *Works and*

Days this same form emerges in the human world in the form of the farmer's field (Greene and Nelson 1998). The arable in Hesiod appears as the punch line of a divine joke rather than a product of development. It is the arable field that

circumvents salvation through its apparent scorn for human pride and provides the profound ground of human experience. The human cannot feel in control for long when they attempt to make a site consistently fruitful in a world of storms, pests and drought. This critical position does not oppose the Platonic form of the 'good'. Rather it posits that this form has a darker lining. At the hems and lapels Zeus' cruel joke can be glimpsed – the physical world is organised in such a way that humans can experience good but we can never perceive where evil is hiding inside a good, or vice versa.

On this occasion, the single point in the Fen region that I was moving toward – funnelled, rather than propelled – came into view. A stone farmhouse sat at the end of the track. It was unkempt but securely gated. A people carrier and a few caravans sat around front of the house. The space was arranged to keep intruding eyes out and I felt compelled to leave, quickly. And here we arrive at a central interest of this thesis – how did this landscape materialise this moment? Put differently: if we begin with geography – the arrangement of space – over affect; if we start with the issue of repetition rather than representation; if we privilege the field over the furrow; if we take seriously the crescent moon of an old landscape flashing up on the map; what might this place – the old Fen region – tell us about what we have collectively taken for granted about our spatial arrangements? Precisely what previously unseen elements of geographic understanding might the Fen region hold if we consider that the speculative grounds of philosophy may be rooted in the farmer's field rather than the polis?



4.3 Methods.

Hesiod's conception of the means-ends tension is understood in this thesis as a metaphysical axiom rather than an ontological problem. In other words, this dilemma is not one that can be overcome with the use of technology to increase human senses and perceptions. Our means, or indeed our bodies in space, cannot control the radical contingencies that time produces in its alchemical reaction with all other living things. The methods through which we attempt to achieve an ataraxic state – a state free of physical want – can result in myriad consequences. This understanding of the human is of a being with intermittent agency and as a result this thesis is particularly concerned with those moments in which we find ourselves – despite our best efforts – unable to explain how we 'got here'. We might understand these moments through Walter Benjamin's (2007) term 'divine violence'. I refer here to the relationship between fate and the moment – the

moment beyond which the possibility of the continuation of the current social contract, or the mourning of its loss, withers. Though the crop may fail, it is the moment of hunger after the stores have dwindled and decayed in which one finds oneself in the narrow aperture of kismet – the cleavage of one life from the aperature of possibility into an embodied and located spatio-temporal framework.

In what follows I describe the research process that simultaneously emerged from and underpinned this theoretical contribution. After this I outline a structure of the Acts Two and Three of this thesis in which I perform a critical reading of the Fen region. These readings produce a preliminary conceptual dictionary of the rural, which I use in the concluding chapter to provide formal strictures that guide a reading of emerging themes that have previously been left unexplored, in the Fen region. In the final section of this chapter, I lay out the structure of the thesis, which is at once also the analytic method in operation.

This is an attempt to read and re-read the Fen landscape. Reading here refers to a tender process of noticing and responding to the fine grain of a text. The writer and critic Vladimir Nabokov (1982;1) states that a good reader should:

.....notice and fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes after the sunny trifles [...] have been lovingly collected. If one begins with a ready-made generalization, one begins at the wrong end and travels away [...] before one has started to understand.

I am talking here about engaging with the Fen region in a manner that resists the excavatory ends of that “impulse that drives the astronomer to search the depths of the universe and the geographer to penetrate the mysteries of *terrae incognitae*” (Wright, 1947: 4, see also Sauer, 1941; Lowenthal, 1961; Jackson, 1980). In short, this doctoral research project is not driven by a “thirst for information” with “the

quest to penetrate forbidden areas” and “the ambition to go beyond” (Benedict, 2001:54). Nor is this a study inspired by the kind of investigation which the geographer Richard Phillips discusses in his work on curious fieldwork (2012; 2020). Phillips describes the work of scholars such as Keith Basset and Keri Smith who use situationist concepts and methods to playfully engage with the urban environment animated by “whatever makes you feel a twinge of excitement” (Smith, 2008: 2 in Phillips, 2012) “using a variety of different approaches in combinations group members could decide for themselves” (Bassett, 2004: 404). The methodologies described by Phillips are inspired by the Situationist International organisation (1957–72) that advocated new and disruptive engagements with cities. This is methodology of resistance against the factory line, aiming to *create* disruption – to pull an emergency stop lever on the factory line of endless production of capitalist urban space. As such it uses the radical walking technique of the ‘*dérive*’ and subversive maps and mappings of cities to reclaim the streets for the people. The epistemological formulation at play here understands space as something stable that can be reclaimed. This is a position which is at odds with the aims of this research project.

The methodology used in this thesis is not concerned by my internal responses – those “twinges of excitement” (Smith 2008: 2). Rather, I aim as far as possible to read the formal arrangements of the Fens, to ‘notice and fondle details’. Though I do not always succeed in keeping myself out of the matter, my own experiences are used as far as possible to create a what Merleau-Ponty (2004) might call a ‘*chiasm*’. Precisely, a sensitive skin between the Fen landscape and questions of meaning. In other words, whilst I cannot keep myself out of this thesis, my subjective responses are not my concern. This research project does not make, nor

does it aim to make, a disruption. Instead, it aims to notice the myriad disruptions and disjunctures already present in the apparently solid arrangements of this place.

As such I owe a huge debt to my previous life as a psychiatric social worker, during which I was trained not only in art therapy but also in play and group therapy methods. This therapeutic training made me aware of the possibilities that emerge from making rigid what is usually slack – a kind of ‘serious play’. The drawing of a boundary in time and space and not only looking for but actively being led by what unfolds within. In my previous career this ‘serious play’ meant marking out a boundary. This might be achieved through the arrangement of a room, a blanket, or a sand tray alongside a visible egg timer or a clock. The finer details do not matter. What *does* matter here is that in my career as a social worker I learnt how contingency opens within these boundaries. Worlds could emerge from a few toys – or a pen and paper – if I paid attention not to the content of the conversation but rather to the forms and gestures that appeared. In other words, this is a method of being led by the impulse to notice and fondle the details that manifest within a boundary, instead of being led by the idea of trying to achieve something. This method aims to confront rather than deflect or gloss over the minute details of the moment. In turn this thesis aims to document the minute disruptions and disjunctures that are inherent to a monoculture – and that in turn form the unstable ground of the polis.

This thesis is, in short, an attempt to read the Fen landscape “in the conditional mood; not the imperative” (Ponge, 1971: 17) – a method of means rather than ends. This is a process that ebbed and flowed. Not a fumbling for and finding of a ‘thread of excitement’ but one of ekphrastic swellings – images of the landscape congealed

into germinate gems. In other words, this is a reading of the Fen landscape that is uninterested in what the landscape *should be*. This research attempts to engage with the contingent elements of this place, the alterity that resides in its current monocultural form rather than behind or underneath it – in other words its topological unconscious. As such, this thesis is less concerned with narration or description of the Fen region as it is with the ekphrastic form of this landscape – the manner in which this tightly constrained landscape undoes itself, bursts its own banks and cracks the backs of its roads. I am interested here in the way the Fens themselves are caught in the ‘bear trap’ of their own monocultural formation.

There is no real anecdote contained in my side road experience. No angry man appeared shouting. No dogs barked. There was no flutter of a curtain. The road widened before the driveway, enough for me to execute a clammy multiple point turn and drive back out into the expanse. It transpired that so much of the same had, in Virginia Woolfe’s words “played me false” (1979: 69). Throughout this research process the Fens repeatedly made me the butt of the joke by appearing without aspect and yet continually siphoning me towards single, closed points.

I don’t know if the house at the bottom of the lane was a gangmaster’s house, despite having worked hard to organise the narrative in a way that places the notion in your mind. I do however know that I saw many arrangements like these during my time in the Fens, and they always caused me to quicken my step, turn around or change route. I also know that these houses, and collections of static caravans, look very much like the accommodation that two Latvian men (whom I interviewed in Sheffield in the winter of 2017) described inhabiting when they worked in the Fens. They had both been victims of modern slavery.

Research Trip 1.

My first research trip appears as the image of my van trundling down the increasingly constricted side road, with which I opened this chapter. In short, this is an image that holds within it an encounter with a seemingly wide-open place that nonetheless repeatedly funnelled me towards unintended and unanticipated outcomes.

It was incredibly uncomfortable living in the van. I had no toilet, washing facilities or internet and I often felt unsafe at night. This way of living did, however, force me to be in public space a great deal – to sit in cafes, use the swimming pool each morning for exercise and washing, the library for internet and working space and pubs in the evening for warmth, light and comfort. It also prompted unexpected confessions from seemingly middle-class people in the area about times that they had lived in their cars, unable to find work stable enough to rent or buy a home. Further to this I heard many conversations, sketched, and took photographs. The van allowed me to be mobile and responsive to offers of interviews, although I was often late as the combination of the poor Fenland roads and my van's sluggish accelerator meant a journey of ten miles might take anywhere between 30 minutes and over an hour.

Following calls to third sector and voluntary community projects in the Spring of 2017, this research trip was carried out with the intention of preparing for the second stage of what is popularly known as the 'snowball' or 'chain' sampling method. In this non-positivistic sampling technique, future participants are identified and recruited from networks accessed through present participants. It

is well known that creating a representative sample is challenging when using the snowball method, but this is not a positivistic research project, and so the benefits of this sampling method seemed likely to outweigh its limitations. I was particularly keen to use a snowball sampling method because of the manner in which it “relies on and partakes in the dynamics of natural and organic social networks” (Noy 2008: 329).

One of these third sector spaces was the Rosmini Centre in Wisbech, a community centre that provides support for a diverse cross section of the community in Wisbech. If I was anticipating a snowball, I was met with an avalanche. A local man, Erbie Murat, took an intense interest in my project and within the first afternoon had arranged for me to visit workers in community projects across the district. Within the first week I had twenty interviews scheduled across the summer. In the end I carried out eighteen research interviews in total during this first visit to the research area:

- Five interviews were arranged with the Dawn Project, Peterborough. A third sector organisation that supports female ex-offenders seeking work from across the Fenland area.
- Five interviews were arranged with the Rosmini Centre, a community hub in Wisbech. Two of which were with support workers at the centre.
- Four interviews were arranged with local residents who I met through the Rosmini Centre’s drop in job-shop.
- One interview with the Town Clerk of Wisbech.

- One interview with the service manager of the Oasis Centre. A community centre in the Waterlees ward of Wisbech.
- One interview with a Community Researcher for Mind.
- One interview with Cambridgeshire County Council's Traveller Liaison Officer.

Nine of these interviews were conducted with women and nine were with men. Most participants identified themselves as White-British. Two participants identified as Romany, one as Turkish and one as Romanian. Participants ages ranged from seventeen to seventy.

The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of the area, through asking residents about their understanding of the issues that affect the wider Fen region. In the interest of ethics all participants names and identifying details have been changed, except in those cases where the participants requested that their real name be used in the thesis. The interviews were semi-structured and they all lasted around an hour. Each conversation began and ended with the same questions. This was the boundary that I constructed in which I attempted to follow my participants through their experiences of the Fen landscape. Each interview began with questions about work and family life, usually: "What did your parents do for work?" This question was asked in order to create a sense of structure in which the interviewee could relax without wondering what I wanted to talk to them about. In creating this structure, I created a space that was open enough that the interviewee's interpretation could take the lead.

By embedding the question in work and the previous generation we could open conversations around class and origin provoked by the participant, in the

language that participants were comfortable with. I did not have to begin by asking people “where do you come from?” This question was answered in the context of the individual’s experience. This allowed me to learn about aspects of life in the Fenland district that I had not anticipated or come across in my review of the literature. For example, one young man responded to this question with a brief family tree – he could only tell me what his stepdad did, because he had never lived with his father. His stepfather came from a Traveller background and worked within the Traveller community. As a result of this opening an alternative geography of the Fenland district opened, in which caravan parks sit at the edge of market towns, bleeding into housing estates in which ‘Gorgers’ (non-travellers) co-habit and make families with the Traveller community, which nonetheless remains distinct. These insights provoked a new cycle of desk-based research, in which I tried to contextualise the experiences of my participants in wider research and literature.

All interviews ended with the same two questions. First I asked "if I could give you a magic wand and you had three wishes that you could use to make the Fens a better place, what would they be?" Secondly, "If you had to take one picture of this place and send it to someone who wanted to know what it was like, what would you photograph?" I wanted to collect a catalogue of images to inform my vision, to focus on the Fen landscape in the image language of the people who live in this place. In later stages of the research this would bloom into a project of its own and the methodology of this is explored in the description of my third research trip.

Although quotes from the interviews conducted during this research trip are used in the thesis, I was not aiming to collect facts in these interviews. Instead, the

focus of this fieldwork was to destabilise my constructed image of the Fenland area and to let this place throw a spanner in the works of my own perceptions. I achieved this by using methods that were familiar to me from my previous career. Precisely through making a space for dialectical images to emerge. By freezing two images of this place, the people I met during this research trip introduced radical contingency into the monocultural landscape that I found myself in. The Fen landscape opened up to me not simply as it is, but in a handful of germinate gems – dialectical images – that presented this place as riven by moments of danger.

Research Trip 2.

In the winter of 2017, I spent a month living with a friend's mother in the north of Boston. I travelled throughout the larger Fen region during this trip and spoke with people in Boston and Spalding as well returning to Wisbech and the Fenland District more generally.

I used the same methodology as in the previous trip and carried out the following interviews:

- Five interviews were conducted with members of a mother and toddler group in Boston, Lincolnshire.
- Four interviews were carried out during a day spent at a church-led foodbank in Spalding, Lincolnshire.

- Five interviews were carried out with individuals connected with a homeless shelter in Wisbech, including staff, residents and former residents.
- One interview was carried out with two men who had been victims of modern slavery in Fenland but who now lived in Sheffield.
- I also revisited some of my participants from the previous trip and spoke with them again.

Once again, this was a relatively gender and age balanced sample. It was however, overwhelmingly working class White-British in terms of diversity. Two participants identified as Polish, two as Lithuanian, one as South Asian, and one as Afro-Portuguese.

Research Trip 3.

In the late summer of 2018, I returned to the Fenland District, this time to spend a month living in a converted railway carriage in an abandoned orchard. This carriage was once part of the railway that used to carry soft fruits – and the apples that now rotted on the ground around me – to jam factories in nearby Wisbech. I had returned to the area to conduct a poetry project, inspired by the images collected in the previous interviews (a more detailed account of this methodology can be found in Jaines, 2021). I decided to start the snowballing sample again, and this time met the contributors through my daily meanderings around the area – walking with the dog, conversations in shops, pubs and museums, through making phone calls to ask if I may visit. We met in pubs, in people’s homes, work

offices, in libraries and at the railway carriage where I stayed. A method emerged through the relationships. We fashioned it together through noticing the most ordinary aspects of day-to-day encounters – through meeting and talking and figuring our way together.

I wanted to open up a space for more detailed images from local people and asked them to describe to me a specific site, or journey in the area. The boundary that I constructed was around the content of the image that they shared. I specified that my participants were only to describe sensory data, not opinions or ideas. I wanted to spend some time looking at details that I had missed previously, because they seemed too obvious to be of interest. I asked my participants to discuss a specific place in the Fens on a specific day at a specific hour. A young woman described:

Wearing lots of layers so it feels heavy but I'm still cold.

Not quite sunset, beautiful orange hue across the sky.

I transcribed the participants' speech, mostly because people generally become frozen when asked to write. In addition to this the Fenland District is an area in which problems with literacy are common. I was keen to stop having conversations and instead to funnel images towards a single point in a handful of participants. I facilitated these pieces, keeping the boundary in order to try – as the French experimental writer Georges Perec puts it – “to see more flatly” (1997:51).

Once the description was transcribed, I either gave the piece to the participant, or read it to them if they preferred; they would edit my transcription. Some participants requested that I email them the piece to edit in their own time. The writers moved words around, corrected facts and names which I had misheard.

Some took out colloquialisms replacing them with standard English.

I ended up with eleven detailed descriptions of unexpected aspects of the Fens. These have been used to both orientate and disorientate this thesis. The writing from this project created a space where things that previously blurred into insignificance moved into a new focus – a site where the ordinary becomes strange and where the expanse transmutes into a single image. These pieces made space for the familiar to emerge in all its strangeness. And so my gaze in the latter part of this research was orientated through these rich images. In turn these images will be used throughout the thesis to disorientate the reader, providing moments of interruption by appearing at moments throughout the body of this work in the form of Landscape Observations. Sometimes these fragments intensify and collaborate with the narrative of the thesis; at others they undo the account that I am constructing so that you – as the reader – also move tentatively, fondling the details in this landscape that at once “most approximates to Nothing” (Swift 2019: 69) and “plays you false” (Woolfe 1979: 69) with every step.

Research Trip 4

I returned to the Fens a last time for two weeks in September 2019, to talk with local politicians and artists. This time I stayed in a room above a pub in Whittlesey. The other rooms were mostly taken by contractors working on building projects in nearby Peterborough.

I used a similar structure of interview to the one used in earlier research trips. This time however I did not start with a question about participant’s families but

rather about the political or creative structures in the Fens and their role within that. We ended with the image generating questions that ended all my interviews in this research project. I spoke to representatives from the UK Independence Party, the Green Party, Labour, and the Conservative Party as well as with police officers involved with the Modern Slavery Taskforce ‘Operation Pheasant’. In addition to this I spoke with local writers, artists, museum staff and radio producers.

Twelve interviews were carried out in total, all participants identified as white British and were over 35 years of age. These interviews provided another aspect of the landscape – the intentions and understandings of the people who are involved with making and remaking this place.

In addition to interviews, each fieldwork trip also involved large amounts of being in public space in the Fens – of walking and of taking photographs. I went out for walks with wildlife specialists and ecologists from the area and asked them to tell me what they saw as we moved through this landscape. I engaged extensively with the Hansard archive in order to locate issues in the landscape in political rhetoric, and in a similar vein collected data from local and national newspaper archives.

I also made numerous trips to Cambridgeshire Archives Service to view their collection of unique historic records. And this is where the empirical section of this thesis locates itself. As stated previously, the first three chapters (of which this is the final) operate as the first act of this thesis, situating us in the area and forming a theoretical contribution. This contribution, simply put, is that the rural can be seen as the foundation of the urban – the context which has slipped out of view.

This blind spot, I argue, has come into view in the moment of danger in which we find ourselves – in which increasing political totalitarianism intertwines with monocultural arable formation. I suggest that, following the classicist Stephanie Nelson (1998), this is a long-standing issue regarding the ways that we think of the relationship between the polis and the farmer's field. Nelson's reading of Hesiod, I suggest, adds a new dimension to Walter Benjamin's critical methods of reading space – not only that the rural can be read critically too, but that the method of close reading emerges from the practice of the small-scale farmer. This is a practice of serious play, the drawing out of a boundary and the giving of careful attention. The act of being able to respond to what is literally responseability to all that occurs within that space.

In the following empirical section of this thesis I carry out a close reading of the Fen landscape, 'noticing and fondling details' and finding forms to talk about this place that emerge from engagement with this place. There are three chapters in this section. In the opening empirical chapter (5) I carry out a prehistory of the area, animated by the images shared with me by my participants. I explore ideas of reclamation and fate in the Fens prior to the drainage of the seventeenth century, exploring themes of repetition and loss. In the second chapter (6) I explore the material elements of the landscape – the fields and dykes, the roads and the schools. In the third chapter (7) of the empirical section of this thesis I explore the idea of labour, particularly of a specific form of disembodied labour that repeats through the Fen landscape and links to wider issues of value and violence.

Over the course of these three empirical chapters I develop a rudimentary conceptual dictionary of the rural. In the final chapter of this thesis I put this

theoretical lexicon to work in reading the current moment of danger in the Fen region as new constellations of post-Brexit power interact with this arable land with far-reaching consequences.

Landscape Observation Four



It was half past; I can normally do the journey in about twenty minutes so I would be ok leaving at twenty to but I like to give myself time.

I was at my Nan's so I walked through her garden to my car. She lives next door; my dad had just cut the grass so it was nice and neat and you could actually smell the grass. It was a bit damp; I think it had rained the night before so it was that wet grass smell. It was mostly cloudy with a little bit of sun peeking through, Nan's garden is open grass with a stone path and the bit outside is stone too and that is where the car is parked. Not warm enough to walk around in a t-shirt but not cold enough to wear a coat. I wore a little cardigan to keep my arms warm.

Down the little lane past the Dun Cow Pub we are the second house from the end, we've got a big front garden with trees and you can actually see large trees at the

end of the back garden, big tall trees, you can see them from the front garden too. My Nan's house is a bungalow and it's on the same bit of land as our house.

There's only houses on one side of the road because there's farmers' fields on the other side, at the moment they have green leaves, I think they are potatoes they are growing.

Christchurch has a very kind of quiet relaxed atmosphere, you don't get much traffic here anyway, much less down our little road which doesn't lead anywhere apart from to a dirt track where only tractors go. It is quite nice and soothing in a way after being in a busy town or something, you can hear the birds and that, I could hear the blackbirds that day. We have quite a few blackbirds in our garden, sometimes coming out of our back door you disturb them, and they make a lot of noise.

I could also hear the rooks. The farmer opposite us has a house at the end of the drove and the rooks nest there in the tall trees and you can hear them talking. It's quite nice the difference from London, you can hear nature more. I could actually hear my cat Pepper talking somewhere. He is a big black cat, he likes my Dad best but he comes to talk and say hello if he hears you. We imagine he is talking and telling us about what he's been up to, patrolling his territory, hunting, hanging out with his girlfriend. He doesn't like other cats coming into his garden except one girl cat who we call his girlfriend, and he tolerates her, they sit together in the garden. We lost our old female cat Lucy on New Year's Day just gone and we think he's been lonely but lately he's been letting this female cat into the garden.

He's often been hunting, and he lets you know as he comes in, a quiet chirrup considering he's quite a big cat, different from his normal chatter and you think

“oh no, he’s got something”. He used to bring rabbits from the farmer’s field opposite but not recently. We don’t know if they have realised it’s not a good place to live or if Pepper actually ate them all. He brings birds too and once a mouse, he left half of it in my Dad’s shoe. Dad wondered what the wet thing was and he found half a mouse.

We have a little gate across our garden, we get a lot of people walking dogs and not always on leads so we have this gate so that Pepper can have his own space without dogs running in. So, he was chatting and walking up the road towards me and I had to pick him up and put him somewhere safe because I didn’t want him to get into my blind spot. He has got in the back of the car with me before, and I’m sure he’d come all the way to March with me if he could. He is quite a character, we hear his girlfriend in the garden at night and he runs right down to her. I reversed out- I always pull in front ways keeping my eye out for Pepper, I wouldn’t put it past him to try to follow me.

I drive down the Drove. We call it a Drove, but it’s actually called a Lane. It was called Green Drove when we first moved in but one day there was a sign that said Green Lane and we were like “Oh!” but we still call it a Drove because it is more like a Drove.

I drive down the road, there’s a 30mph speed limit but I never go faster than 20mph because people and animals can pop out. Lots of windy winding roads down here and I would not want to go the full limit on them. Up to the pub on the right, the farmer’s house on the left, the road you join is curved if you take a left it’s the best way to go to March and if you take a right it’s the best way to go to Wisbech

and Downham Market. They both lead up to the sixteen-foot drain but I have a set way of going to each place.

When it has been raining there are puddles on that road and you can see birds taking a bath in them, I love that. Even pigeons and they refuse to get out of the way of cars until the last possible second. There was nothing like that today though, I took the left and follow the road past the church and the village hall. Parents are walking home from the little school. My sister went there when we first moved there and there were only about a dozen kids, all ages mixed together because of that.

I drove past a couple of my Nan's friends, a husband and wife walking their greyhound and whenever they see me, they wave so I waved as I drove past. I get to the end of the road which I have to turn right on which takes me to the road that leads to the sixteen foot and when I got to the junction I turned left. The sixteen foot is a really long river, reasonably wide, sometimes you see fishermen fishing on the bank. I drove along the road next to it, the river on my right-hand side.

As I drive along, I watch what's going on I see birds flying around, swans on the river. As I got onto the bridge where I turn into March, I saw herons and cormorants on the bank. Follow that road all the way into March, over level crossing down until you get to a mini roundabout busier than the village, a lot more parents with their kids walking around. Left Calvary Drive windy, winding road school and lots of houses. It was busy with lots of parents picking up their children, cars on either side of the road, lots of ducking in and out. All the way to the other end and when I got to the junction, I took a left, by this point there were

lots of kids from the Neil Wade Secondary School walking around; loud, shouting, mucking around. I drove carefully keeping an eye on them as they do have a tendency to jump out onto the road. School on the left, pub, petrol station on right, past main entrance to school where all the busses are. I took the little road round the back and on the right side little detached houses.

I came round to the graphics department where my sister was, and I wait outside for her. Louder than Christchurch I can hear cars going by and children laughing and talking and that. It definitely feels livelier, kids, teachers, janitors walking around. My old school, it does feel quite strange, it doesn't feel that long ago I was there, but it was. They've done a lot of work to it, new buildings, and that. I think if I went inside, I wouldn't recognise it.

Act Two



PREHISTORY

History is like Janus, it has two faces:
whether it regards the past or the
present, it sees the same things.
Du Camp in Leslie (2000: 111)

5.1 A figure from the past.

The first act of Caryl Churchill's 1983 play *Fen* opens with the production's second scene. As the audience enter and take their seats the stage is already inhabited by:

...a boy from the last century, barefoot and in rags, is alone in a field, in a fog, scaring crows. He shouts and waves a rattle. As the day goes on his voice gets weaker till he is hoarse and shouting in a whisper. It gets dark.

(Churchill 2016: 144)

The boy, in his rags, does not speak. His presence upon the stage is purely dramatic. His shouts are unintelligible, creaturely in nature. Alone and barefoot, the figure on the stage is a gesture of mundane, corporeal suffering. He signals to the audience that their attention and readiness is of no consequence – they are

required as bodily witnesses to something already in motion rather than as consumers of a spectacle. The noise of the rattle and the boy's shouting indicates that *this* story of the Fens is not a tragedy, marked by silence, but rather something indiscernible, wretched, and interminable.

The prologue to Churchill's *Fen* is a germinate gem. The compact image of the fieldhand shimmers in this prehistory as a constellatory point in an arrangement that also holds Benjamin's study of German Tragic Drama - the *Trauerspiel* (Benjamin, 2019 [1928]). The material of the Fen region is understood here as a historicised scene that bodies forth every implication of political and social texture in a manner that generates both content and style. This landscape will be explored as the generated content and form of a technology of statecraft that emerges from and heads towards the ekphrastic form of the monocultural arrangement. Understood in ecological terms, the monocultural arrangement is a form that offers no resilience. It augurs system collapse or increasing dependence on technological life support in the form of pesticides and fertilisers. It can therefore be seen as structurally similar to the encroaching totalitarianism of hegemonic cultural arrangements that augur what Benjamin calls a "moment of danger" (2006: 391).

The boy in Churchill's prologue stands on a stage covered with earth and around the edge of the stage piles of vegetables are heaped. Although this boy only appears once, the stage remains the same throughout the play. In this prologue, the noise from the boy's rattle performs a mechanical mimesis of the constant, indecipherable din of nature. The scene is set for an agricultural expression. The

word agriculture literally means the cultivation of a *field*. Churchill uses the stage to found and ground an arable *field of vision*. On this *theatrum mundi* – this earthbound stage – the actors materialise the repetitive lack of cohesion that defines agricultural labour: the weeding, the stone picking, the planting, the harvest; none of these tasks amount to progression or accumulation for the agricultural labourer.

Churchill's stage directions state that the boy 'is from the last century'. The use of the word 'last' sets ticking a specific temporality. In the form of this prologue Churchill ties the Fen landscape to not only the technological shifts of the late nineteenth century – in other words the pumps and engines that finally drained the Fen landscape – she also links this particular landscape to a longer history of agricultural production. The specific use of the term 'last century' alerts us to the presence of these labourers throughout history and a production of *Fen* staged in 2022 would have its own revenant boy 'from the last century.' This is a landscape where faces change but the role of the agricultural labourer does not alter. Here the arable field and the agricultural labourer are a configuration that cites and contests the Aristotelian propensity for matter to *become* form. In short, the belief that humans can transcend corporeal subsistence. In doing so Churchill indicates that *Fen* is not set in a temporal stream in which narrative develops in a dramatic arc. Rather, the Fen stage/landscape holds a choreography of historical setting in which the actors play multiple roles and efficacious human action is foreclosed. The characters are held in a Fen landscape that appears as "a rubble field of half completed, inauthentic action" (Benjamin 2009: 141).

The research that Churchill carried out in preparation for the writing of this play conceived of the Fen region as a site of historically grounded gesture, rather than the locus of a subjective account. Churchill and her researchers stayed in a cottage in the Fenland district. They knocked on doors, wandered around and sat in pubs and cafes. As I did many times during my research, Churchill and her researchers relied on happenstance conversations alongside scheduled interviews. In doing so both Churchill and I drew on the techniques that Mary Chamberlain (1977) used in her seminal book *Fenwomen* that described the dominance of the aristocracy in this area: “Poverty and exploitation [...] of men and women by the landowners [...] the big landowners have gone but the exploitation remains” (Chamberlain, 1977: 12).

The actors upon the stage of Churchill’s *Fen* are not quite characters but are rather gestures of an oppressed and exploited landscape. This is a common trope of writing about the Fen landscape. In Daisy Johnson’s *Fen* (2016) and in Swift’s *Waterland* (2010) the human lives that are lived in this place are directed and constrained by this land itself and its history. In this chapter I ground this research in its own prehistory of the material form of the Fen landscape. Not as a conduit for the transmission of a research narrative, but instead as a physical medium in its own right – a spatial configuration of historical setting, a choreography rather than a poetics of place.

The Fen region has not always been monocultural. This landscape has a full and meaningful pre-history that darkly illuminates its current form. The Fens are currently imagined as a place in which a cultural break – in the form of

seventeenth century drainage – took them from what anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss (1990 [1969]) might call a ‘raw’ state towards a ‘cooked’ state. In an interview with Mavis, a farmer’s wife, she described this ‘break’ to me in a romantic framework as “a history that is a feat of engineering over 400 years that never ought to be left” and expressed disdain for projects that aimed to reconstruct portions of wetland, such as the site at Wicken Fen as “playgrounds for rich folk from Cambridge”.

Even now, in its monocultural form the Fen region always shimmers on the edge of ekphrasis. The flat and rectilinear field system appears as a mimesis of the image of productivity that is so extreme that it breaks its own bounds. Put another way, the more this landscape is constructed, the stranger and more corporeal the gestures of history it contains. Ron, one of my participants, described that what distinguishes the landscape of the Fens for him is that “you can see the ghosts of previous landscapes”. Ron linked this to the material structure of the land itself: “people say the Fen is flat but it’s not, it is veined with roddons”. These roddons are the dried raised beds of defunct watercourses. They are formed through the compaction of silty accretions and the adjacent lowering of the land following drainage. Ron continued “when you get a ploughed field you can see the roddons rather than just feel them, the colouration of the peat on top and silt underneath shows them snaking across like ghostly waterways”.

The word roddon itself is thought to be a local term from the Early Modern period – from *rod-ham* “raised land in a marsh or Fen serving as, or resembling, a road”

(Coates, 2005: 170). Ron's account evokes these banks of laminated silt as key to a pre-history of progress as failure in the Fens – the compaction of silt meant that roddons had the stability and height to allow communities to settle and farm, even during flooded periods. Simon, another participant, described the act of driving down Fen roads as such: “you think it is flat, but try driving over twenty miles an hour, you feel as if you are in a speed boat on a roiling sea”. And indeed, many a time my body juddered as I drove along what appeared to be a flat road. In the Fens, history hits the body.

These roddons are above all an effect of the material composition of the very ground of the place, composed as it is of clay and alluvium – loose, unconsolidated materials eroded and redistributed by water. The alluvial nature of this ground renders it vulnerable to seepage from the water table below and to inundation from above. This silt builds up in rivers so that they spill their banks and low ground kisses the water table so that it swells and seeps mineral rich leakages that lay across these flats. The water has nowhere to run, and peat accretes in the bottom of the mire. Formed through the slow decomposition of decaying vegetal matter in the mire, the acidic and anaerobic conditions that peat generates holds matter that falls into the Fen in unresolved time.

The soil here is rich and fertile and communities were attracted to the gravel islands and roddons for agricultural purposes from the Bronze age onwards. Most if not all of the communities that have settled in the Fen have attempted to manage the land to extend their crops, usually through drainage. Each of these attempts has intensified the material proclivities of this landscape. When drained,

this land shrinks, and it is brought back to meet the water table so that it is ever liable to flood.

The image of a prelapsarian Fen prior to that seventeenth century drainage which made something out of nothing, is a myth – a narrative structure placed upon the primary material of the landscape. Myths of this kind accrete into interdependent material and imaginary geographies. This process entwines with perceptions of time, so that temporality acts within this mythical structure like whispers in a game of pass the messenger. Meaning both accumulates and dissipates in the repetition that characterises the movement from one moment to the next.

Studies of the history of the formation of the Fens such as H.C Darby's (1932, 2011a, 2011b) work have perpetuated the familiar pattern of understanding the drainage of the area in the seventeenth century as a point of rupture in the area's history. Whilst the works of Darby and latterly Ash (2017) are of great importance to historical understandings of the Fen landscape, my project has different aims. I do not attempt here to clarify an eternal point in history that remains static, but rather to take seriously the relationship between the current monocultural form of this landscape and the way in which this surface level expression provides, by virtue of a topological unconscious, unmediated access to the fundamental matter of the state of corporeal existence. Put another way, this prehistory utilises the same temporal structure as Churchill's prologue to *Fen* and Freud's (2004 [1895]) concept of *nachträglichkeit* – both of which understand the material of the moment as always in relation to the availability and organisation of historical material. In the Fen landscape it is possible to see that past meanings are never

stable and history is never finished with. Yesterday is always mutable. It is ever in dialogue with the present.

The current form of the Fen region is a manmade landscape and its monocultural form is vulnerable to destabilisation by extreme weather events. As the spectre of climate change looms, the Fens are not only on the frontline of rising sea levels and at growing risk of severe tidal flooding; this landscape is simultaneously at risk of water shortages during summer months in the near future. This landscape can be read as a microcosm of the climate challenges that society faces. By the year 2050 the record-breaking temperatures and wildfires recorded in 2018 will be considered average. This is the case even if the global path to 'net zero' emissions is established and adhered to. By the end of the century, based on current locations and not allowing for future development, nearly 1 in 10 homes and 1 in 4 agricultural and industrial production facilities in the Fen region could face river and tidal flooding (Environment Agency 2021). The history of this landscape is being telescoped into the present and these previous iterations and forms are recalled and invigorated in new ways.



5.2 Held in empty time.

In their most basic structural manifestation, the Fens represent a very particular British landscape. This low-lying land curves sickle-like around the bay of which it once was a part. The west of this estuary was underlain by a layer of limestone and to the north and east a layer of chalk bedrock ran in a continuous ribbon along the east coast. Changing global temperatures over millennia provoked expansions and contractions of glacial ice. Sea levels in turn rose and fell. Prey to the tides, the low-lying bay of the Wash was persistently flooded and drained by the movements of the moon. With each flood a gift of marine silt lingered on the seakissed coastline. Over time the doggedly relentless repetition of this process created a large area comprising a base layer of sunken Jurassic clay that was once

a part of the North Sea floor, covered by layers of peat and alluvium and tapering out towards the Wash. The intransigently flat and low nature of the area was formed by these deposits as they settled into both the low water and the soft, easily erodible underlying basin. These deposits form the unstable foundation of the Fen landscape – the land is so low that water seeps from below and inundates from above.

Evidence suggests that the wider Fen area was inhabited during prehistoric times when Britain was still connected by land with continental Europe. Wider landscape management began in the Fen landscape in the Neolithic period. Archaeological excavations of the wider Fen landscape show evidence of the emergence of pastoral agriculture as well as the use of the willow and alder woodland during this period. These practices appear to have moved progressively onto drier land as the height and surface area of the mire increased due to rising sea levels from the Middle Bronze Age onwards. The creation of fields and farms demanded widespread deforestation of the dry woodland which populated the higher and dryer areas of land. This forest clearance increased the surface runoff and stream flow from rivers that already struggled to hold their burden and reduced the stability of the soil. During this period global temperatures increased, melting glaciers and raising sea levels. These broad rivers backed up with sediment and spilt onto the surface of the Fen basin. The areas between the islands and bands of higher ground flooded and became a wetland ecology where vegetation, reeds, grasses, fish and fowl contributed to a richly biodiverse ecosystem.

During the later Bronze period a band of this sandwiched peat and silt – a roddon – shifted into the horseshoe shaped area known as the Silt Fens that run from Boston to Wisbech. This area was surrounded by wetlands punctuated by rocky islands which were covered with clay and gravel sediments. These Silt Fens provided an area of relatively stable settlement both because of their relative height above sea level and their light silt soil ideal for horticulture. The islands were harder to farm but nonetheless provided good growing conditions for the small long-standing settlements that were founded on them from the Mesolithic period onwards. Excavations at Flag Fen in northern Cambridgeshire found evidence that during this Bronze Age period, the rich soil of the peat Fen area around Whittlesey was divided up into one of England's first known field systems. The fields were marked out by ditches, banks and hedges, and laid at right angles to the developing wetland. Many of these old field boundaries persist to this day in the Silt Fens (Oosthuizen 2003).

As water levels rose farmers in the area appear to have developed wooden causeways to bridge the mire. Metal, stone, shale, and ceramic as well as food and other objects have been found at the Flag Fen site and appear to have been placed in the water around the platform deliberately. There are significant remains at Flag Fen – from earlier as well as later than the date of the Bronze Age causeway. A Roman causeway aligns with the rows of posts and Neolithic funerary monuments sit on the Fen edge here alongside traces of both Neolithic and Bronze Age agricultural landscapes (Pryor 2020). These material remains are extraordinarily well-preserved due to the organic process known as eutrophication. The waste that decayed in the Fen basin enriched the water with

nutrients such as phosphates. These nutrients stimulated the growth of aquatic plant life which in turn depleted the oxygen levels in the water. Anaerobic environments break down dead matter very slowly, into a layer of nutrient rich peat at the bottom of the mire. This peat is acidic and preserves matter that is usually perishable, in the manner of a pickle. Things that die or are discarded in this landscape stay beneath the surface – undead, de-animated, irretrievable yet affecting.

During my fieldwork visit to Eric, the Fenland farmer, and his wife Mavis, he produced a piece of petrified wood from a shelf in his shed. He handed me this shiny, black shard. It was unbelievably light

That's 'bog oak. Years ago when we first started ripping the soil up, we pulled these trees out. I couldn't understand what they were, I'd never seen anything like it. I cut a bit off and I took it to an archaeologist. She said it was petrified wood, and that it was over five thousand years old.

I held the piece of bog oak in my hand whilst listening to the man. A moment later his wife Mavis described that the man's father and grandfather had farmed the same patches of land on which he worked today. The strips of field behind the farmer stretched into the horizon – Mavis' voice and the bog oak in my hand aligned like kaleidoscopic fragments. They constellated with another petrified fragment – it appeared in the action of agriculture. Like Churchill's use of the term 'last century' in her description of the young bird-scarer, the marker of "more than five thousand years" is an open one, referring to a time beyond the span of recorded history. This is also the container of the empty and homogenous time of

organised agriculture in which every misstep is rewritten as a necessary link towards progress.

The ancient Greek poet Hesiod's origin story *The Theogony* (Caldwell, 1987 [c.730700 BCE]) associates the birth of ordered – or ‘empty’ – time with the emergence of agriculture, prospect and justice. In Hesiod’s cosmology, Chaos – the abyss – was the original state from which all life emerged: from Chaos came Gaia, the Earth, and the dark, dim Tartaros the recess of Earth; from Gaia came Uranus, the sky, as well as the mountains and the sea. Hesiod describes Uranus as the first ruler of the cosmos. Each night this heavenly sky would descend to lay with Gaia as his consort, and together they produced eighteen children. The last six of these children were the three Cyclopes and their brothers, the equally monstrous ‘hundred handers’. Repulsed and frightened by his grotesque progeny Uranus hid the monstrous offspring within the depths of Gaia, preventing them from entering the cosmos. In doing so Uranus created a pre-monocultural arrangement – precisely a banishment of contingency through occult forces. Hesiod makes clear that by hiding his children within Gaia, Uranus concealed elements of the cosmos that linked the manifest world to meaning, in order to safeguard a continuation of his power.

Trapped in empty time, Gaia groaned in pain. She bid her twelve children to help her overthrow their father. The youngest, Cronos the Titan, offered himself for the task, and Gaia granted him a ‘jagged toothed sickle’. With this instrument – synonymous with both agriculture and death – Cronos castrated his father. Hesiod describes that Cronos cut Uranus’s power to hold empty time in place, but

he did not undo the monocultural arrangement. Instead, it is actualised, taken from potentiality into being with the swift sweep of the sickle. The abstraction entrenches itself in the material realm of the cosmos, moving temporality from the condition of potential time – in which there was only day and night – into a time of ‘afterwardness’, a divided but boundless time in which things from the past proliferate in strange new ways. It is in this time that Hesiod’s *Theogony* unfolds.

Measured time in the form of days, months and seasons emerge, in Hesiod’s cosmology, with the castration of Uranus by Cronos using the jagged toothed sickle. Hesiod describes that Cronos ‘reaped’ the sky with this sickle – the first technology within this cosmos. In the next act Cronos attempts to achieve his Father’s goal – the retention of power – fearing the power of his own offspring so much that he eats each and every child that his wife Rhea births. Cronos is the God of both ordered time and duration. With his sickle in hand his story can be understood as the birth of technology *not in the form of agriculture but precisely as agriculture* (Nelson and Greene 1998). Hesiod’s origin tale can be understood as such: first comes the earth, in the form of Gaia; next, Uranus brings forth the occult, the concealed but active, the unconscious; this occluded element remains active but not supremely powerful because it begets Cronos – technology, the agricultural, the quality of divided and measured time and space.

In Hesiod’s cosmology Uranus rises to power and falls to his own son Cronos; latterly Cronos too falls to his son Zeus. Gaia, the material, maternal progeny of Chaos is instrumental in each of these productions and downfalls. It is she who

begets Uranus and she who births the Cyclopes and the ‘hundred handers’ as well as Cronos and his Titan siblings. It is she who produces the sickle and it is she who bids Cronos to use it to castrate Uranus and end his occult reign. She is also instrumental in the deception and downfall of Cronos. He is given the prophecy that his reign will be overcome by his own son by Gaia and his neutered Father Uranus. Hesiod tells us that Cronos consumed each of his own offspring at birth and like Gaia before her Rhea moaned in pain, always pregnant but never a mother – her babes were imprisoned within her husband’s belly. When she fell pregnant with her last child Zeus, Rhea sought the counsel of ‘the Earth and starry Heaven’ to seek retribution not only for her children but also for Uranus against ‘crafty’ Cronos (Nelson and Grene, 1998). Once again it was Gaia who created a new form of deception. In the realm of divided earthly space and time that Cronos has brought into being, Zeus could be hidden on the surface of the earth, concealed by distance rather than magic. Rhea was sent to Crete where she bore Zeus. And it was Gaia who hid him in a cave and swapped his body for a stone, which she wrapped in swaddling and handed to Cronos. He took it in his hands and thrust it down into his belly. And when Zeus was grown, it was Gaia who tricked Cronos into eating an emetic plant. Cronos retched and threw up first the stone which he had swallowed in place of Zeus; latterly he vomited up Zeus’ siblings – those Olympian gods whose names are so familiar: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades and Poseidon.

It is with this third movement that the earthly nature of technology and the occult nature of abstraction enmesh in the form of a boundary stone. Zeus sets fast the stone which took his place in his father’s belly at Parnassus, to be a sign

thenceforth that Zeus rules over both mortals and immortals. The basic pattern of claiming power through the monocultural form – the banishment of diversity and contingency – and of downfall through the Gaia – the Earth – is repeated throughout Hesiod's work. However, from the first movement of *The Theogony* this occurs within an increasingly abstracted form. We can understand this as an agricultural metaphor, beginning with Cronos using a scythe to 'reap' the heavens, and reaching its peak in *Works and Days* when Prometheus creates the first truly abstracted form – fire stolen from the Gods and hidden in a fennel stalk (Nelson and Grene, 1998). This unfolding technological form – agriculture – precipitates not only social form but also metaphysics. This occurs not only through the wilful action of agential subjects but also through the interaction of these subjects and the movements of the Earth on which they live. Cronos did not form his sceptre, rather it was given to him by Gaia. And Zeus did not set the boundary stone at Parnassus. Nevertheless, it is these actions that formed the world in which Prometheus the Titan felt compelled to grant humans the gift of fire – the gift that was not his to give.

It is in this moment that earthly form is ruptured from meaning and value – setting in motion the entrance of Pandora into the world. Prometheus' name can literally be translated as 'foresight' and Zeus's reciprocal gift of Pandora blocks the use of this gift. She is an evil hidden inside a good and Hesiod makes clear that her entrance into the world represents a break between appearances and qualities. He makes it clear that this is an agricultural problem – the farmer can no longer tell what his actions will bring forth and cannot plan to accumulate wealth without inciting evil returns. This is to say that if Marx believed that it

was capital that caused “all that is solid to melt into air” (1992: 34), this reading of Hesiod contends that the condition is a by-product of agriculture. The original condition in Hesiod’s cosmology is chaos: the abyss, nothing, pure and unusable potential. The earth is closer to both the abyss of chaos and – simultaneously – plenty than any other form. To relate to the earth through the act of marking out a plot and tilling the soil is always a relationship to nothing – and downfall is the conditional status of this action.

This condition is echoed in the first story of the Israelites as they make their way out of Egypt. The Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis (2009) states that the key message of *The Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Old Testament) is that ‘dominion’ means feeding others. The word dominion here links sovereignty, land ownership, nobility and territory and this theme repeats throughout Genesis as it does in Hesiod’s *The Theogony*. The practice and management of creating food production is presented in *The Pentateuch* as the ultimate expression of God’s sovereignty over creation: the immediate material – that is the sensuous – presence of the divine. In Ellen Davis’ reading of the Old Testament, she brings attention to agriculture as a point of consistency between the Kingdom of Egypt and our current moment. Then as now, the grain trade was a source of ‘agri-power’ – an indispensable key to personal wealth and political power through the exploitation of natural resources. Here Egypt appears as “the Iron Furnace” (Deut. 4:20, in Davis, 2009). It is the biblical archetype of industrial society – consuming, burning, ceaseless in its hunger for slave labour in the fields. This is a picture of a society that knew “no holiday” (Benjamin, 2002 [1921]); it understood nature as unremittingly fruitful. The Israelites were conceived here as closer to nature than

culture and therefore as another resource to be milked. When the Israelites embarked on their journey into the wilderness, one of the initial aims was to outline a new moral economy of food that incorporated a holy day – the Sabbath – in order to avoid this slave relationship (Davis, 2009). Time and time again they failed. The Old Testament can be understood here as an endless repetition of Adam’s original sin – again and again food and its growth is the central issue that cannot be dealt with in a manner that pleases God.

Agriculture appears in both *The Theogony* and *The Pentateuch* as the pre-history of Benjamin’s ‘technik’ – the techniques, technics and technologies that are implicated in the mismatch of forces and relations of production. The technological forces of agricultural production discharge a determining effect on all sections of the social totality and demand conformism (Leslie, 2000: xi). Put another way, agriculture brings into focus the use of arable landscape as precapitalist technik. Landscape managed in monocultural form appears as a fundamental form – like the wheel or the cog – which remain active and in use even when the forms in which they are used diversify. As Hesiod describes, in the breaking of space and time into monocultural arrangements, a time of abstraction is set ticking in which an empty proliferation of more of the same unfolds. In a simultaneous movement, the Hebrew Bible displays the way in which this proliferation of empty commodities is accompanied by a restriction of ownership over these processes, and that wherever there is food production ‘food becomes a weapon’ (Davis 2009). In short, the technik of monocultural arrangements is also inevitably a technik of aristocracy – precisely of a designated superior, or ‘best’ power over all other life forms.



5.3 - People in place.

It is often assumed that the shift from hunter-gatherer societies to sedentary societies was propagated by the domestication of plants and animals and fixed field agriculture: in other words the shift to monocultural arrangements. Advances in archaeological techniques over the past decades have served to radically revise or totally reverse these assumptions. In his agricultural analysis of statecraft in *Against the Grain*, anthropologist James C. Scott (2017) proposes that sedentism long preceded evidence of plant and animal domestication and that

both sedentism and domestication were in place at least four millennia before anything like agricultural villages appeared. Sedentism and the first appearance of towns were typically seen to be a by-product of wetland abundance. In the Mesopotamian communities that Scott discusses, settlement occurred through the proximity to rich abundance of life in the Deltic wetlands of Southern Mesopotamia c.400-500 BCE. These diverse wetlands allowed foraging communities to settle near abundant food sources. This theoretical contribution allows the Fens of eastern England to be considered here as an essential landscape in the 'turning on of the law' (Benjamin 1996a [1921]) in the period that spans the Roman occupation of England c.43 CE to the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1543.

When the Romans invaded Britain in the first century CE, they found themselves in a country in which vast tracts of territory were consistently marshy due to tidal flooding. These sites, including but not limited to the Fen region, were dangerous territory for the Roman communities due to the presence of Celtic tribes such as the Iceni in the Fenland region and were thus subject to large scale infrastructure projects. We see this in the following quote from Roman historian Herodian who claims that the Emperor Severus stated that:

...especially endeavoured to render the marshy places stable by means of causeways, that his soldiers treading with safety might easily pass them and having firm footing might fight to advantage. For many parts of British country, being constantly flooded by the tides of the ocean, become marshy. In these the natives are accustomed to swim and traverse about as high as their waists.

(Darby 2011: 20)

Wetlands, in particular the Fen region – the largest swathe of wetland territory in the British Isles even during this period – were imagined as qualitatively different from stable ground. The myths, legends and anecdotes that surround this landscape are difficult to untangle from a historiographic perspective. In 2018 I visited the folklorist Maureen James at her home in March, in the Fenland district. She described to me a history of tales of a Fen landscape that actively reaches out, grabbing bodies from the higher ground to pull them into the mire to drown. However, she also explained to me that these tales were produced under the influence of the Folklore Society whose Council shared a belief in a linear progression of society from the savage to the peasant, to the civilised. James described to me that “as a consequence they were looking for proof of survival of aspects of these early stages”. In her PhD thesis concerning the collection of legends from the Lincolnshire Fens, James states that:

These leading scholars within the Folklore Society also showed a reluctance to go out 'into the field,' and though they made efforts to persuade their membership to seek for evidence of the dying traditions, beliefs, and folk stories, they preferred the collation of entries from published sources.

(James, 2013: 24)

This is a familiar tale, most famously embodied by Robert Graves *The White Goddess* (1961) whose explorations of Celtic myth are based on readings of previous scholars such as Edward Davies and James Frazer and various eighteenth century fabrications of ancient British mythology. This is to say that much of what has been accepted as authentic folklore and mythology of the British

Isles is subject to the *nachträglichkeit* of scholars versed in the classical works of Ancient Greece and Rome. Despite this, two elements regarding the myth of a treacherous Fen landscape can be asserted with some clarity. First, from the Roman occupation onwards there was a desire to create an official, stable ground of imaginative geography in the Fen region. This is probably best demonstrated by the Roman construction of the Fen Causeway which created an official material linkage between what later became East Anglia and central England.

Secondly, the visceral fear of a dangerous indigenous Briton produced by this sodden native habitat persisted into the hagiographical imaginative geographies of the British Isles produced in the seventh and eighth centuries (Brady 2010). There is no way to garner conclusive evidence as to whether there was any truth in these ideas of a Celtic refuge in the Fens that held strong for centuries after the Roman invasion. It is, however, possible to conceive the ‘othering’ of the Britons *through* the way these communities were linked to specific peripheral areas of the British Isles. These ideas of placed, peripheral peoples are, I propose, essential to the formation of an early identity of England and Englishness. This connection between wild lands and wild peoples provided a rationale for a legitimisation of territorial claims leading to the development of specific legislative, social and spatial structures. As the classicist Lindy Brady states:

[...] the association of the Britons with specific landscapes functioned in the Anglo-Saxon period in order to separate ‘us’ from ‘them’, and thus the Britons in their wildness were linked to the dangerous Fens.

(2010: 677)

The history of the British Isles is one of constant revision used to further the advancement of the ruling classes through the phantasy of an indigenous 'British' population. The production of people in conjunction with landscape allowed for the production of the imagination of 'dangerous' populations and landscapes which led the way for oppressive projects going forward. During the Roman occupation climatic changes resulted in a drier and more habitable Fen region which archaeological evidence suggests was used productively for sheep grazing and wool production (Hall 1987). The 'dark ages' of the British Isles that followed the desertion of Britain by the Roman Empire in around 400 CE, has traditionally led scholars to believe the Fen region was deserted during this period. Looking to both Hesiod (who lived and wrote through the end of the Greek 'dark age') and Scott (2017), the concept of a 'dark age' does not necessarily refer to a lack of culture or desertion but rather the collapse of a previous regime and the moment prior to the formation of a new system of dominance. Recent archaeological work by Susan Oosthuizen (2017) argues that rather than undergoing dramatic change after 400 CE, communities continued to live around the Silt Fen edge and on the 'islands' of higher ground rising above the wetlands.

Since the Victorian period historians – in particular John Richard Green's *The Making of England* (2019 [1881]) – have argued that during the fifth and sixth centuries, indigenous British communities were removed altogether or reduced to servitude by incomers arriving from north-west Europe – the Anglo-Saxons – who lived in separate settlements. Oosthuizen (2017) argues that between 400 and 900 the Fen region was inhabited by communities in which there was no break between Britons, the 'Romano-British' and the 'Anglo Saxons'. Rather, she states

that local communities successfully managed a subsistence farming schema and that the networks of rivers that threaded the area allowed incomers from across the North Sea to penetrate as far as the English midlands. Importantly, Oosthuizen (2017) indicates that it is status rather than origin that can be distinguished by the remnants of material culture discovered in the Fen region from this period:

Settlements, fields and artefacts can be distinguished by status, but not by the cultural background of the people to whom they belonged...The evidence from fenland shows that newcomers were assimilated into late British communities; there was no displacement of populations nor establishment of separate communities.

(Oosthuizen, 2017b:np)

The understanding of the premodern Anglo-Saxon, Roman, Danish and Briton populations as ethnically distinct from each other emerges in the attempts to create a 'legitimate' or legally bound geography of England by the Norman scholars of the tenth century. These scholars made reference to the cultivation projects of the Gregorian missions of the seventh century in 'wild' areas such as the Fens to propagate the idea of a homogenous 'English' population who 'reclaimed' these areas from 'savage' rule through a legitimising relationship with the divine Christian God. In doing so they called on earlier stories from the Mesopotamian period of the Old Testament, as well as material remnants from the Roman occupation, in order to erase a complex history of immigration and create the idea of a bounded and ethnically 'pure' English race and state.



5.4. Geography and the turning on of the law.

The Gregorian mission (c. 596–601) is the name given to the missionary enterprise for the conversion of the English to Christianity, launched by Pope Gregory I (c. 590–604). The chronology and intentions of the mission were uniquely well documented (for this period) in Gregory's register of letters issued in his name.

Further to this the Anglo-Saxon theologian, historian, and chronologist Bede (2003 [c.672-735]) extensively documented the missionaries' activities within England in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede was particularly concerned with emphasising Roman connections, authorities, and monastic traditions. There is

therefore a wide body of evidence to suggest that Gregory conceived the mission as directed at an – as yet unformed – ‘English people’. This ethnic term aimed to homogenise the various pagan Germanic peoples whose kingdoms dominated large swathes of the former Roman province of Britain. In doing so it simultaneously created a plethora of ethnic ‘others’, including the pre-Roman Britons and the Danes who arrived in England through the tidal streams of East Anglia from the eighth century onwards.

The *Ecclesiastical History* was foundational to both the phantasm of a white, Christian English ethnic identity and an organised and sanctified Christian geography of England. This ‘Gregorian’ geography of the Church of England – based upon the two provinces of Canterbury and York – remains active in the present day. The text has been used and re-used continually since its inception in the transmission of the phantasm of a white, Anglo-Saxon, English ethnic identity. The rhetorical devices at play often reappear at moments of perceived invasion or threat from ‘othered’ communities both within and without England. The influence of this text on the cultural geographies of the Fen landscape cannot be underestimated. The work of the Bede as well as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles can be understood as central to a move from diversity to homogeneity through the creation of an ethnic identity that is inextricably bound up with the production of sanctified landownership and through this the birth of a ‘monocultural’ ruling class.

The *Ecclesiastical History* is arranged in chronological order, beginning with the Roman invasion in the first century CE. The third book deals with the latter part

of the Gregorian mission, in which a noble class of Anglo-Saxon Christians had been established and were moving into the less habitable areas of England, sanctifying these areas with their presence. It is in this third book that Bede gives his account of Queen Æthelthryth and her actions within the Fen region between 660 and 696 CE. This account is above all a miracle story in which Æthelthryth preserved her virginity through two marriages, and her body suffered no corruption in the grave. Through this account Bede saturates both Æthelthryth and the watery Fen landscape with the rhetoric of the sanctified body of Mary – the virgin mother of Christ.

In Bede's account Æthelthryth was a royal woman, the daughter of Anna, King of the East Angles. She had been given in marriage to Tondbert, a royal man of the Southern Gyrwas – an Anglo Saxon Fen tribe – but he died soon after he had married her. With her virginity intact, Æthelthryth was given to King Egfrid, the Anglo-Saxon ruler of Northumbria. Bede tells us that though Æthelthryth lived with Egfrid for twelve years, she preserved her virginity, because although she loved no man more than her husband she wished to serve only Christ. This was granted to her and she entered a monastery in Scotland, under her husband's Aunt the Abbess Aebba. After a year she was herself made Abbess in the district called Elge (Ely), where she built a monastery and began, by the example of a heavenly life and by her teaching, to be the virgin mother of many virgins dedicated to God.

The life of Æthelthryth in the monastery upon Ely was described by Bede as rigorously ascetic in nature. She routinely eschewed all material comfort until her

death, after which was succeeded in the office of abbess by her sister Sexburg, who had been wife to Earconbert, King of Kent. After sixteen years – in an act described as a ‘translation’ – Sexburg is said to have ordered the exhumation of Æthelthryth’s remains. Monks were sent in a boat across the marshes to the deserted Roman city of Grantchester (near the present-day city of Cambridge) where they found a white marble sarcophagus – interpreted by Bede as a gift from God. When Æthelthryth’s body was exhumed Bede states that her body was not only uncorrupted by death, but the physical marks of the illness that had caused her death were healed. The pristine body of Æthelthryth was washed, clothed in new garments, brought into the church, and laid in the sarcophagus that had been brought. The sarcophagus was found in a wonderful manner to fit the virgin’s body as if it had been made purposely for her. Bede concludes that this is evidence of a divine will to establish a monastery in the Fens.

In this account Bede created an allegory of the life of the Anglo-Saxon noblewoman Æthelthryth in order to demonstrate the efficacy of a Christian God and his will to establish a Christian nation in England. The preservation of Æthelthryth’s body, Bede is clear, is achieved through the power of Christ who keeps her enshrined form inviolate because she devoted herself to him (Blanton 2007: 58; Bede, 2003: 41-42). The contemporary material power of God is thus invoked by Bede. Miracles, he claims, are not a thing of the past and their occurrence within the new Anglo-Saxon church is testimony both to God’s approval of the Christianisation of England and the danger of not conforming to its values. This danger and the possibility of salvation is also inscribed by Bede on Æthelthryth’s body. Her actions are presented as being routinely ascetic in nature. Each of the

examples provided by Bede indicate her abstemiousness and prudence. However it is made very clear in her *Vita* that when she became ill with the tumour in her neck which killed her:

[...] she was afflicted [...] she gladly welcomed this sort of pain and used to say: I know well enough that I deserve to bear the weight of this affliction in my neck, for I remember that when I was a young girl I used to wear an unnecessary weight of necklaces; I believe that God in His goodness would have me endure this pain in my neck in order that I may thus be absolved from the guilt of my needless vanity. So, instead of gold and pearls, a fiery red tumour now stands out upon my neck.

(Blanton 2007: 46)

Much like wetlands and water itself the female body has been imagined as an entity which does not adhere to boundaries and needs regulation and control to protect both itself and others from defilement, disease, and corruption. Bede's account depicts Æthelthryth as internalising and performing the ideal of an enclosed and sealed feminine body and this behaviour as being endorsed, intensified, and repeated by God in a manner which places Æthelthryth's pure and sealed body as a nested doll within a chain of divinely endorsed enclosures. The text claims that the sarcophagus in which she lay was discovered by the monks in the ruins of Roman Grantchester who brought it home to discover it was a miraculous fit. This miraculous fit implies that the casket was a divinely ordered iteration of a previous Roman rule – which in turn lends validity to the multiplicity of enclosures presented in the text – the purity of Æthelthryth's spiritual form, the preservation of Æthelthryth's corporeal form, her body within the divinely ordered sarcophagus, the sarcophagus within the shrine, the shrine within the church which sits inside a monastic close on the Isle of Ely surrounded by Fen (Blanton 2005: 50). Æthelthryth's body, described by Bede as impenetrable in its holiness, interacts with the symbolic nature of its wetland island shrine to

become both metaphor and justification of the monastery's status as a space bounded and endorsed by God.

This account of the life of Æthelthryth in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* appears in a refined form later in the form of *Vita St Guthlaci*, produced by the East Anglian monk Felix in the late eleventh century, following the Norman Conquest (Colgrave 2009). In this hagiography, Felix uses the Fen landscape to introduce a series of topographical rhetorical devices and tropes which were of crucial importance to another iteration of an emergent, distinctly Christian and English identity. Guthlac's hagiography introduces the notion of the pre-Roman Britons seen in Roman accounts of the Fen region as an 'other' in need of reclamation and improvement, and intertwined with the Fen landscape.

Felix narrates that Guthlac was born as part of a tribe called the Guthlacingas in around 674. A soldier in his early life, Guthlac retired to monastic life at Repton Abbey where the other monks castigated him for his abstinence from alcohol. A desire builds in Guthlac for retreat to a place of isolation so that he may better contemplate God. And thus, he travels to the Fens where he finds:

[...] immense marshes, now a black pool of water, now foul running streams, and also many islands, and reeds, and hillocks, and thickets, and with manifold windings wide and long it continues up to the north sea [...] Guthlac [...] inquired of the inhabitants of the land where he might find himself a dwelling place in the wilderness. Whereupon they told him many things about the vastness of the wilderness. There was a man named Tatwine, who said he knew an island especially obscure, which oft times many men had attempted to inhabit, but no man could do it on account of manifold horrors and fears.

(Felix as cited by Darby 2011: 8)

The island to which Tatwine refers and to which Guthlac retreats is Crowland in South Lincolnshire, where an Abbey still stands. Here Guthlac finds himself tormented by presences in the Fen. Despite this he continues to pray and worship and eventually is saved. The narrative arc is recognisable from Bede's *Life of Saint Cuthbert* which is often seen as an English response to the hagiographies of the North African Church Fathers. Central to these texts are recurrent Old Testament themes of hostile wilderness, self-imposed exile, asceticism and the attainment of an inner spiritual transformation. This conversion is embodied in the metamorphosis of the landscape from diabolical wasteland to a fertile and blossoming garden of salvation.

The description of Guthlac's Fen dwelling tormenters recalls Severus' description of the Britons in the Fens. In doing so it expresses a perception of a population enmeshed with the wasteland in which they live, recognisable by their monstrous behaviour and corporeality mired in its proximate geography. The demons are:

[...] ferocious in appearance, terrible in shape with great heads, long necks, thin faces, yellow complexions, filthy beards, shaggy ears, wild foreheads, fierce eyes, foul mouths, horses' teeth, throats vomiting flames, twisted jaws, thick lips, strident voices, singed hair, fat cheeks, pigeon breasts, scabby thighs, knotty knees, crooked legs, swollen ankles, splay feet, spreading mouths, raucous cries.

(see Bjork 1986: 378 for this and variations on the translation)

Here the invocation of a visceral fear that dominated the psychic life of the Roman communities during the occupation is reanimated, twisting topologically in the symbolic Fen landscape of the Gregorian mission. This fear of the dangerous

indigenous Briton – camouflaged and produced in a native habitat – haunted the marginal spaces of the converted Anglo-Saxon imaginative geographies of the British Isles (Brady 2010).

The presences that visit Guthlac in the Fens are spectral rather than physical representations of Britons. The medieval historian Bertram Colgrave (in Brady 2010) brings to attention that in the *Vita*, the attackers simply evaporate and thus the story forms part of a growing body of literature produced at the time depicting Anglo-Saxon Christians as more powerful than indigenous pagans and represents:

...a racialised imagination of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ community predicated on the expulsion of the Britons as nonsensical monsters, as demons whose identities do not coalesce into human shape; a suturing point at which the dispersed identity of the contemporary island could imagine itself a unity, projecting into the future a Mercian hegemony characterised by solidity, racial integration, and a divinely mandated colonialist destiny
(Brady 2010: 679)

Felix’ text *Life of St Guthlac* presents the Fen landscape as a highly charged symbolic space, a foul and pestilent wilderness – it is twice described in the text as ‘inculta’, beyond human cultivation (Clarke 2011) – which holds within itself the possibility of transformation into a divine pastoral scene through the material interventions of God. Indeed, the climax of the poem sees Guthlac finally settled peacefully on Crowland which promptly undergoes a metamorphosis into a vision of arcadia where Guthlac feeds the birds:

...calm was the site of victory and his hall for the first time
fair the birds song, the earth in fruit;
the cuckoos announced the new season. Guthlac was able,
blessed and resolute, to use that land. the green
plain remained in God’s keeping; the pastor who
had come from Heaven had put the fiends to flight.
(Hines, 2004: 64)

Archaeologist John Hines (2004) states in his exploration of Guthlac that the ‘gnomic’ rhetoric devices used in the poem – traceable back to the saintly hermits in the Syrian and North African deserts – interweave and sanction contemporary economic structures of a holy life, merging artfully with exchange systems that worked on both the market level and the gift system. Indeed this emergent organisation of land and bodies was actualised in and through the landscape, particularly this marginal wetland landscape of the English Fens which held the opportunity for human subjects to earn salvation through God’s grace. Literature of this period “emphatically presented a raw wasteland [...] as its typical setting; an uncultivated and open stage on which its heroes [...] could be tested and proved” (Hines 2004:57). Wetlands were once considered necromantic landscapes, places of death and eternal return which were central to the divine ecology of territory. In early Christian thought, places or practices of return were synonymous with demonic apparitions brought forth to test Christian people. This shift within the Anglo-Saxon English Fens facilitated and necessitated the emergence of the rhetorical figure of the saint who controls and offers salvation to a piece of land and those within it – both spectral and fleshy. The ambiguity of the Fen landscape was, however, not nullified. Rather it was crossed out yet, as this thesis will demonstrate, remained active through its negation in Christian culture.

The life of St Guthlac – along with other Anglo-Saxon literary works such as *The Life of Saint Cuthbert*, *Andreas* and *Phoenix* – contributed to the development of an imaginative geography in which the moral and spiritual health, beauty and productivity of place is inextricable from that of its inhabitants. The dual figures

of the saint as hero and of place made sacred are central to a dynamic quality within this geographic projection. The saint provides the possibility of redemption – a divine intervention which can save or indeed reclaim the landscape and all those in it. Thus, a specular image of an internally coherent philosophical and legislative English culture was permitted, enabled and empowered. The monastic culture forged in the Fens during the Gregorian reformation formed an essential spatial manifestation of a developing entwinement of ecclesia – the church – and rex, the monarch. By the tenth century the region was home to four of the most important houses of the Benedictine reform – that religious and intellectual movement in which secular clergy were replaced by celibate and contemplative monks. The hagiography of Æthelthryth and the life of Guthlac were just two of a multitude of texts that operated as what Virginia Blanton has described as "rhetorical hybrids" (2002: 227) – texts in which we see interweaving legal and hagiographical as well as placed and bodily elements in validation not only of institutional legitimacy and culture but also law and sovereignty. In this area a culture of isolation was fostered through the 'uninhabitable' nature of the Fen landscape which was presented as divinely intended for the pursuit of monasticism. This landscape provided a series of islands of devotion surrounded by the permeable barrier of water, inhibiting but not preventing interaction with the rest of the world. This was a mimetic reproduction of the image of England itself that was later produced by the monasterial scholars in the Fens – precisely a Christian island, separated from mainland Europe by traversable water.

When the twelfth century historian William of Malmesbury visited the monastery at Thorney near Peterborough he described it as:

the image of paradise, and its loveliness gives an advance idea of heaven itself. For all the swamps surrounding it, it supports an abundance of trees, whose tall smooth trunks strain towards the stars. The flat countryside catches the eye with its green carpet of grass; those who hurry across the plain meet nothing that offends. No part of the land, however tiny, is uncultivated. In one place you come across tall fruit trees, in another fields bordered with vines, which creep along the earth or climb high on their props. Nature and art are in competition: what the one forgets the other brings forth ... A vast solitude allows the monks a quiet life: the more limited their glimpses of mortal men, the more tenaciously they cleave to things heavenly.

(in Harvey, 1981: 35-36)

The monastic community that dominated the Fen landscape from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries was, amongst other things, a hugely successful economic and land management project (Naismith, 2016). England at the turn of the first millennium was experiencing what has been termed the ‘fish event horizon’ – a notable increase in fishing as a commercial enterprise (Barrett, Locker, and Roberts, 2004). This upswing in the economic exploitation of commercial fishing across Europe led to a huge expanse in wealth in the eel rich wetlands of the Fens. Texts from the Fenland monastic houses during the early part of the eleventh century show an increasing interest in a method of landscape management that privileged growth and advancement, in a manner that intertwined economic concerns with spiritual and metaphorical interests (Naismith 2016). In short, in the Fenland monastic communities of this period there was an upsurge in new techniques of land management in relation to economic markets. These centred on issues of ‘improvement’ that entwined economic and theological issues into a singular project. This ethos of estate management was distinct from projects elsewhere in mediaeval Europe which tended to be much more targeted and was due, at least in part, to the unique possibilities that the Fen landscape presented for investment in the drainage of land and the building of canals. As a major

monastery, Ely was particularly well placed to 'further' its property thanks to the wealth generated from the emerging eel trade. Crucially, the long-term development of this landscape in the hands of monastic communities in the Fens encouraged the development and preservation of record keeping. It is in these records that we can see the development of systematic surveys of landed property. Indeed, the Ely memoranda and their counterparts show the kind of information that had to be gathered as a prelude to setting up a lasting regime for an estate or group of estates. In the system of land management in the Fenland monasteries of the tenth and eleventh centuries it is possible to glimpse the economic root system of eastern England in the century before the Domesday Book.

The historical literature of the nineteenth century marked the Norman Conquest in 1066 as the social revolution in which new forms of landed tenure produced a 'new' feudal society. This is sedimented into the canon of English social history through the image of the Domesday Book as the formation of a break from previous traditions and the beginning of a new hierarchical mediaeval society entrenched in land ownership, land tenure and its obligations (Crouch, 2011). The formation of the monastic estates of the Fen region present this history in an alternative light. It is in this distinct landscape – where wet and dry land worked side by side, exploited in different yet complementary ways by tenants and landlords – that we find a reiteration of James C Scott's (2017) theory of wetlands as the breeding ground for state formation. The Fen landscape provided wealth not only through the eel trade but also through pig and sheep husbandry and the growth of crops. What is perhaps more important is that this wealth of resources occurred in a bounded area of a landscape that was differentiated from the rest of

an increasingly internally cohesive England. The stability provided through a monastic order that demanded sedentarism, as well as the region's historically 'othered' status, fostered the growth of a form of estate management that gave form to the legalistic epoch in which the modern English state arose. This did not occur through a sublimation of previous epochs but in a series of lateral steps towards a 'rational' management of landscape and its produce.



5.5 Mummers and mysteries.

Although the Fen region by no means sat in stasis between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, the political, ecclesiastical and spatial order that was set ticking with Æthelthryth's foundation of the abbey at Ely, prevailed and intensified during this period. The concluding section of this chapter focuses on the period surrounding the reformation – the sixteenth century separation of the English Church from Rome – in order to interrogate the choreography of the Fen region as it constellated with an increasingly secular state.

In 1535, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* – a survey of the finances of the Church of England – identified Ely as one of the half-dozen most affluent bishoprics in the country. However, unlike Bath and Wells whose status were most similar the estates of the bishopric of Ely, its estates were all concentrated in the East Anglian area. Thus the sphere of aristocratic influence under which it operated placed it in a different position to other sees in England (Heal 1973). The latter years of Henry VIII's reign and the period of Edward's minority were the times when most easy lay profit was made at the expense of the Church. Ely however avoided the losses of territory and revenue that other monastic estates were subjected to. The estates of the bishopric of Ely remained virtually untouched during this period. This appears to be partly because of the great political influence of the Ely bishops, and partly due to the lack of country parks and subsequent influential local families, as well the level of responsibility for flood control that the bishops managed. In short, the bishopric of Ely was a site held by powerful and influential

individuals in a landscape that was unattractive to aristocratic interests (Heal 1973).

In the grammar of the performance of the episcopate by these powerful and wealthy Bishops in this distinct landscape, we can glimpse the ‘aura’ of the Reformation – precisely its experiential coordinates in time and space (Benjamin 2008). Nicholas West, Bishop of Ely from 1515 to 1553, used his wealth primarily for the good of his soul. It was said that West fed 200 poor and hungry mouths in the Isle of Ely each day. When he died, he was buried in his own chapel and large endowments were left for perpetual prayer at his birthplace in Putney and his see in Ely. Richard Cox, Bishop of Ely from 1559 to 1581, felt no need to insure his soul through the use of worldly goods. His will was made to the benefit of his family, with some limited provision for the poor. This is a transition from an understanding of the Church estate as fundamentally different from the worldly goods of the leading laity, to one that saw Christian space and its aims as almost identical to that of secular space. In the Fens the initiative of charity and the endowment of learning that once had lain with the clergy passed into secular aristocratic hands without the rupture and conflict seen in other English ecclesiastical estates (Heal, 1973).

In the Fens, the Lutheran renunciation of purgatory that introduced a new worldliness into modern Christianity happened slowly and without an identifiable cause or moment of rupture. The landscape of the Fens became an independent physical and economic medium in its own right, rather than the conduit for the transmission of a Christian drama. In this transition the communities in the Fen

region found themselves in an empty landscape, in which deeds were divorced from their salvic ends.

To understand this process as emerging from the Reformation is a top-down approach to history. The conditions that the labouring communities of the Fen region found themselves in at the end of the sixteenth century were established with the fifteenth century transition to secular style property leases – letting out their estates for financial rather than service or gift-based returns (Jack, 1996). It is in this shifting relationship between service and finance-based leasehold that the figure of the shire reeve, or indeed the sheriff, emerged. These intriguers were neither noblemen nor clerics, they were rather ‘men risen from dust’ who scaffolded a burgeoning ‘rule of law’ based on the *enforcement* of property rights. The adoption of this method of land management in the monastic territory of the 15th century Fen region - which lacked powerful aristocratic families and country estates - can be understood as a situation where time transformed into space. A situation where servitude gave way to fiscal estate management, and where the Aristotelian conception of nobility as arising from blood transmuted and took on the earthly aspect of land.

It was in this period and region that the play *Mankind* (c.1466) is located. This brief morality play is understood to be the earliest surviving evidence of professional players (Bevington, 1965) – the stage in the form of an independent physical medium – and displays many elements that Benjamin (2009) attributed to the sixteenth century *Trauerspiel* or mourning plays (Cermatori, 2021). These productions were staged during Germany’s transition to a secular state, in line

with the rest of continental Europe and a century after England's gentry began to separate the political and economic state from the monarchy and Church. A key distinction between the endless cycle of history explored in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* and that enacted in the drama of *Mankind* is that whilst the former deals with matters of state from a courtly position, the latter stages a choreography of the toiling man within a rural field of stasis. In the allegorical choreography of *Mankind* it is possible to glimpse the loss of the mythic and religious in the Fens for the rural labourer during this transition – an epoch shift that is arguably as persistent as the much studied drainage schemes of the seventeenth century.

Mankind is a brief play (914 lines survive) that acts as a dramatic staging of the battle between good and evil for the souls of the human race – embodied through that always incomplete gesture of the tilling of a piece of ground. It opens with a speech by the character Mercy, in the guise of a priest, whose goal is to save the central character Mankind's soul by encouraging him to live a proper life. Mercy is opposed in this effort by the character Mischief and three fashionable young men: New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought. These players are joined later in the play by the comic devil Titivillus who strives to make Mankind's attempt to lead a good life all the more difficult. *Mankind* invites its audience not only to recognise sin and penance as a compulsive cycle, but also to participate in it through their viewing pleasure (Clopper, 1974).

The play lacks a central organising structure, unfolding choreographically through a series of – often scatological – spectacles. In contrast to other dramatic works of the period, *Mankind* incorporates elements of Mumming – that silent,

masked, transgressive-comedic performance of folk festivities (Denny, 1974). The theatrical form of the strange, eerie machinations of the Mummers plays in *Mankind* bodies forth the folk rituals performed on Plough Monday. Once a year in the dead and dark of early January a small group of strange, disguised figures would emerge in procession from the hidden recesses of the landscape to enact an inscrutable, improvised ritual drama at a series of unannounced stations. *Mankind* is replete with the tropes of the Mummers plays. The players improvise, make regular calls for space and room, and the tone is lewd and vulgar. This form led *Mankind* to be largely excluded from serious analyses of mediaeval drama until the mid-twentieth century. Critics saw the play as a degraded example of the morality play form and argued that the lack of a central organising principle, use of extraneous improvisation and vulgarity indicated lack of sophistication in a manner that could only appeal to an uneducated rural audience (Kochanska Stock, 1975).

More recent scholarship argues that the spatial configurations that *Mankind* borrows from the Mummers plays work not only to constellate the divine and the demonic with the mundane and material, but also to dissolve plot from character (Garrison, 2019). *Mankind* stages the subsumption of efficacious human action in the spatial dramaturgy of secular space. As the character Mankind attempts to till his plot, the vices remind him of the fruitlessness of his labour, for he will never make a living from it (lines 351-75). We can thus understand the play as giving physical form to theosophical and philosophical concerns in the Fen region of the fifteenth century regarding the spiritual and social regulation of ‘true labour’

in a landscape where human actions were steadily being deprived of value and meaning.

The exclusion of *Mankind* from scholarly debates mirrors the exclusion of Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony* from the classical philosophical canon. I propose that these texts do not represent failed literary attempts but rather an oppressed rural aesthetic that is obscured in the formation of a secular state. Indeed, the Mumming elements of discontinuity, mute power and choreographic forms persist in literary and theoretical representations of the Fens to this day. Caryl Churchill's *Fen* (2016) also uses a small group of actors to create allegorical formations with a cryptic plot in order to stage the mourning of the fieldhands of the 1980s. The mythical vices of *Mankind* are replaced in Churchill's play by ghosts trapped in the landscape. This theme intensifies in Daisy Johnson's collections of short stories *Fen* (2017) and *The Hotel* (2021) in which the material elements of the Fen landscape – houses, hotel rooms and ponds – trap human lives in the Fens in cyclical compositions of trauma and mourning without resolve.

In both Churchill and Johnson's *Fen* as well as in Graham Swift's *Waterland* (2010) we see human agency in this landscape transmuted into repetitious actions, gestures divorced from meaning in a landscape saturated by 'nothing'.

I propose that in the fifteenth century introduction of secular property management to the monastic estate, it is possible to locate a set of allegorical mechanisms of the Fen fields that persist in the spatio-temporal constellation of the present – precisely that of a specific form of emptiness and the destruction of experience that I refer to as the 'monocultural arrangement'. This occurred

through the material and ideological formation of the Fen landscape in the Gregorian reform into a conduit for the transmission of a Christian drama of a unified England. This unified state and its emergent political class, grounded in the right of private property, set the stage for the emergence of the bureaucrat – that ‘proto-typical corporate person’ who exercises absolute control and none at all. In the figure of the Reeve we see the prehistory of the estate managers who appear in Caryl Churchill’s *Fen* as Mr Takaii, who aims to exploit this area for profit. Like Cronos, this figure cuts time and space in the Fens into agricultural parcels that simultaneously sever and bind space into a stage of ideas – a rubble heap where all human deeds are divorced from their salvic ends.

Landscape Observation Five.



When I take in a landscape much of my appreciation of it is based on how good it is for wildlife. There's no doubt that in this respect the Fen landscape is much poorer than it was prior to drainage, and that more recently the arable fens have also deteriorated as a place for wildlife. Having said that the Fens are still a bit special. The arable areas have more open country species like corn buntings and yellow wagtails than in other English landscapes, and the reed-filled ditches are alive with reed warblers, reed buntings, water voles and otters.

And of course, the Fens are not entirely flat, you try counting the flocks of foraging bewicks and whooper swans from Russia and Iceland, even in the apparently flat fields many of the swans will be all or partly obscured in dips or behind ridges.

Having large numbers of large birds in the landscape is an important part of it, and not only do the Fens have the wild swans, nowadays there are flocks of cranes. It's difficult to relax on a train journey when you hope that the next field could

have ten or twenty cranes gleaning the maize stubble. The other big change to the Fen landscape that I have seen over the last 20 years is the return of large birds of prey to the Fen skies, it is now quite common but always a pleasure to see marsh harriers quartering the fields or buzzards soaring over them.

The small variations in slope and height that exist out there, sometimes so subtle that a non-Fen dweller will not spot them, often have a really interesting explanation. The peat soils of the Black Fen are mostly gone from around Whittlesey, the washes are the last surviving area of Upper Peat in this part of the Basin. When these peaty soils are drained of water they quickly shrink and when you replace the water with air, it is like putting a log on a fire, it just oxidises away to nothing, it's only after heavy rain that the land appears black again.

The courses of long extinct rivers snaking through the Fens are now picked out by the ribbons of silt deposited in their channels. These gentle ridges are known as roddons, clear to me not just because of their height but also because of the different soil colour, pale and creamy contrasting with the black land, and firm enough for the first farmers to plant their houses on. A few years ago, I visited a friend whose house sits on a roddon. He was growing barley in the field next to his house, and in the central gully of the roddon (the very last channel used by the river before it stopped flowing) the wind had concentrated and flattened the barley, it looked like the River Nene had been flowing that way only a few days before, not two thousand years ago. Walking across this field later in the year when it had been harvested and ploughed, we found shards of Roman pottery, and even the pelvis bone of a long dead beaver. Fenland is an archaeological treasure trove with a prehistoric landscape buried just out of sight. Archaeologists working near Whittlesey have recovered the houses built on stilts, the canoes, tools and buckets

of people living here three thousand years ago when it was a swamp and dominated by water. Armed with this knowledge, when I look across the Fens it is just about possible to imagine the scene, a huge expanse of marsh with meres, rivers, and swampy woods, filled with wildlife and exploited by people.

The English Fens have lost much of their watery character, and I think that is a shame, particularly when similar lower lying areas just across the Channel in Belgium, Holland and Germany, still have grassland, livestock and water filled ditches as common features of the landscape. However, fragments of this wetland do survive as islands in a sea of arable and these are the areas where I choose to spend my time, for me the best Fen landscapes have got to have water in them. The Nene Washes which is an area I know well, were constructed in the 17th century as flood storage for the river Nene, and they still flood fairly regularly but not all the time. So, it is not like looking at a flooded gravel pit which is always under water, it is a landscape that changes dramatically, depending on whether it is flooded or not, and people come out of Whittlesey and from further afield to appreciate a good flood.

When it is not flooded the Washes are an expanse of grazing marshes, dotted with cattle during the summer. There are hundreds of small fields divided by miles of water-filled ditches, no fences, and no hedgerows in this type of landscape. The fields were laid out when the washes were created and so are almost without exception neat rectangles, and the ditches dead straight. This is not to everyone's taste but there is a beauty in the geometry and tidiness of the landscape. Trees often brighten up a landscape, but they are not traditional to the washes and all the key washland wildlife is associated with grassland and negatively associated with trees, so we tend to manage them out of the landscape. Again, a treeless

landscape is not to everyone's taste, but I like traditional, and I know what the wildlife is looking for, so I like to see grazing meadows looking like this, and I know they stretch all the way across the North European Plain, to Lubeck and beyond! I don't doubt that someday the sea level will rise, and we'll have to abandon what we do on the Wash and it may become a huge reed filled mere. This would be nice and interesting for lots of things but at the moment the washes are one of the most important sites in the country for godwits, spotted crakes, cranes and snipe so that's what we manage for.

A lot of people feel very strongly about the wind turbines, but they don't seem to notice the pylons that blight so much of the landscape. The way I see it is that for hundreds of years there were windmills here, but they became redundant and were lost from the landscape, so people aren't used to seeing them but now they're back in a modern form. My friend Bob swept all the glasses off the pub table "That" he said, "is how the Fens should look", then he put all the glasses back, "and this is how it looks now!" I think they're quite elegant looking, and unlike the electricity pylons you can actually see them working, it's just a shame they are so massive and dominate the landscape.

March Farmers is a seven hundred acre holding that has been used for growing potatoes since the 1950s. When we took it on in 2008, we phased out the arable and put it back to grass, introduced the sheep and the cattle and raised the water levels, returning it to what much of the Fens looked like for most of their history. What we're trying to do is get a wide-open expanse, this is virtually a landscape scale nature conservation – to me the Fens should be full of grassland, birds, livestock, it has got to have an element of water in it to make it really nice. I love to see ditches that are full of water, you go out into the Fen at the moment and

there'll be thousands of miles of ditches but they're mostly deep, steep sided and very often dry. The best ones are the bigger, water-filled drains, and there's a huge amount of pleasure to be had from looking down into them from a bridge and seeing the abundance of fish and plant life.

In winter the Washes are home to tens of thousands of ducks, swans and waders, down here from the north, some are still here at the start of spring and the nesting season when snipe and the godwits are displaying and migrant birds are returning from Africa. It is wonderful, but it gradually becomes quieter as the spring progresses into summer. The Washes are rarely entirely empty and quiet, in mid-May we start turning out cattle, it's very time consuming looking after hundreds of cattle but they look great, to me a landscape without livestock can be very empty.

Just as it is often the glade in the wood or the crag on a rolling moorland that becomes the focus of attention, so it is on the washes that the few trees there are have a disproportionate impact on the landscape and you can't help but be drawn to them. The Decoy Wood was planted a hundred or so years ago for shooting. It's not what I'm managing for but to me it looks absolutely gorgeous. On the edge where the trees have been falling across the ditch and into the field the cattle have created a really neat browse line and rubbed themselves against the bigger branches, it's a very strange and beautiful spot with buzzards mewing overhead and a strong smell of water mint. When the iris is in flower it looks stunning. It is like a small version of the large and ancient swampy forests of Poland, an almost a primeval landscape with water, reed, sweet grass and willows. I saw my first English otter there in 2006. The woods have nesting herons and cormorants, and they make some of the weirdest noises you've ever heard a bird make. White willow, crack willow, hawthorn, buckthorn grow here and there's a pool in the

middle. Even though most of my work is in the open I love the little bit of woodland, there's a chance of seeing something really special like a tree creeper, a different suite of birds completely from those found on the grassy fields.

The thing about the Fens and particularly us working out on the washes, because there is no shelter, if it is a cold, windy or rainy day you get cold and wet, if it is a hot sunny day, you get sun burnt and dehydrated. A feature of the Fens is that the wind blows, it can get extremely cold and yet it can get extremely hot in summer.

Just a fortnight ago we buried the power cables which crossed the washes as we were losing swans and other birds to the power lines. They'd feed on the arable farms in the day, on the potatoes and sugar beet tops and they'd be flying in at dusk and hitting those power lines, killing themselves. You could see the dead swans but there'd have probably been loads of other dead birds that were less obvious. So, we've had the power lines buried and it's one of those things, now they've gone it's like they were never there, it is difficult to appreciate how much the landscape has been improved without them.



THE DESERT.

6.1 A Bear Trap(ped).

The fifteenth century morality play *Mankind* is thought to have been staged on Plough Monday – the first Monday after Epiphany (6th January) – in the Cambridgeshire and Norfolk villages on the Silt Fen between Ely and Kings Lynn (Lester, 1981: xii). The strange choreography of *Mankind* uses many devices associated with Mummers plays – in particular improvisation, doubling, dancelike movement and disrupted narrative. The Mummers plays themselves are documented from the thirteenth century onwards but are widely believed to be a continuation of pre-Christian festivities, marking the end of winter and the beginning of the agricultural year. Precisely "a survival of the primitive Ritual Pattern, combining the twin elements of (a) the Combat of the Seasons and (b) the

Death-and-Resurrection of the god of fertility” (Gaster, 1961: 64-65). There is evidence of Plough Monday being a pre-reformation celebration in which votive offerings were proffered to the agricultural workers as well as to the fields, the farm animals and equipment for the agricultural year ahead (Frampton 1989). Though no real evidence exists regarding the historical roots of this form of Mumming, it appears in documentary evidence in rural communities throughout Europe at key points of the agricultural year from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century when, in England, legislation against begging led local councils to ban the practice (Irvine 2018).

In Whittlesey on the north-west edge of the Fenland region, the Plough Monday festival took the form of a ‘straw bear’ play. In the nineteenth century this play consisted of the selection of a man or boy from the community, who was bound in lengths of tightly twisted straw bands to form a ‘bear’. Two sticks were fastened to his shoulders, meeting in a point above his head where the straw was wound to form a cone. Inside the bear the chosen individual was unable to see or move freely. A chain was fastened around his armpits and in this way he was led through the streets of Whittlesey. Sometimes the bear was made to ‘dance’ in front of houses for offerings of beer, food and money, as part of improvised Mummers plays that also incorporated costumed men with sooted faces, ploughs and music. However there is no evidence of any continuity of tradition or form of the festival from year to year (Irvine 2018).

Around eighty years after the suppression of the Plough Monday festivities at Whittlesey, the Straw Bear festival was revived in 1980, inspired by the ‘folk revival’ of the 1970s that saw English culture assemble multiple fragments of a ‘pagan’ past under a new commercial guise. Cleaved from its ritual function, the

frightening elements of the play are now subsumed. It is now an honour rather than a trial to 'drive' the 'bear' costume which is now affixed to a frame that prevents the wearer from undue discomfort. The procession winds its neat way through the streets of Whittlesey to the delight of a crowd of orderly spectators. The straw bear is now a permanent fixture in the town's urban fabric, commemorated in the petrified form of a statue. The uniqueness of the straw bear's ritual form is held in a devitalised image that adorns t-shirts, keyrings, and mugs.

The propagation of the straw bear as a static and empty image, divorced from the "location of its original use value" (Benjamin 1969c:6) intensified in the mid-2010s when the fashion designer Christopher Shannon used a frozen and empty image of the straw bear on the invitation for his SS13 show invite. Vogue magazine reported that:

On the invitation to Christopher Shannon's Spring show was an image from James Pearson-Howes' series "British Folk," about, in the words of the photographer, the "darker, more obscure cultural traditions that persist in the U.K." In the picture, a man kitted out like some kind of Abominable Scarecrow trips through a scad of normally dressed locals in a U.K. town somewhere or other. "I think that guy's called the Idiot," Shannon said by way of explanation backstage after the show. "It's basically a drunken race."

The shapes of the pieces themselves were rather conventional, as Shannon admitted backstage. They're elasticized shorts, collared shirts, polos, and jean jackets, kept simple, he insisted, because he wants them to be worn so. And according to one of his retailers, seen grinning his way out the show, that, for all their manic energy, is what keeps them selling briskly.

(Schneier, 2012)

The next year the same image provided a focal point for fashion designer Liam Hodges – whose collections go by names such as 'Morris Nomads' and 'Druid Road' – and photographer James Pearson-Howes in their exhibition *Ceremony*. As part

of their exhibition the pair produced contemporary garments, prints, images and video featuring Whittlesey's straw bear. In an interview with Vice magazine, Hodges and Pearson-Howes were asked about the meaning of the straw bear and its ritual, they responded:

Let's not beat around the bush, most people just go to these things to get pissed. But I'm sure it is rooted in pagan fertility rituals... Nowadays it's just a celebration of local culture I guess.

(Kissick 2014)

The Mummers play that once acted, regardless of origin, as a performance of radical contingency – a moment in the calendar marked off for a unique performance – in the Fen landscape has been held in empty time, “pried from its shell, its aura destroyed.” (Benjamin, 1969: 5). It seems that the closer the focus hones in on the image of Whittlesey's straw bear, the further away its reciprocal gaze is situated. This is not only true for the cultural practice of the Mummers play in the Fen landscape, but for the landscape itself. This chapter explores the manners in which technology and politics have aimed to produce a consistently productive system of fields in the Fens, and how these attempts have resulted in strange reversals – the undermining of their own significances and uses over time. Benjamin's term ‘aura’, I argue, is key to understanding not only the Fen landscape but also the manner in which the attempt to produce food always reveals a technological and political system which – as it moves closer to the source of boundless production – always simultaneously dissipates and creates distance between production and its organic source.



6.2 Strange temporalities.

In the late summer of 2018 John, an ecologist from Norwich, joined me to walk from March in mid Fenland to Christchurch in the south of the region. We walked through miles and miles of fields along the River Nene, where a traveller site sits on the edge of the market town of March, before the countryside opens into an expanse of open fields, temporalised by the swooping sound of wind farms.

This region was at the forefront of agricultural change and was acknowledged widely during the late eighteenth century as the birthplace of ‘modern’ farming. From the 1790s, enclosure of the Fenland commons, improvements in arterial drainage, and – from the late nineteenth century onwards – the spread of steam drainage meant that by the early twentieth century most of this fertile land was converted to arable land producing mainly wheat and potatoes. The Silt Fens to the north of March developed as a wide fruit growing district centring on the

orchards of Wisbech, where cooking apples and plums were grown to be sent to the north of England or used in local jam factories. The fields that John the ecologist and I walked through on that September day are today home to crops of cereals (wheat and barley), root crops (potatoes, carrots and sugar beet) and brassicas (sprouts, cabbages and cauliflowers). The structure of the past however, remains – despite its unreachability.

Currently 87 percent of the soils in the wider Fen area are classified as grade one and grade two agricultural land, and this drained landscape is home to an estimated four thousand farms. The previous system of smallholdings has given way in recent years to large scale agricultural management with most farms consisting of over a hundred hectares of land (Defra, 2010). This trend of managed farmland seems to be increasing. 2000 to 2009 showed a decrease in the number of principal farmers and an increase in the number of salaried managers (Prince, 2012). A significant portion of farmland in the Fenland area is currently registered either to the Cambridgeshire County Farms Estate or private offshore limited companies. The interwar schemes in which small plots of land were leased by the state to individual veterans has given way to management of the Fen farms as capital investment.

As we walked John posed the rhetorical question “What is the countryside for? Growing food or letting nature live?” Intensive farming, he explained, utilises a combination of pesticides and fertilisers to develop a monoculture which ensures the crop gets maximum nutrition whilst having nothing to compete with. This method of managing nature results in:

The very green grass you see here, the abundance of nettles, the duck weed over the surface of the river, these are all signs that fertilisers have left

high levels of nitrates in the soil. This results in low plant diversity because species like nettles can take advantage of the high levels of nitrates quickly- nothing can graze on them, and they become *entrenched*.

John is referring here to an arrangement in which the idea of a living nature synthesises with its value under a capitalist modality in a manner which disintegrates both concepts, resulting in a sense of ambiguous disorientation. The Fen fields through which we walked that day are a deceptive totalisation of constellating material conditions. These conditions are at once specific to localised and temporalised experience as it hurtles through the lens of wider technological and political chronologies. John continued:

What you see here is a biodiversity desert. This is a man-made remote place. It is weird, because in some ways it is wilder than actual wild places. I mean even time feels funny, it feels like it is moving slower. We passed that wind farm ages ago, but it still looks so close [...] There is no *aspect* here; no perspective, no height, no timeframe. Aspect is really important for biodiversity- you can have the same soil conditions and rainfall, but different sides of the hill will be home to different species because of different light and dark conditions.

Typically, a natural Fen has a high level of species diversity because there is a structure, different patches where it is wetter or drier, different soils, different heights due to trees keeling over and rotting – open and closed [...] but in draining they took all of that structure away [...] Everything extraneous has been stripped from this landscape to maximise the growing potential of the land. This means there are no hedges here, which also affects biodiversity as so many things would grow and live there. Even the trees we can see don't look like nice mature woodland – they look like trees grown for materials and cut down as and when necessary. In other words, they're another industrial monoculture in this place.

In other rural environments I've worked in there has been evidence of the usefulness of agri-environment schemes which compensate farmers to let strips of farmland go unused for production instead providing a home for wildflowers between crops to mitigate the detrimental effects of monoculture and provide habitat for other things. In eight hours of walking, I have seen no evidence of the use of this here.

John repeatedly likened the monocultural arrangement of the Fen fields to a desert landscape during our walk together. This observation created a strange

(dis)continuity between the replication of form and evocation of images from St. Anthony of Egypt – the famous Desert Father widely considered to be the founder of organised Christian monasticism – in Felix’ hagiography of St Guthlac. In one passage depicting Guthlac’s ascetic practices in the Fen, Felix actively merges this place with the landscape of the desert fathers of the fourth century:

[...] from the time when he began to inhabit the desert [the Fen] he ate no food of any kind except that after sunset he took a scrap of barley bread and a small cup of muddy water.

(in Colgrave, 2009: 28)

The aura of these fields stands in a metonymic relation to their use. It does not derive only from their current iteration as an industrial zone of food production but also from a long-term material relationship with the body of England – precisely, as an expression of an exterior within. This site of arable production figuratively instantiates an indexical dimension between the politics of the nation state and the site of corporeal action and necessity. Arable farming, the monocultural arrangement in which grain and vegetables are grown, carries an antithetical trace that is dependent on the constellation in which it is deployed. It is always simultaneously a remnant of history – if only of the previous season in which it was planted – and a simple mark of renewal. The Fen fields are an obscured montage of auras and traces, a surface expression of both the interminable nature of history and the constant presence of contingent forces.

When John the ecologist described the strange temporal slips produced by the lack of aspect in the landscape between the Fenland market towns of March and Chatteris – “even time feels funny [...] we passed that wind farm ages ago but it still looks so close [...] There is no aspect here; no perspective, no height, no

timeframe” – the trace of St Anthony’s desert appears, detached from previous tradition but nevertheless active in the present. The lawlike optics of the neat geometric strips of fields retranslate the notion of the salvation of this landscape, as seen in the Gregorian and Anglo-Saxon Christian hagiographies of this area, into a form of absence. This “landscape that most approximates to Nothing” (Swift, 2015:) is a product of history cloaked in natural form which perishes the relationship between the landscape and human perception. This is bodied forth in the very materiality of the land, as the nature reserve site manager, Harry described to me:

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

The effect of this degeneration can be seen in the disorientating nature of the contemporary Fen landscape, a site both awash with history and totally lacking in historical context – the rear-view mirror and windscreen showing the same image doubled – so that it is rendered incomprehensible. In John’s terms:

When, as is the case here, a place has no biodiversity it is impossible to work out what happened and when. It removes perspective.

The loss of relationship between signs and meaning result in a landscape in which signs abound which cannot signify. The ecological materiality of the Fen landscape manifests in a traumatic landscape where the past reappears endlessly but fails to provide a coherent sense of meaning. Another participant, Mike (a photographer from Whittlesey), described the constant presence of history: “There’s not many places like the Fens where you can see the ghosts of previous landscapes”. What John the ecologist articulated in his explanation of aspect is

that this history fails to manifest in a structured meaning, or a sense of how this place cohabits spatially and temporally with other times and places. Thus, the lack of diversity here is experienced as an *internal* phenomenon, something immanent within this place rather than as a manifestation of structural trauma or a deficit in the wider socio-political landscape.

The landscape of the contemporary Fens in its ‘nothingness’ materialises in a lack of biodiversity, or indeed in John’s words “aspect”, which results from intensive farming practices – the management of nature through monocultural arrangements. The production of space in the Fen landscape centres around the enforced stabilisation of the rich, waterlogged soils – whether by monasterial houses in the attempted continuation of a Christian chronology, or by drainage and the deformation of biodiversity into a monocultural arrangement. This landscape can be understood as a sepulchre around a eutrophic corpse – perfectly preserved and held in empty time. Put another way, this monocultural arrangement is ekphrastic, imposed upon the Fen landscape’s mutable form in order to “still it” (Krieger, 1967). In this process the landscape “stages a paradoxical performance” (Steiner, 1988: 13–14) foretelling its own rupture at the point that contingency appears to have been banished. The technologies that have transformed this wetland into a ‘desert’ appear in John the ecologist’s statements as a qualitative transformation of nature itself: “nothing can grow here now without a life support system of fertilisers and pesticides”. On this soil which threatens always to flood or to combust as it dries, this monocultural arrangement is shot through with chips of its own undoing. As the totalitarian nature of its choreography intensifies, so too does the potential contingency held within its form.



6.3 “If they would cut us off no one would notice”

The effects of the technology that produces this monocultural arrangement of the Fens is not restricted to its vegetal life. A local farmer, Ken, described to me that:

In the 1970s, the sugar beets were a big crop. Originally sugar beet had to be what's known as a single crop. You'd plant a sugar beet seed and two or three plants would come up, you see it's multi germ. And you would have to have gangs of people with hoes separating these out so you got one plant every seven or eight inches, otherwise they would strangle one another, and you wouldn't get a proper sugar beet. So that required a lot of labour, separating the plants and also weeding. In May of each year the fields would be full of people with hoes and then they would go on to pick potatoes later. That stopped, when we got access to pesticides and herbicides to combat the weeds, and later the plant breeders produced a seed where only one plant came up each time, instead of three. These 'monogerm' sugar beets meant that suddenly we didn't need all these people. In a very short space of time plant technology meant that we could do away with all that labour.

The incorporation of scientific technology into the arable process can be understood here not only in Marx's terms as replacing "not some particular tool

but the hand itself” but also as a deformation of “species being” that materialises in an ontological shift (Marx 1977: 507). In Franz Kafka’s short story *Up in the Gallery* we see an earlier iteration of the transmutation of human elements into industrial components when the audience applaud “from hands which were *really* steam hammers” [emphasis added] (1988 [1919]: 436). Like Kafka’s audience – whose hands still clap – this plant engineering technology does not fully reify the physis of the Fenland fields, rather this living element is petrified into the ekphrastic gesture of the monocultural arrangement. The primary essence inherent in the gesture of vegetal growth is suspended in a quotation of this action – in a technologically modified seed that functions as an interpretation of ideal growth and recalls John the ecologist’s question: “what is the countryside for, growing food or letting nature live?”

This ontological shift renders the Christian discourses of the monasterial Fens available in the present spatial formation of this landscape. A congealed form of the salvation myths found in Bede’s *Vita St Æthelthryth* and Felix’ hagiography of Guthlac can be found in the plant engineering rhetoric of the mid-twentieth century:

God told Noah of the beasts of the earth, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea: "Into your hand they are delivered. as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything." Or, as 1975 Nobel laureate and M.I.T. microbiologist David Baltimore put it, "We can outdo evolution".

(Kloppenburg 2004: 3)

The immediate future augurs the introduction of genetically edited crops into the Fen fields. In September 2021 the UK announced that it will join other countries such as Brazil, the USA, Australia and Japan who are producing and trading genetically edited crops such as high-fibre wheat,

rape seed oil that is herbicide tolerant and tomatoes that can be left on the vine for longer. Potatoes and apples that do not bruise are being developed and may be available on UK shop shelves within the next five years. This move marks the biggest divergence by the UK away from existing European laws since leaving the EU, which has banned the technology for years on the grounds that it might be unsafe.

The use of gene technology affects arable sites in the UK and elsewhere on a more general level. However, we find the singularity of this landscape as a site that always both follows and exceeds other arable sites in the repetition of the theological repetition that continually seeks a certain restoration or reproduction that nevertheless remains elusive. The singularity at work in the Fen region is always experienced negatively through experiences of perpetual loss that are simultaneously embodiments of anticipatory hope.

The monocultural arrangement of the Fen landscape in anticipation of the introduction of this new technology appears as the antithesis of an Arcadian landscape – precisely a site that discourages the contemplation of aura. This industrial arable landscape manifests as an exterior at the centre of the English rural – that “strange weave of space and time that encompasses the viewer at peace within nature, gently” (Benjamin: 518-19). Like the development of military technology, the progression of agricultural technology cultivates phantasies of control over nature – the notion that “we can outdo evolution” (Kloppenborg, 2004: 3). The monocultural choreography of the Fen landscape in this present moment reanimates and retranslates the ‘nothingness’ of the Christian desert and recreates the manmade aura of the monastic Fens. In this denatured landscape aura is readmitted through the revivification of history in the form of disconnected

images – such as the ‘pagan’ ritual of the Whittlesey Straw Bear festival – marking the landscape with an inward-looking phantasm of an authentic and mystically charged English ethnic identity.

The speed of the profound transformations that can now be engineered in living organisms, as well as the social effects which accompany them – in the words of Ken the farmer: “suddenly we didn't need all these people. In a very short space of time [...] we could do away with all that labour” – stands in tension with the experience of the wider landscape, in which as John told me “time feels as though it is moving slower.” A participant, Callum, described the way in which this temporal perception places this place outside of time: “[w]e're very, very behind. That's like no one ever thinks of the East.” This sense of detachment – a landscape torn from social context accreted in the observation of another participant, Rose. She described that “this place is like a third hand or fourth leg. If they would cut us off no one would notice.”

The impressions from my participants of the Fen region as a monocultural arrangement standing in empty time is perhaps best summed up by Richard – a Traveller Liaison Officer for Cambridgeshire County council who told me:

I'm not saying this is an area that time forgot, but we had no commonwealth migration and received none of the benefits that other places did from that diversity of values and ways of life.

The wider Fen region did not experience the cultural diversification that the post second world war period brought to many of the cities – London, Glasgow, Liverpool, Plymouth, Cardiff, Belfast and Southampton, Birmingham, and Bristol – that were blitzed by Luftwaffe bombs during that war. The market towns of Whittlesey, March, Chatteris and Wisbech instead operated as an active

underside to intensifying cultural heterogeneity of Britain's urban areas. I discussed this issue with Clare, a fifty-year-old woman from London who relocated to Fenland in the 1980s: "the Peterborough effect. That's how it all started". Clare told me:

Oh I'm showing my age now! The thing was, Peterborough was a city but it wasn't best known. It was more like a little village really. And new buildings went up, and people who were trying to get out of London were encouraged to come to the area around Peterborough - to a new home, a new job. That was in the early 80s. It was a development corporation that started it. And for a long time Peterborough was called Little London because a lot of Londoners came up. I think it was mainly - this is going to sound racist - white people trying to get away from the multiracial scene in London. Because there was still this big thing, you know they used to call people darkies, there was still a big thing about the migration that started after the war. You know, people didn't like living with them. They had every right to live there but...

'The Peterborough Effect' was a slogan used by the Peterborough Development Corporation in the 1970s and 1980s to promote the city and resulted in a dispersed internal migration across the Fen region. In an interview with Callum in Wisbech, he described that:

I think the older generation stay here because it's disconnected. I think lots of people came here to get away from it all. To hide away.

The Peterborough Development Commission produced a series of adverts during the 1980s that starred the actor Roy Kinnear as a Roman Centurion. This reanimation of the image of a Roman Britain operated in tandem with the folk revival of the 1970s that resurrected Whittlesey's Straw Bear festival – performances of a racialised phantasm of white English ethnicity. In 'The Peterborough Effect' commercial the stage is set with a summer garden party which is gate-crashed by Roy Kinnear's Latin-speaking Roman Centurion. These

images condense into an advertisement of an ‘authentically English’ experience outside of and in contrast to the multicultural metropolis. At this moment in the 1980s, during which new agricultural technologies intensified the reproduction of the monocultural arrangement in the Fen region, this revivification of historical imagery can be understood as the creation of a fake aura that veils and subsumes the reciprocity of elements that maintain this landscape. The social reality of this region is pried from its history and suffused with an ideological mystification.

The use of Roman imagery in ‘The ‘Peterborough Effect’ commercial can be understood as an inversion of the citation of Rome by nineteenth century intellectuals – including but not limited to, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Curzon, Arthur Balfour and Rudyard Kipling – as the justification for imperial expansion under the guise of ‘bringing civilisation’ to the colonies. In 1980s Britain we see the disconnection and the temporal idiosyncrasies of the Fen region’s monocultural arrangement used as the site of a phantastical retreat from multicultural urban life in which ‘English identity’ might continue, in petrified form in a landscape held in empty time.



6.4 Languor

The internal migration into the Fen region in the 1980s – the flight of a particular demographic from Britain’s liberal multicultural urban centres – explains in part the persistence of a Conservative political monoculture that is also present within the area. The Northeast Cambridgeshire seat in which the Fenland district sits has been a Conservative stronghold since 1987. Whilst the Liberal party held this seat and its previous iteration (the Isle of Ely) between 1973 and 1987, this area has never been represented by a Labour member of parliament. In the 2019 election, the Conservative MP Steve Barclay – who has been in situ since 2010 – won a strong majority in every ward in the seat. In my interview with Callum, he described the political attitude of his father. He told me that:

[...] this place has been pretty much a safe Tory vote for years and years and years, and I've talked to my Dad about it. My dad hates our Conservative MP, absolutely hates him, but he still votes for him. I asked him recently "why did you vote for him even though you don't like him?"

And he said "Because what else will I do? He's gonna win anyway. So, what's the point?" My Dad's friends share that view. They might hate the system. But it's their system.

The political proclivities described by Callum can be understood as a manifestation of what Esther Leslie describes as 'the conformism of the left' (2000). The industrial rural context of the Fen region fleshes out this concept in new ways. The reform acts of the mid nineteenth century (in particular the Representation of the People Act 1884) that brought suffrage to the urban working-classes, neglected rural workers. Further to this, the rise of the Labour party was a direct response to the growing political power of the urban workingclasses. The formation of the party in the late nineteenth century emerged from an admixture of the trade union movement and socialist organisations. The property restrictions of the 1884 extension of the franchise nullified the political power of the working poor of the Fen region, where the agriculture-dominated labour market had not generated a propertied bourgeoisie. A large proportion of people who lived and worked in the Fens were agricultural labourers and tenant farmers who remained disenfranchised whilst the (often absent) upper class landholders in this region retained plural votes (one for each constituency in which they owned the requisite amount of property) until 1948. The political power of the Conservative party in this area was not entrenched prior to the interwar period – many smallholders in the area were Liberal supporters.

The congealing of Conservative politics in the Fen region can be at least partly attributed to the success of Labour, who supplanted the Liberal party as the main opposition party during the interwar period. The Conservative and Labour twoparty alignment that emerged in 1935 led to a lack of choice for working-class

rural voters who were presented with a choice between a Conservative political ideology rooted in political and economic liberalism, favoured by landowning farmers or a Labour Party doctrine – rooted in Marxist theory – that adhered to a conception of progress centred on the trade unions and the urban workingclasses. The Marxist conception of development in which the Labour party grounded its ideology can be understood as “precisely that of the potential of historical man to grow past the sky without overturning it” (Benjamin, 1921:). I am referring here specifically to the acceptance of – and lack of interrogation or protest regarding – the conditions of rural workers in favour of the development of a politically active urban working-class. In this framework the turning point of history, in which old systems of oppression are challenged and overcome, is understood as occurring ‘at the last minute’ in the form of the industrial worker. I propose that the failure of the Labour party to engage with rural issues has manifested in a ‘beartrap’ in which politics remain trapped in the destructive framework of “capitalism as religion”. This conception of progress – that ensnares the potential for real political revolution in the monocultural arrangement of the Fen fields – was articulated by Paul, a Labour representative from Whittlesey. He told me that:

[...] I perceive Labour ideals as standing for the representation of industrialised working people. I think perhaps we could offer something to brick workers in Whittlesey and perhaps railway employees in March. But agricultural workers, I don't know...

I don't know what it is about land workers, they don't seem to perceive what Labour could do for them. They seem to think that the things that benefit industrial working people don't apply to them. I suppose I haven't thought about it enough. There is perhaps an element of paternalism, like: "we're in hock to them to a large extent if they're housing us and we're going to go along with whatever they say really". I think there is an element of that, but I'm not aware of any research by the Labour party into rural workers. I have no idea really.

The monocultural arrangement of the Fen region mediates – in spatial form – an understanding of time as duration. Within this temporal framework the Labour party appears as the aspiring bourgeoisie cushioned in the world, in and through the oppressed labour of agricultural workers. The auratic appearance of the Labour party as ‘universal liberator’ is reliant on agricultural technologies old and new alike. Not only gene technologies, pesticides, and fertilisers, but also the scythe and the organisation of hands who pick, hoe and weed. The position of the rural worker was articulated by Ken, a local farmer who explained:

In the 1970s and 1980s some of the land workers were very unionised. But it wasn't the way that people in industrial places go on strike you know at the drop of a hat. There was a love of the land and a suspicion of Labour party activists and going on strike, which they felt could be self-defeating, especially at the moments like harvest when it would have the most impact. For them just to walk away and leave animals to suffer or a crop to rot, they couldn't do it.

You also must understand that land workers are often reliant on their employers for their accommodation, and it is on the actual farm. There isn't a commute of a few miles to a big factory and a distance from the impact of the strike [...] you're there, you're living it, you can see how the weather affects the crops. Working on the land makes agricultural labourers' *part* of the landscape and this makes them very reluctant to strike.

The grounding of the Labour party's ideology in Marxist theory reanimates the Aristotelian thesis that agricultural labour is not carried out by truly ‘human’ hands – although the Marxist position looks towards a ‘technological fix’ in lieu of slavery. However, as Ken the farmer explained to me, this future has so far been foreclosed in the Fen region due to the particular monocultural arrangements of this arable landscape:

In the Fens you do have these very high value crops which can be mechanised to a degree, but the thing is that crops are grown in the Fens but not anywhere else. This is a difficulty, you can put a huge amount of research into producing some wonderful machine, but there will not be

many customers for it. I used the technology with potatoes and sugar beet, but it is very difficult to mechanise some of these crops, and they do continue to require reliable hand labour.

The omission from political debate of the need for this ‘reliable hand labour’ – at the base of arguably the most important land for domestic food production in England – can be understood as both a generative force in, and a repercussion of, the auratic appearance of a ‘natural’ political monoculture. The production of space in the Fen region – whether under monasterial or monocultural arrangements – has persistently centred around the notion of a transcendental element that enables the manifestation of something from nothing. This transcendental element reveals itself here as the labour of ‘spectral workers’ – precisely workers who have not been granted political subjectivity. The political choices of Callum’s father – his support of the continuation of a Conservative monoculture – appears here as a symptom of what the Critchley (2006) refers to as ‘languor’. The monocultural formation of the Fens – not only in their arable arrangement but also in political proclivities – infuses the social life of this place with an unbearable gravity in an affective response to the exitlessness of existence in this landscape. It is no coincidence that Callum himself refers to the Fen landscape as “a beartrap”. This force manifests in a strange temporal perception and induces a languid sluggishness – a lethargy, a seeping inertia.

This languor was referred to variously by interview participants in the Fens as “a lack of aspiration”, “incuriosity”, “apathy” and “lassitude”. In conversation with Henry, a local Green party candidate, he referred to the 2009 report by the Electoral Reform Society that identified Fenland District Council in Cambridgeshire as “the worst offender” in England for denying the electorate a

choice of political representation. In 2019, twelve of the district's thirty seats sat in 'rotten boroughs' in which the Conservative candidate was guaranteed to win.

Henry opposed this reading, telling me that:

I think it's a bit of an unfair description. It's more like apathetic boroughs, the situation can only be down to apathy.

I think one of the issues here locally is the strength of the local Conservatives. If you belong to a political party, if you're interested in politics, then you're a Conservative, that's kind of the default.

The landowners, the business owners, tend to be Conservative in political orientation. And the politics gets passed down through generations as well. We've seen a certain amount of Conservative councillors whose son then becomes a Conservative councillor - you know they join the Masons, the Rotary Club. They're upper middle-class circles...

What you have to understand is that the Fenland region is made up of small, isolated communities. For example, you've got the secondary school here, which everybody in the area goes to. Everyone in March goes to this secondary school unless they go to the paid for Wisbech grammar school, which is a separate issue. But because everyone in the area goes to that school, then everyone grows up knowing every other child of their age in the area. So, everybody knows everybody. And so, you end up with a very inward-looking mentality towards things.

Everybody wants to fit in and going beyond Fenland for a lot of people locally is a kind of a place too far. What goes on outside of here, in the cities for example, is rather alien to the local people. There's a lot of people who just don't leave March. They might have a, you know, a trip to London once in their lifetime sort of thing. But you know, March is their home. And the same applies the other Fenland towns, they don't really get out very much.

There's a feeling here that there's no point in going to school because you need to learn to drive a tractor and get a job and, you know, make some money [...] kind of an idea that school is a waste of time. It's not for you. It's for you know, other people. There's almost a desire for people's children to be low achievers, like they were low achievers. It's kind of just accepted that you have your place and you're never going to be anything great. So therefore, there's no point in trying, because you're in a long line of succession of people that have not had the opportunity to do particularly well. Not that they couldn't achieve things, it's just that the social makeup has not allowed it.

I used to live in London, we moved up here twenty years ago. And I got the feeling when we arrived that we were moving back in time. It was like stepping back thirty years, attitudes, the way people live what people do. It was, it was just like how it used to be. And it's kind of like, the society

hasn't moved on and they're kind of stuck, not stuck in a time warp, they're not they're not stuck in the past. It's just that they're lagging behind.

It's how I imagine things were historically, where you have the ruling classes, the landowners and the workers and there was little crossover. And for the rest of the United Kingdom, the rest of perhaps the world, I don't know, certainly the EU, we've, we've kind of lost a lot of that class differential where people can get on if they want to. And just because you're born into wealth doesn't mean to say that you're going to be a great success, but that hasn't translated in Fenland to such an extent.

If you go down into Cambridge, it becomes very cosmopolitan. It becomes very fluid, south Cambridge as well, it's a completely different set up. So why here? Perhaps it is to do with a lack of employment opportunity. There's no great industry in the Fens apart from farming and general run of the mill type, minimum wage type jobs. There's nothing here to bring people out and move them upwards. There's nothing here of any great significance unless you've already own land, property, or business. It's like, there isn't anything here to offer anything above, simply getting a job. Things haven't moved on; things stay as they are in Fenland.



6.5 Vengeful hope.

The totalising nature of the Fen landscape in its current monocultural arrangement is ekphrastic in form. As the processes of mimetic reproduction – in which more and more of the same is produced – intensify. A moment of danger gestures. In the political arena this appears in the form of the Brexit vote, which has remade a perception of this area as cut off from the warp and woof of England. In doing so, a new space has opened up, simultaneously creating a sense of loss and the potential for contingency. Henry, the Green party candidate, described to me that “this results in low plant diversity because species like nettles take advantage of the high levels of nitrates quickly – nothing can graze on them, and they become entrenched”. The nettle, *Urtica dioica*, is entwined in our imaginations with notions of progress as ruin and the wastelands that growth can

leave in its wake. In its tendency to cause nuisance through taking up space in the form of large monospecific patches, the nettle calls to mind the melancholic and disruptive ‘calls for space’ of the Mummers plays. The literature scholar Leo Mellor (2011) refers to the entrenchment of nettles in the rubble heaps of post war London as an “enfolding verdancy”. In the *Rings of Saturn* – which constellates sites throughout the east of England in a galaxy of loss – Sebald invokes the image of the nettle in his description of “the deserted, soundless month of August” in which:

there is not a bird to be seen. It is as if everything was somehow hollowed out. Everything is on the point of decline, and only the weeds flourish: bindweed strangles the shrubs, the yellow roots of nettles creep onward in the soil, burdock stands a whole head taller than oneself, brown rot and greenfly are everywhere, and even the sheets of paper on which one endeavours to put together a few words and sentences seem covered in mildew.

(1995: 13)

Sebald draws on the image of the nettle as a symbol of natural decomposition, as it constellates with ‘unnatural’ composition in a spatialised temporality, that is measurable only through loss and absence. In the Fens, stands of nettles in their monospecific arrangements enact a mimicry rather than a mimesis of the exhausting semblance of denatured crops that stretch across the horizon. Nettles call for space around a de-auratised relationship with the landscape – they apply a break in the productive processes of the monocultural arrangement of this place. This ‘colonising species’ instigates a relational counterpoint between the landscape and its perceiver – nettles “need no description, they may be found by feeling, in the darkest night” (Culper, 1788). Entrenching themselves in the waste products of industrial monoculture, the nettle not only fixes nitrogen into the soil and provides much needed food and habitat for insects and birds. In its

monospecific – as opposed to *monocultural* – formation, the nettle embodies the resistance of nature as it occurs through the landscape in a series of irreducibly relative singularities (Weber, 2021). The temporal and singular event of the ekphrastic monoculture breaking into stands of nettles is also a repetition – their leaves appear in the form of the jagged toothed sickle that Gaia gifted to Cronos, in her plot to release herself from empty time.

Like Pandora's jar, the stands of nettles that disrupt the ekphrastic form of the Fen landscape flutter with Red Admiral, Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies: augurs of a vengeful hope.

Landscape Observation Six



The last cigarette of the working day.

I feel like the queen of the castle. Yeah, it's nippy as hell but it is glorious to be sat down rather than stood up.

Watching rabbits hopping around in the beautiful sunset.

So good to know I'll be home soon.

Sat in the smoking area facing into the field if I turn to the right a lorry just there. Bitterly cold, feels like your hands are freezing, so cold some smokers in the factory quit through the winter.

Wearing lots of layers so it feels heavy but I'm still cold.

Not quite sunset, beautiful orange hue across the sky.

Small grass field then you see these little brown rabbits.

There are trees at the bottom of the field, another factory beyond it, you can't see it but you can smell it.

Sometimes frying potatoes, sometimes powerful vile manure smell, even overwhelming the smell of cigarette smoke.

The potato factory smell is winding down for the day.

The trees cover where the sun sits in the sky, so it is only the clouds that catch the orange of the sun.

Rabbits, you catch sight of one.

A bird flies past and one stands up, then goes down, another pops up.

If you spot one, you'll see three or four.

They chase each other and wander up to me, come within a few feet but run away at a loud noise.

It's the end of the week.

I leave the smoking shack.

Walk in front of the building.

Little wall I sit on to wait.

White automatic doors open from the inside, reddish brick building in the front

Canteen, office, and stuff.

Metal side, as tall as a house. It is the factory part.

Tall for air conditioning.

The sky orange behind the building, I look at it and think “Thank fuck I’m out of there”.

Sitting on the wall waiting for my stepdad.

Watching the cars go by and people leaving.

The white van pulls up, my stepdad, inside smells like smoke and dirt.

We talk about my day and what is for tea, he teases me “We’re having food for tea”.

First of all, you see the factories, first my fruit factory, second the Potato factory

Then on the right a car scrap yard with lorries and stuff.

Round the corner turn left, B&M, McDonalds, Farms Foods, KFC, Tesco, You come along there, and everything gets enclosed by trees.

Straight over at the roundabout and onto the road.

Sky deeper in colour, orchard on the right, trees bare, thin and spindly branches.

A narrow road looks darker.

And the apple trees cast shadows.

We drive over old train tracks. Bump bump.

Old and neglected, overgrown.

It has not been used for a very long time, even the no entry signs are neglected and old.

Another orchard on the left.

Where the last one was maintained, here the trees are short and spindly and overgrown.

Even though the grass has died down in the cold, you can tell it hasn't been cut.

One tree leaning into the road.

A horse in the orchard.

Black and white, broken through from the travellers' field next door, no caravans, or people, just another horse.

And the kind of fly tipping you find on the edge of a junk yard, when people can't be bothered to carry rubbish in.

Houses, Horse fields on the other side of road: a white one, a brown one, one always wearing covers on eyes and body.

The sun is more towards the right side.

You get a flash of light as you pass the horses because it is open.

More houses, fields, trees.

An Equestrian centre, wide building, tall, with a pebble entrance.

Couple of cars, sign with a horseshoe.

It is starting to look dark – gloomy.

You still have the orangeness in the sky, because it takes a while to set, and the darkness starts to roll in.

Round two corners into trees, darkness, switch lights on.

No one looks after the trees, so it feels enclosed, making it too tight for another car to pass.

Out onto open wheat fields, short, little seedlings.

Not much grown, in the bitter cold.

The sun's to our right.

My stepdad taps me and says:

“Take a look at that sun”

There’s just the tip of the sun poking out and making the sky, our house silhouetted. Beautifully red.

Sheep and Alpaca in the field near my house.

Past the farmhouse - part nice, beautiful, new building: part old, fire damaged - but the farmer can’t get rid of it because bats live inside.

The clouds behind.

No longer orangeish.

The ones around the sun are deep red.

Silhouettes of houses in the distance.

We drive straight into it.

And arrive home.



SPECTRAL LABOUR

“The task of history is to get hold of the tradition of the oppressed.”

(Benjamin, 2006b:390)

7.1 A bleak picture

In September 2021, the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) reported widespread labour shortages across the UK’s food and drinks sector not only because of the Covid-19 pandemic but perhaps more pertinently due to Brexit and the UK’s new points-based immigration system. The NFU stated that 500,000 job vacancies

across the sector had resulted in higher costs for farmers, as well as record levels of food waste (National Farmers Union, 2021).

Farmers in the Fen region in the East of England described problems with attracting workers to the area. The vegetable grower Simon Naylor, who runs Naylor Farms in Spalding, Lincolnshire, was featured in *The Independent* describing his problems with finding workers. He said it was difficult attracting UK pickers to rural areas and had even offered to double the wages: “It’s a prime vegetable area” he said, “but getting people here, that’s another thing”.

(Chapman, 2021)

In October 2021, the Vice President of the NFU, Tom Bradshaw, said only 11 percent of seasonal workers in the 2020 season were UK residents and called on the UK government to increase the number of visas available under the Seasonal Worker Pilot (SWP) from 10,000 in 2020 to 30,000 in 2022 – voicing a hope that the scheme could be expanded further to help farmers in the future (National Farmers Union, 2021). The need for migratory labour to fulfil ‘low skilled’ jobs on farms and in food processing factories has been defined in part by the proposition that the domestic population will not do these jobs (Nye, 2017). However, the A8 integration that brought new EU workers onto British farms from newly integrated EU countries is very recent history. In 2008 an official from the Gangmasters Licensing Authority stated that “as recently as the 1990s, 95 percent of pickers on the flower farms in Spalding Lincolnshire were British but by 2008, 95 percent of the labour on these farms was performed by migrant workers from A8 countries” (Beattie, 2008: 25). This chapter proposes that there is a deficit of analysis regarding those who fulfilled these roles prior to 2004, when

the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – grouped together into the ‘Accession Eight’ or A8 – joined the EU.

Most existing EU member states chose to impose restrictions on the movement of workers from these newly integrated countries. Only Ireland, Sweden and the UK opened their labour markets to workers from the A8 countries immediately upon EU enlargement.¹³ In the UK, A8 workers were able to take up employment freely and legally after May 2004 as long as they registered with the Worker Registration Scheme, a simple procedure. The opening of the UK labour market to workers from these countries led to a rapid influx of migrants from these newly integrated countries. It has been estimated that at least half a million A8 nationals arrived in the UK between 2004 and 2011. This important social phenomenon disproportionately impacted the Fenland region in northern Cambridgeshire, where a rise in non-UK population, from 2,641 to 8,209, occurred between 2001 and 2011 (Krausova and Vargas-Silva, 2013). In real terms this resulted in a 113.5 percent increase in new migrant GP registrations in Fenland – from 585 in 2003/4 to 1,249 in 2013/14. Further to this, more migrant National Insurance registrations occurred in Fenland than migrant GP registrations, suggesting the real increase in population – particularly in towns such as Wisbech – was much higher than official figures suggest (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group & Cambridgeshire County Council, 2016).

¹³ Though the UK did not confer full rights - restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian migrants remained in place until 2014.

There has not been a huge growth in the industry of flower, soft fruit or vegetable production in the Fenland region in recent years. If anything, evidence suggests there has been a huge reduction in soft fruit farms and flower farms in the area since the 1980s. In 1989 – on the eve of his retirement as NFU Horticultural Secretary – Tony Godfrey, reflected on the ‘sad decline’ of soft fruit production in the Fen area, which he stated had halved in the area during his two decades in the role (Fenland Citizen, 1989). In 1997, Edward Newling, President of the Wisbech and District Fruit Growers Association, described a ‘bleak picture’ for the labourers in the area, stating that in the previous year a third of the remaining fruit picking jobs in the area were lost as crops failed and customers turned towards the import market for their fresh produce (Drayton, 1997). Although the area now has new crops – turning increasingly toward grain production in the late 1990s – there is no indication that there was a shift in production in the area that required a new migrant labour force prior to 2004.

In this chapter I read the recent history of agricultural labour in the Fen fields ‘against the grain’. Through doing so I identify the use of migrant labour in this landscape as a ‘new guise’ of older processes of agricultural labour exploitation. These older processes are understood here as precisely the use of ‘spectral labour’ – the chthonic foundation and mournful lining of the suffraged industrial labourer. The ‘spectral labourer’ of the Fen fields reveals historicised processes of the ‘natural history’ of agricultural work in a rapidly urbanising world. Although national press coverage in the late 1990s and early 2000s indicated that farms in Scotland and the west of England were struggling to recruit workers for picking and processing, local press coverage from the Fen region during 1990s and early 2000s demonstrates that this was not an evenly spread geographic phenomenon.

In the Fen region, domestic workers and regular Gypsy and Traveller communities relied on seasonal manual farm and factory work on Fen farms throughout the 1980s and 1990s. I will demonstrate in this chapter that as these populations were interned in the 'beartrap' of citizenship. Their labour on the Fen farms was met with hostility from wider social structures such as the benefits systems and local county councils – stranding these communities in a state of 'petrified unrest'.

The experiences and treatment of A8 migrants in agricultural labouring roles is an important and salient topic of research. Over the past decade a variety of research projects have investigated the working and living conditions of migrant workers in the UK. These studies are inclusive of, but not limited to, work around the indifference of the British government to the exploitation of the migrant workforce (Wilkinson, 2012), the spatial embeddedness of temporary migrant workers' everyday lives and agency (Rogaly, 2009), labour contracts (Rogaly, 2008), the rhetoric surrounding the 'need' for migrants' skills (Ruhs & Anderson, 2012), forced labour and trafficking (Anderson and Rogaly, 2005) and social exclusion (Wilkinson & Craig, 2011). Further to this Sam Scott (2013a, 2013b) has explored the manner in which A8 migration has functioned as a regulatory project, creating queues and hierarchies between low paid domestic and migrant labourers.

I propose here that much research on the agricultural constellations of migrant labour, EU migration and Brexit is woefully present-centred. In this chapter I aim to provide a much-needed counter to that static, ahistorical literature, through a deep attention to the recent history of the domestic picker in the Fen region in the East of England. The term 'picker' here refers to various low paid, casually

organised and physically demanding roles in the fields and food production factories that dominate the labour economy in the wider Fen region. This area, once a wetland, stretches from Boston in Lincolnshire through north and east Cambridgeshire and towards Kings Lynn in the west of Norfolk. This drained landscape is subject to widespread ‘monocultural arrangements’ – precisely the domination of an industrial farming system over the economic and political life of the people who live in this place.

Poor transport links make it difficult to travel to work outside of the region (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group and Cambridgeshire County Council, 2016). Mark, a twenty-five year old man from Wisbech who I spoke to in the winter of 2018, described returning from a job interview in Peterborough to the train station in March. He found he had missed the last bus back to Wisbech that evening and found himself with no other option but to walk the ten miles back to Wisbech, along a dual carriageway in the rain. He did not get the job. This was one of many stories told to me by residents about the way that the current benefits system – which assumes easy access to the internet and employment opportunities – punished poor bodies in the Fen region. Internally, there are few jobs outside of low paid agricultural and food production work in this region (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group & Cambridgeshire County Council, 2016).

In the summer of 2017 Callum, a twenty-one year old university graduate (also from Wisbech), explained to me that without a car he could not access jobs that were appropriate to his skill level but – he described with frustration – he could not save up for a car because despite numerous applications, he could not obtain work in any of the local factories. This issue was further elucidated during a

discussion with a local employment agent who expressed her preference for ‘newly arrived’ A8 migrant workers who, she explained with a shrug “just work harder” (see also, Scott, 2013).

In this landscape the past is never simply gone – in the agricultural field the previous crop always haunts the soil. I pose here that the ongoing exploitation of migrant pickers within this region is a continuation of a longer legacy of the oppression of agricultural labourers. This oppressed history will continue to act in the present, regardless of the bodies in question – be they human or ‘morethan-human’ (see Tsing, 2013: 16). Thus, they must be historicised and recalled – cited in a revolutionary way. If there is a moment for politics to anticipate a moment of danger – the “opportune moment”, that “tiger’s leap into the past” or indeed “the dialectical leap” that “Marx understood as revolution”; in short, the opportunity to interrupt this catastrophic course of history – it is now (Benjamin, 2006b: 395). In this moment of impending climate change in which the Fen landscape appears as a biodiversity desert – exploited by industrial farming techniques so that the fields are kept in a productive state by a life support system of chemical fertilisers and pesticides – we find politics inextricably intertwined with landscape and history.

The fields and factories of the Fen region are understood in this chapter as a medium in which the present is connected to all lost causes and struggles of a recent history of agricultural labourers – who have both literally and metaphorically lost their histories through what Benjamin calls a “tradition of the oppressed’ (2006: 392). It is in the lost history of the agricultural labourers just prior to the A8 integration – those domestic workers who as recently as 1998 carried out “95% of the work” (Beattie, 2008) in the Fen region – that we find

evidence that tradition does not establish continuity through direct narrative transmission. It is rather a discontinuous process that is fissured by neglect, secrecy and betrayal. However, following Benjamin I propose that it is precisely in this ‘tradition of the oppressed’ that we might find a redemptive force. In other words, my hope here is that in exploring this ‘covered over’ history, new discussions might be opened that do not define the treatment of A8 migrant labourers by their migratory status. Instead, I aim to show that the exploitation of A8 migrants in the Fen region – which by 2014 was so serious that it warranted the development of an anti-slavery task force and has led to long term oversubscription of the homeless shelter in Wisbech – is part of an endemic culture of agricultural exploitation in this area.

What is at stake here is crucial. As I will show in this chapter, the food production systems in this area were established by the labour of exploited ‘non-citizen’ bodies – ‘spectral labourers’ – ever since the solidification of the monocultural regime that was achieved through the technologies of the (long) Industrial Revolution. These ‘spectral pickers’ appear as a procession of people without democratic rights – who the state bears no responsibility towards – whose bodies and labour have been used in a systematic fashion for over 150 years.

Since the mid-1960s there has been a phantasm of a ‘technological fix’ that will put an end to the need for human hands to carry out these ‘menial’ tasks. The Fen region – where every year enough wheat is grown to produce 250 million loaves of bread, and where 33 percent of all the vegetables produced in England is grown (NFU, 2019) – undoes this utopian ideal. The rich soils here have led this land to be divided into plots of land too small to make the purchase and upkeep of this technology economically viable. Human labour is simply cheaper and more

efficient in this landscape. To be clear, by understanding the exploitation of migrant workers in the fields and factories of the Fens only through their migratory status, not only is this landscape primed for the next wave of exploitation – simultaneously an oppressed history that is active in the present remains unchallenged. This occurs whilst ignoring the internment and mistreatment of previous workers – that of the Gypsy and Traveller communities – persisting today. The Wisbech area of Fenland has one of the highest proportions of Gypsy and Traveller populations in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This population – previously integral to the seasonal labour force in the Fen region – was forced to settle in authorised encampments through the implementation of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJPOA).¹⁴ Between 1994 and 2010 the number of settled Gypsy and Travellers` in the area near Wisbech doubled (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2010) – interned and disavowed in the local area. The oppressed history of this community in relation to the current debates regarding deficits in seasonal workers indicates a wider history of the use and dis-use of pickers, not only during the performance of labour but also in its aftermath.

The problem at hand, I propose, is that there is very little information about the unfolding of agricultural labour because of the neglected status of the agricultural within the canon of political philosophy more generally (Jaines, 2022). The Fen landscape and the recent history of the pickers – who perform the ‘spectral labour’

¹⁴ Part Five of the CJPOA increased the powers of police and local authorities to evict Gypsies and Travellers camping illegally and removed the duty on local authorities, under the 1968 Caravan Sites Act, to provide sites. See Halfacree (1996), Sibley (1997) and Burgum, Jones and Powell (2022) for discussions surrounding the long-term impacts of widespread anti- Gypsy-Traveller sentiments in rural and legislative discourses.

maintaining the food production upon which the area's economy relies – offer a timely opportunity to understand the manner in which this manifests.



7.2 A Spatial Choreography of Loss.

The Fens have been a keystone of England's organised food production since the monasterial period – between c.600 and c.1536 – during which the land was strategically drained and managed by the monastic houses that dominated this area. Following the dissolution of the monasteries, the largely absentee landlords to whom the land was granted struggled to maintain the established systems of common rights and responsibilities that had led to a thriving mediaeval economy in the Fen region. The area became steadily wetter and more difficult to manage productively – it was partially this unmanageability that allowed the Fen region to escape the early waves of enclosures that swept across agricultural communities in England from the sixteenth century onwards. Though the Fen region is often defined by the drainage of the seventeenth century, the mechanical, political and legal technology required to drain and enclose this region only came into being with the arrival of the (long) Industrial Revolution. The windmills, cuts

and dykes engineered by the seventeenth century Adventurers had proved insufficient to keep the Fen region dry. New applications for the steam pump in the early nineteenth century proved instrumental in draining the last large body of water from the area around Whittlesea – in what is now the Fenland district in Cambridgeshire. In the Autumn of 1851, the wind could be seen curling the water of the mire. By 1853 it blew on the same site over a sea of yellow corn. This metamorphosis was the marker of an epoch shift in which the last unenclosed area of English countryside shifted through technology into the first large scale industrial arable site in Britain.

This industrial monocultural arrangement took on the spatial form of an internal ‘colony’. The landscape was managed using the ‘high farming’ techniques of the Victorian period. The biodiversity that once defined the area was curtailed through the uses of fertilisers and pesticides aimed at making agricultural production more efficient and predictable. The Fen region from the 1840s onward was also the birthplace of the ‘gang’ system which – like the high farming techniques – aimed to allow farmers to achieve higher outputs with lower economic outgoings. The formation of the gang labour system in this region can be understood as a product of a very particular nexus of legislative, spatial and employment market based opportunities in this peculiarly historicised landscape, in a particular moment. The spatial choreography of the gang labour system that emerged in this place is pertinent to the uses and misuses of agricultural labourers in the present – through its use of ‘outsiders’ as a source of ‘spectral labour’. Precisely bodies who provide hard labour and to whom the state – or in this early iteration, the parish – bears no fiscal responsibility.

In order to understand the emergence of the gang system – which is still in use today – in these newly enclosed former wetlands, it is necessary to understand the geographies of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ parishes that developed in the early nineteenth century. The distinction between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ parishes did not arise in this period, although it was around 1830 that the terminology first appeared in legal language (Holderness, 1972). This geographic distinction can be traced back to the early stages of the ‘poor administration’ in English law. The initial Elizabethan Act from 1601 was parochial in form, in that the administrative unit of the system was the parish. In 1662 a further poor relief bill – the Act of Settlement – placed the burden of supporting the poor onto the parishes in which they were born. This Act encouraged many landlords to rid their estates of labourer cottages and instead to import labourers from other parishes, thus escaping their responsibility for supporting the poor. The early administration of England’s poor prescribed that each cottage should have at least four acres of land to call its own. This was in statute until 1775. However, this fell into the jurisdiction of the large estate owners on whose land these cottagers resided. By the mid sixteenth century this statute was essentially a ‘dead letter’ as estate holders steadily deprived cottage smallholders of their land in favour of developing a vision of arcadia in which agricultural labour was obscured – kept not only out of sight but outside of the estate holder’s ethical and financial responsibilities.

This development was not only an economic decision from the landowner’s perspective. Political philosophy in the seventeenth century was increasingly influenced by a ‘neo-Aristotelian’ framework in which internal qualities and external form entwined – so that poverty appeared as a lack of goodness and the

beauty of virtue manifested as the transcendence of a privileged few from base physical needs. Of course, it is only those whose base physical needs are consistently met who can afford the luxury of the concealment of corporeal necessities. It is in this distinction that we find the rationale for the development of 'open' and 'close' parishes. The latter term refers to a parish where one or two elite individuals exercised tight control over the population and the activities of their parishioners. These 'close' parishes were considered wholesome communities of long-standing families – good, and God-fearing folk. The 'open' parishes, on the other hand, tended to have a diversified power structure that prevented monopolistic or oligarchic control over parish affairs. The population of 'open' parishes tended to be larger and the parishioners poorer, less well educated and more diverse in origin (Khun Song, 2002). The existence of a close parish was thus conditional on the existence of a nearby open parish that could provide a steady supply of low paid manual labourers – thus the close parish reaped the benefits of labourers willing to accept low wages – without bearing fiscal responsibility for the poor relief of these workers.

The sourcing and management of these labourers was carried out by a 'gangmaster'. This was usually a local man from the open parish. The rapid metamorphosis of the Fen region through the steam power of the mid nineteenth century hurtled this method of labour management into a new context. The new fields that stood where once water laid were quickly furnished with farm buildings. But workers' cottages failed to emerge. The long-standing settlements on the old gravel islands and the higher silt ground on the Fen edge were transformed into a new kind of 'open' parish, in which women and children from poor families were sourced by new 'gangmasters' to perform agricultural labour.

By the 1860s – within two decades of this last drainage – the social structure of these areas shifted – from one of the last semi-subsistence economies in England to an area where conditions for the poor were worse than in the industrial cities of the North. The sixth report of the Children's Employment Commission (1862) outlined that in Wisbech the death rate of children under one year was the same as in Manchester. The rates of infant mortality in general had spiked across the Fen region. This was attributed, by the medical officers of the Children's Employment Commission, to the widespread use of opium by labouring women, who would drug their infants in order to keep up with the work rates demanded by gangmasters in the fields. Children from the ages of five or six – as well as women from the poorest of families – made up these gangs, who often had to walk up to ten miles before a day's labour in the fields. The gangmasters often also touted produce and instead of receiving money, at the end of the week labourers were often required to barter for food and drink, sold at a price fixed at the discretion of the gangmaster.

The Liberal politician John Wodehouse – third Earl of Kimberley – asserted in a House of Lords debate regarding the report from the Children's Employment Commission that “to a very considerable extent, the smallness of the wages received by agricultural labourers compelled them to employ their wives and children in work of that description” (HL Debate 1867). In an adjacent House of Commons debate, Mr Fawcett, also of the Liberal Party, asked “could anything bring out more strongly the fact that the interests of those who were not directly represented were too often little regarded?” (HC Deb 1867). The issues of democratic representation, poverty and agricultural labour are, I propose, entwined in the Fen landscape. The parliamentary debates that occurred

following the sixth report of the Children's Employment Commission led to the Agricultural Gangs Act 1867 (and latterly the Agricultural Children Act 1873), which stipulated that no child under eight was permitted to be employed on an agricultural gang, that no female was to be employed on the same gang as males, and that no female was to be employed under a male gangmaster unless a female gangmaster was also present. The Act also required gangmasters to be licensed. These licences were to be granted by two or more magistrates at petty sessions, on evidence that the applicant was of good character and a fit person to be licensed. Stipulated licences were not to be granted to keepers of public houses. The Acts made no attempt, however, to address the issues of poverty, lack of democratic power and spatial inequalities (in particular, the open and close parish system) which were identified in the debates as giving rise to the gang system.

Despite the success of urban campaigns to increase suffrage in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was not until 1917 that the property-less population that made up the labour gangs in the Fens received the vote. Even then their political power was stymied. Mary Chamberlain makes clear, in her 1975 study of agricultural labourers in the Fen region in the early part of the twentieth century, that "party allegiance differentiated the employed from the unemployed, the deserving from the undeserving poor, the employable from the unemployable [...] to vote Tory was to get and keep a job. The Liberals were the party of the unemployed and the undeserving" (Chamberlain, 1977: 130). Furthermore, cottages were not built for labourers and industry was not diversified in the area, so that the conditions of the rural poor in the Fens failed to shift throughout a large part of the twentieth century.

Whilst now it is common for university undergraduates to engage in ‘charity tourism’ in so-called ‘developing countries’ in the Global South, in the mid twentieth century these middle-class projects had their sights on the ‘others’ *within* the UK. It was popular from the 1930s onwards for Cambridge undergraduates to visit the Fen region each summer as part of a project called the ‘Cambridge Fruiting Campaigns’. The undergraduates spent time with the fieldworkers and provided aid and support to the children of the pickers in the fields. This included not only local children but also the children of families from London who arrived each summer for picking ‘holidays’, but also the children of the Gypsy and Traveller families who provided vital labour for the soft fruit picking season each year. What is clear from the development of this project is that the Fen region and its pickers were seen as ‘outside’ of normal life and offered an experience of alterity for Cambridge students throughout the middle part of the twentieth century.



7.3 Spectral Labour.

In the Winter of 2017, I spoke to Tina and Wendy, two women in their fifties who had lived in the Fen region and worked in fields and factories all their lives. Tina described to me that:

My Nan worked in the fields and so did my Mum. My Nan had to, all her life, most people did back then. I used to work with my Mum when I was little. I used to work behind the roller, taking the potatoes out. Whether it was cold or snowing, I used to do it all year round. Lots of children did, it was normal to go to work in the fields instead of going to school.

Wendy confirmed that this was her experience too:

I used to do field work. When I was about 11 or 12, I used to go pea pulling. I'd go along with my net bag picking the peas off and when the sack was full, I remember I would take it to be weighed. At the end of the day, you'd get a big round disk with a hole in and that'd be your wages. I used to love doing that. I used to go to the fields with some gypsy friends, they'd be here and away again all year. They used to come first, just before Spring for the daffodil picking. That's how it was, us women and kids from here and the Gypsies. We all worked together.

A Wisbech town councillor in his mid-thirties confirmed that the phenomenon of children missing school to work in the field continued into the 1990s in the Fen region. He told me:

I was working on the land from 10 years old. I used to take the last few weeks of the summer term off to go out strawberry picking every year to earn money, so that my mum could take us on holiday. And then we went blackberry picking and then we went onion bunching. Me and my sisters, we all did that. And I left school at 15. No qualifications. Because I was earning money.

The labour arrangements in the Fen region from the mid-twentieth century onwards are difficult to ascertain. As in the anecdotal evidence above they were largely made up of 'black market' arrangements where piece work was paid cash in hand meaning that gangmasters could bypass employment laws. In short, labour in the Fen area – from the final drainage of the area in the mid-nineteenth century and through most of the twentieth century – was carried out by people who were largely unseen, othered and outside of political and legal representation, by a gang system that bore many of the hallmarks of British labour abuses within colonised states abroad. With each movement that aimed to legislate this workforce, new bodies of 'spectral labourers' were animated. For example, the introduction of the Equal Pay Act in 1975 provoked fear in agricultural workers across East Anglia. Workers in a mushroom factory in Norfolk specifically levied against wage increases in recognition that the enactment of this legislation would result in widespread redundancies for formally employed workers (Mackie, 1975).

The increase in legislation regarding pay and labour rights from the 1970s through to the introduction of the minimum wage in 1998 had significant effects

on the agricultural labour market of the Fen region. As a participant in Wisbech explained to me:

What I think probably changed is that you used to be able to drop into field work and get cash in hand. You could always drop in, you know, if you were a bit down, or a bit short, it didn't matter what you were doing in your life. That was handy for the farmers. And it was handy for the people. It worked well, for both. Yeah. But now they can't do that. Everything has to be declared. Everything has to be on paper. And I think that is where there was a big change with land work.

The informal labour market here was very, very handy for people in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. You could wake up in the morning and realise you didn't have enough money to buy a loaf of bread and all you had to do was make a phone call. You'd go out on the farm and get paid at the end of the day. With that money you could go and buy everything you needed.

The convenience described by my participant belies a level of poverty in the region – a provisionality of everyday life – that is directly attributable to the low wage, casual labour economy of the region. This particular manifestation of poverty can be seen in this quote as acting to secure the contributions and co-operation of populations in the region in this insecure, informal and underpaid labour market. In a House of Commons debate in 1972, Mr Gavin Strang of the Scottish Labour party, raised the issue of the disparity between pay for urban and rural manual labourers:

The latest figures for farm workers in England and Wales, released this month, show that the average weekly earnings of farm workers for the year ending December, 1971, were £21.6 for a 47.9 hour week. Recently the Department of Employment issued the results of its survey into the earnings of manual workers in the first week of October last year. They showed that the average earnings of manual workers covered by the survey were £30.93 for a week of 44.7 hours. The figure for manual workers in the manufacturing industry was £31.37 for a week of 43.6 hours.

We have a situation where the gap between the earnings of farm workers and of workers in other industries is intolerable. It is a gap of about £10 a week. If one looks at the hourly earnings, bearing in mind that farm workers work longer hours than industrial workers, incredibly the average

hourly earnings of a worker in the manufacturing industry are no less than 66 per cent higher than those of a farm worker.

(HC Debate 1972)

Further to this, Strang also raised the issue of the casual nature of agricultural labour which did not offer occupational pension schemes and sick pay schemes. In the Fen region this was further compounded, since even regular hours which would allow workers to plan their economic activities were not available. The convenience that my participant spoke of – in the period in the mid-twentieth century – actually amounted to precarity. Things did not improve in the late twentieth century, and by 1990 the basic minimum rate of pay for agricultural workers was still around £70 less per week than their counterparts in the cities. Anecdotal evidence from local newspaper reports and interviews reveals that the labouring population in the Fen region managed their finances by drawing unemployment benefits and working for gangmasters in the fields and factories through ad hoc cash in hand arrangements. This obscured the labour performed by this population and created an oppressed history – a myth that ‘the locals will not work in the fields.’

In the seasonal economy of agriculture, work is often available for short, condensed periods, followed by languorous lulls. Under the conditions of Jobseekers Allowance, claimants could work up to twelve hours without consequence. For seasonal workers these opportunities are concentrated into smaller, dense periods of work. An analysis of the local paper archives from the 1970s and 1980s shows the manner in which the benefits system not only failed to accommodate non-normative, non-industrial work practices but actively punished them.

Where locals were found to be drawing benefits whilst working for gangmasters, an increasingly hostile regulatory environment developed throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1978 it was reported by the Fenland Citizen that a woman from Wisbech was fined £20 and ordered to pay £10 towards costs by Lynn Magistrates for taking two potato picking shifts whilst claiming benefits:

Mrs Carol Roper (30), of Neeps Terrace, Middle Drove, Wisbech, admitted obtaining supplementary benefit by making a false representation. Mr William Morris, of the Department of Health and Social Security, prosecuting, said Mrs Roper, a mother of three who was living apart from her husband, had signed a declaration on October 10 last year stating she had correctly reported any change of earnings which could affect her benefit. But between October 3rd and October 15th she had been employed by Mr Cutworth of Franks Farm, St John's Fen End, as a potato picker and had twice received payments of £30. The department had since recovered £24. Mr Ken Land (Southwell, Dennis and Land, Wisbech), however, said the payments were of £20 and £18. He told the court that Mrs Roper had found it difficult to live on the amount of money she received being paid no maintenance and had wanted extra to assist with the decoration of her house, for which she could not obtain a grant. Summing up chairman of the bench, Mr J. B. Walton, expressed sympathy for her difficulties, but said she should have asked for guidance. "You need not have been here at all really," he added.

(Fenland Citizen, 1978: 13)

Later that year a man, also from Wisbech, was fined £20 and ordered to pay £20 costs by Lynn magistrates for taking on two weeks potato picking work whilst claiming benefits:

Barry Lewis (32) of Neeps Terrace, Middle Drove, pleaded guilty to completing a weekly declaration on October 1st last year at Lynn, stating he was unemployed although he had worked from October 3 to October 16. Mr William Morris, of the Department of Health and Social Security, prosecuting, said Mr Lewis, a married man with four children, had been employed as a potato picker by Mr William Cutworth, of Franks' Farm, St John's Fen End, during that time and was paid between £27 and £35 a week. On being cautioned by the DHSS, Mr Lewis had denied working for Mr Cutworth, but after further cautions declined to make any written statement. Mr Ken Land (Southwell, Dennis and Land, Wisbech), defending, said Mr Lewis had only received two payments of £24 for working at the farm, which did not cover a very long period of time. Lack

of public transport prevented him from travelling to Lynn or Downham to find permanent employment. and Mr Lewis had a number of financial commitments. Mr Land said Mr Lewis had been unable to obtain a clothing grant and had used the money obtained from the DHSS for that purpose. A sum of £ 39.14 had already been paid back to the Department.

(Fenland Citizen, 1978: 17)

In 1983, a man from Sutton Bridge appeared before Spalding magistrates for failing to declare one month of onion and brussels sprouts picking to the DHSS:

Mr Douglas Best, prosecuting for the DHSS, said Bennett had been receiving supplementary benefit from March 1982 until March 1983 and had stated that he had done no work during that period. Mr Best said: He made this declaration on the appropriate forms but it was discovered some of this was not true. "He had been working in agriculture picking onions between August 30 and October 22 and pulling Brussels between November 1 and 2. "He received both income from agricultural work as well as supplementary benefit and had it been known he was working he would not have received benefit," he said. Mr Best said the amount of benefit involved in the three charges was £372.48 and in the three cases taken into consideration £248.22, making a total of £620.70. Mr George Hastings, for Bennett, said his client had got the job "through the grapevine" and was thinking ahead to Christmas when he decided not to reveal that he had found work.

(Fenland Citizen, 1983: 17)

These reports show the increasing level of conditionality regarding access to welfare benefits that had effects across the UK from the 1970s onwards. Though conditionality has been a long-standing feature of welfare benefit entitlements in the UK, the scope and scale of behavioural forms of conditionality – as well as the severity of the sanctions applied for failure to comply with the required conduct – increased substantially during this period (Dwyer, 2004). This culminated in the introduction of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) in 1996. The incoming Labour government in 1997 adopted a ‘work first’ and ‘work for all’ approach, embracing JSA’s monitoring of claimants’ job search activities, backed up by benefit sanctions in cases of non-compliance. These sanctions were employed alongside an expansion of the reach of work-related conditionality, which intensified and culminated in 2012 in a maximum sanction – for repeated ‘high level’ noncompliance – of complete withdrawal of benefits for three years. The reports

from the Fenland Citizen from the 1970s and 1980s show the use of fines as punishment for working whilst claiming benefits. Later the risk of being caught taking part in 'cash in hand' work made working for gangmasters prohibitive, as a participant explained to me in the summer of 2017:

You don't very often get cash in hand jobs now like you did in the 70s and 80s because the majority of cash in hand jobs were done by people that were drawing benefits as well. That's more or less what it boiled down to, these people were signing on and working cash in hand jobs because they didn't have tax and didn't have to go through the paperwork and things like that. And they could just do it illegally. Cash in hand is illegal.

Cash in hand jobs now are minimal, there aren't many of them about. You know I did one a couple of years ago, but that was a farmer that I knew. He wanted some work done. And I did do that for him, but I used to think, you know, if I ever get caught and I'm drawing benefits I'll lose everything. So I just stopped and went back to my benefits because it wasn't worth the risk really. Sometimes the risk can be too great. You could lose everything you see if you get caught. And then once you lose your benefits, you lose them for good, you lose your housing benefit, your money benefit and you'll probably be homeless because then you wouldn't be able to pay rent.

I thought, at the end of the day this cash in hand job is okay, but if I ever get caught the reaction from it would be terrific. It'd be awful to be homeless and have no money. So, I give it up. I just thought the risk was too much to outweigh what I was doing. Now I just draw my benefits and sign on, and I just go for jobs to show my advisor, I'm looking for work. And obviously I go on courses that are going to get me a job.

What we see here is not the unwillingness of the 'domestic' population to engage in agricultural and food processing work in the Fen region, but rather a situation in which the population that previously had acted as 'spectral labourers' – people who carried out agricultural labour to whom the parish, and latterly the state bore no responsibility towards – were assimilated as citizens. In gaining citizen status, this community found themselves barred from the agricultural gangs on which they had previously relied for employment. In an area constructed for food production – based upon a gang labour system and with poor transport links – many found themselves entirely dependent on an increasingly hostile benefits system. In contrast to the temporal progression that the urban site makes claim

to, the Fen region unfolds choreographically as the continuum of space. There is no unity of character to either the pickers or the gangmasters and no selfdetermining neoliberal subject is to be found on this agricultural stage. It is not only the bodies of the 'domestic' labouring class who have been interned in the Fen region, but also the Gypsy and Traveller and Roma communities who worked alongside them. It is important to note that there is no clear dividing line between the 'domestic' and the Gypsy and Traveller and Roma populations in the Fen region, as Luke a man in his early twenties explained to me:

I was raised by my stepdad, he was born and raised in Chatteris, he was a Traveller and then he just spent all his life working in farming. His Mum is from a Traveller family. My Mum came from Peterborough and her family are all still there. We moved to Chatteris when I was a baby. Diversity is good. Chatteris is still pretty much the same. Eighty percent of Chatteris is Traveller descended so it is all big families. There is a traveller site there and some of them live in houses. The ones who live in houses are called Gaujes¹⁵ - that's a word for a Traveller who lives in a house. They all do all sorts of work, some work on the roads, building, gardening. Yeah, hedge-trimming and stuff all sorts of stuff. Just what they turn their hands to.

In 1960 the British Government introduced the Caravan Sites Act which made it difficult for the Gypsy and Traveller population to buy and winter on small plots of land. It also sought to prevent stays on the private land of farmers for who they were working. Though the 1968 Caravan Sites Act introduced duties for local authorities to provide accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers, this legislation did little to safeguard or create suitable pitches. Crucially, the CJPOA also limited the number of vehicles that could assemble in one stopping place which meant the exclusion of large families.

¹⁵ The term Gauje is usually used to refer to non-Gypsy Travellers. Luke's bleeding of the boundaries of this term speaks to the non-conventional social structures at play in the Local Authority Housing estates in Fenland.

Although official data is scarce, anecdotal evidence from interviews and local newspapers (in which mistreatment of this community is regularly documented) suggests that throughout the mid-twentieth century various communities of Gypsies, Travellers and Romany workers regularly provided labour for Fen farms. This appears to have shifted following the passing of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJPOA, 1994). This not only meant that councils no longer needed to build sites, but that they had the power to close existing sites. Whilst the government suggested that Gypsies and Travellers should buy their own land and set up sites, the planning system made this virtually impossible. The effect of this legislation was that the seasonal movements of the Gypsy and Traveller community, that provided much needed agricultural labour for farms across the country, was criminalised. In the period following the 1994 Act, the systematic closure of traditional stopping places made this way of life impossible.

This meant that even where a provision of camps was made by local authorities – as it has been in the area around Wisbech, where the population of Gypsy and Traveller families has doubled since 1997 – they too have been subject to the increasingly punitive benefit conditions which affect the ‘domestic’ population. It was at this point, in the mid to late 1990s, that British agriculture became heavily dependent upon international migrant workers.

Although the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) was first implemented by the Home Office in 1945 to allow farmers and cultivators in the UK to recruit overseas workers to undertake short-term agricultural work, it was only after the CJPOA that SAWS began to be used to address the increasing difficulty in recruiting for seasonal agricultural work. These workers were generally provided with onsite accommodation, the cost of which was extracted

from the workers' pay. This arrangement can be seen as leading directly to the widespread labour exploitation and modern slavery conditions that were described to me by Ivo, a Lithuanian man, who was held in debt bondage in the Fen area in the early 2000s. He described the situation in the following way:

I'll tell you my personal opinion, it is very simple. To come to the UK the organisers charged three hundred euros. Then we paid for someone to arrange work for us. So, it seems like that is probably quite alright because there are loads of places in Spalding, Boston, Wisbech around that where people can be promised work. We arrived here with nothing; we sold our last things to pay for the transport. And then no job was offered in the first week. Then another week. So, we waited for two weeks. But during that time we still had to pay rent. They told us: 'Don't worry, we'll just take your passport, everything will be good. When you start work, you have to pay us back'. So basically, that's how people get stuck with it.....

I lived in this house and there were 13 people living there with me. So, at that time I think I paid fifty pounds a week, not for room or bed just literally paid for [...] we slept on the floor. That's the way it was. They promised us work and all of us in the house were struggling. When there was work, some of us got the job, some of us didn't. If you did get the job that day, you didn't complain when they told you that you had to walk ten miles when everyone else was still in bed because you have no other place to go to get paid. The people there were mainly middle-aged females, around 45 years old. They did not know the English language. All they did was work and they were abused - but not physical abuse. It's just they didn't get the jobs. So, they couldn't pay off the debt to the gangmasters and could barely pay for food.

The experiences of the A8 migrant labourers appear here not as a development in this region but as a new iteration of previous labour abuses in this spatial choreography. The Fen region is – in short – a landscape drained and put to work with no contingency in place. A site with no contingency and a singular factorial aim – to profit from 'natural' resources, and where the notion of natural resources always includes the human bodies that interact with and facilitate the extraction of this value.



7.4 Progress doesn't progress.

The women who laboured on the Fen fields in the 1970s and 1980s imagined a better life for themselves than their mothers had lived:

my mum looked really old, she looked old before her time really because she had to stand and scrub at the dolly tub, no land work for her that was what our fathers were doing and there weren't the money for childcare...the reason I went to work on the land and put myself through all those aches and pains is I wanted a washing machine.

(Country Characters, 1980)

This better future did not manifest. Rather the promise of something better to come twisted topologically on the surface of the Fen region. This brings to mind that “this landscape of all landscapes most amounts to Nothing” (Swift, 2015: 13). It is on the surface of this landscape that we find the constant failure of progress

that underlies our ‘developed’ society. The Fen region holds on its surface an endless repetition of Aristotle’s concept of agricultural labour as performed by non-political, servile humans.

Agricultural labour, in Aristotle’s political economy, is necessary to but distinct from the free life of politics. In *Politics I* the management of – and relationship with – nature that defines the labour at the base of the food chain, acts as a limit case between free and unfree. That is, superior and servile human life (Smith, 1991). For Aristotle it is through the corporeal existence of agricultural workers that the thinking life of the ‘thinking’ body in the city is freed to practice politics. The Fen landscape displays on its surface the extent to which this mode of thinking – in which the internal production of food serves as an incontrovertible ground and guide to the boundaries of national politics – remains powerful in our own time (Frank, 2004).

As each of the populations that have performed agricultural labour in the Fen region – since its final drainage in the mid-nineteenth century – have gained suffrage and citizen status, they have simultaneously found themselves barred from this labour. Without alternative labour economies to enter into, these populations have found themselves held in place, at the same moment as new bodies of spectral labourers – to whom the state bears no responsibility – also find themselves held in this place.

Throughout my research in the Fen region people repeatedly referred to A8 migrant individuals as “better workers”. This is a rhetorical trend also noted in other areas of the UK where use of A8 migrant labourers for agricultural work was common between 2004 and 2020 (see Findlay and McCollum, 2013; Ruhs and

Anderson 2010; Scott 2013). I put forward in conclusion to this chapter that when read ‘against the grain’ of the oppressed history of the previous agricultural labourers in this landscape, this positive discrimination takes on new meaning. It is an indication of an absence of progress at the very ground level of the UK’s labour economy. This manifests as the consistent need for – and remaking of – a ‘spectral labour’ force that has no political embodiment and thus leaves little trace in the historical narrative.

I met George in the Ferry Project’s Hostel in the winter of 2017. He explained that the lack of social connections and life outside of work made newly arrived migrants most appealing in hiring queues:

I will work 60-80 hours or whatever a week. But there are people that will only do the bare minimum, and then you get a foreign worker or migrant worker coming in. They will work as many hours as you give them, you know. And they'll be quite happy about it because they earn the money, whereas a British person is more likely to go "no I've done my 40 hours this week". You know, "if you're not going to pay me extra, I'm not gonna work extra".

I just think it's because they like to spend time away from work with family, whereas most of the migrant workers have come over here without their family. But they're quite happy because they haven't got, and I don't mean this disrespectfully, but they haven't got a wife to go to when they get home from work. So, they might as well be at work. I mean, that's what I used to do. I mean, when I was working in Northampton, I only had to do forty hours a week, but because I hadn't got something there when I, you know, hadn't got a wife or girlfriend or something to come back to, I'd be at work all the time. Because it wouldn't matter to me that I was doing eighty hours a week or whatever. But when I had my ex-wife and my exgirlfriend. I would be like, "Well, I'd rather be at home with the girlfriend." That's what it is, people have got a life outside of work.

This notion of the “better worker” as one whose life is simultaneously excessively and insufficiently embedded in the structure of the site of their labour was rendered corporeal in an interview with a Town Official in Wisbech. He told me that:

On the news, in the run up to Brexit they interviewed a local GP and said to the GP, surely all these Eastern Europeans coming in must have caused major problems with your appointments and your waiting lists. And he turned around and said well, actually, the Eastern Europeans cause me no problems because most of them are young, they're healthy, and they work. The ones who cause me the problems are the ones who have lived here for a long time, probably never worked, high levels of smoking, get heart disease, type two diabetes, and this lack of activity and that's where the problems lie not in the sort of populations who have arrived mainly in the last five or six years.

This narrative not only operates as a rhetoric of positive discrimination which denies the extreme health problems stored up by the physical and psychological conditions described by Ivo, the man held in debt bondage and his contemporaries. It also oppresses the histories of the communities in the Fen region who previously fulfilled the roles of 'spectral labourers'. The 'deserving poor' here are deserving only because they do not present a physical or social need for their employers or the state. The process of integrating agricultural labourers into the Fen region is in short, an internment – the gaining of the barest of recognition, in exchange for freedom. In my participant Callum's words, this landscape is "a bear trap". A place in which nature is caught and held in empty time. An industrial iteration of an Elysian field. Precisely the spatial choreography of the denial of the corporeal in exchange for a future profit.



ACT THREE.



FUTURES.

8.1 A visitation from the Paris streets.

In Daisy Johnson's (2017) short story *Blood Rites*, the Fen region is targeted by vampiric global forces. The scene is set with a hunger for flesh, and a flight. Three unnamed women — we might call them New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought — leave Paris one morning in search of men to feed upon. They:

...did not care for their creed or religion or type; for the choices they made and the ones they missed. We cared only for what they wanted so much it ruined them. (2017:15)

These spectral females jettison the Paris streets and descend upon the Fen landscape, where they reckon that English, “the language of breaking and bending”

will “suit their mouths better” (p. 15). They vow that what had happened in Paris will never recur, swearing that “none of us would let food ruin our lives” (p. 16). They believe (wrongly) that in the Fens they will “be safe from all that” (ibid) but the Fen landscape plays them false. The trio find themselves caught in the bear trap of the historicised Fen landscape – ensnared in the intractable topological unconscious of this place.

The women rent “a big wrecked house out by the canal” and find themselves “out of time, out of sync” (ibid). Hungry, mournful and disorientated, the three women spend their days in languorous inertia, consuming a rolling cycle of daytime television. The material of the house acts as a porous limit case between the vampiric trio and the oppressed past of the Fen landscape. It knows “how to feel” (ibid) – its walls oxidise, swell and sag in their presence. Through this porous membrane the landscape bewitches the bewitching trio. A mouldering raincoat is found in a cupboard. It acts like a spell, luring one of the women to the pub where she reports finding men:

who would taste like the earth, like potatoes buried until they were done, like roots and trees and bark...She held out her hand, told us to taste it, told us she'd been able to smell their salt-of-the-earth insides across the barren winter fields...We sucked until we could: Fen dirt heavy enough to grow new life in it.

(p. 17)

The women prepare, initially making themselves up so that they “looked the way we'd looked in Paris” (p. 17), before deciding this aspect would not work in the Fens. Once again, the Fen facilitates their hunt. In the backs of wardrobes and on neighbours washing lines the trio find fitting costumes. In their jodhpurs, polo necks and gilets they appear, not as *femme fatales*, but as “child catchers” (p. 18). Indeed, one of the trio targets the underage drinkers, the:

school kids, drunk already [...] we heard her telling them that drinking would only ever get better [...]. They looked at her as if she were a thing summoned up, formed from everything they had ever wanted.

(ibid)

Another targets the old men “alone, talking in strange weathered code [...] she liked the veined alcoholism of them, the implicit watching” (ibid). But the one they choose is a vet. His voice holds a “dull return” (ibid).

“It’s not the way it used to be” the vet mourns, and the protagonist asks “When it was flooded?” (p. 19). In response the vet looks at her “as if this were a thing you could not mention, were not allowed to mention” (ibid). When the women consume him, he tastes “the way burrowing in the earth, mouth whaling open, would taste” (ibid). They bury what is left of him in the sodden soil of the back garden.

The women wake in the morning “with a strangeness inside us we could not identify” (p. 21), full of eerie feelings:

about the giving-in the earth was doing, about the dying foxes and the flood water. The globe was composed of bone and organ, the mandible of the sea, the larynx and the thyroid, the scapula and the vertebrae held it all together.

(p. 22)

The women know they have eaten “something we shouldn’t” and yet they hunger again — they remind themselves that “this is not Paris” (p. 22). They turn to the internet and find a man on a dating website — a rough man who talked of “cock and cunt and fuck” (p. 23) and occasionally gestured to a buried legacy of loss and mourning. The trio lure him to the house and consume him. Afterwards, they find their bodies snared in his silent gestures “hands doing fast work out of sight” (p. 24).

A realisation rises in the women that:

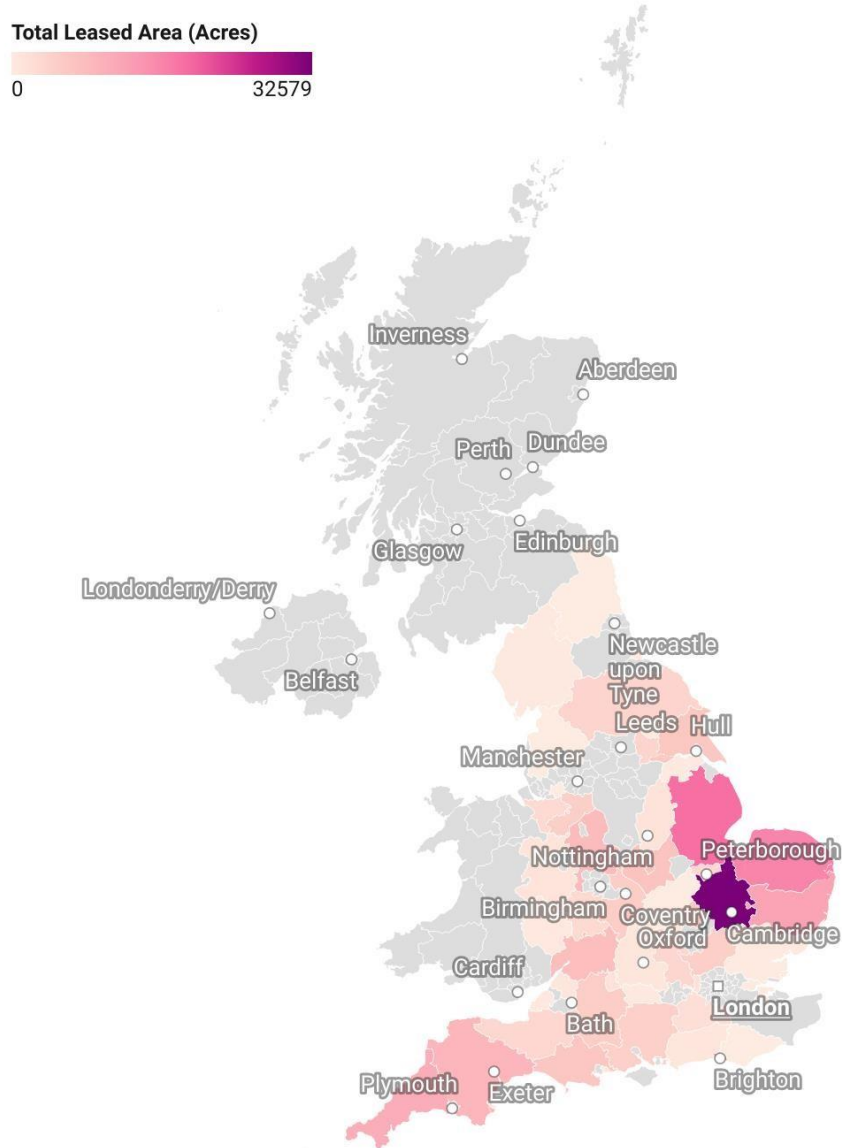
Fen men are not the same as the men we'd had before. They lingered in you the way a bad smell did; their language stayed with you.

(p. 25)

These women can be understood as the inverse and the lining of Benjamin's prostitutes. Hailing from Paris, they are both the "listeners" and the dangerous "erotic power of the sterile" (1999a: 8-9). In other words, as the commodity *par excellence* gone rogue – fleeing from Benjamin's Paris streets these women find themselves ensnared in the Fen landscape. The story closes with the vampiric trio filled, like helium balloons stuffed with the leaden soil of the Fen landscape. Their mobility ensnared in a beartrap of their victims' silent gestures of mourning. *Blood Rites* can be understood as an allegorical reading of the manner in which the power and mobility of the commodity is foreclosed when it consumes the spectral labourers of the Fen landscape – those men who touch the earth and appear in this story as both more and less than human.

County Farms Estates: 2018 Let Area by Local Authority

Data obtained from Graham, K; Shrubsole, G; Wheatley, H; Swade, K (2019) Reviving County Farms. CPRE.



Map: Rowan Jaines • Source: CPRE • Map data: © Crown copyright and database right 2018 • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 8

8.2 A conclusion that most approximates to Nothing.

In this final chapter – a conclusion that most approximates to Nothing – Johnson’s eerie feminine trio congeal in a dialectical image of the historicised landscape of the Fens under global financial capitalism. This image crystallises not only in a revenant choreography of the three fashionable young men of the *Mankind* play (c.1466) – gesturing to the silent mourning and cyclical compulsions of the agricultural labourer – it also contains the shards of Benjamin’s constellatory figure of the Parisian prostitute. The figure of the prostitute is a central figure of Benjamin’s modern city – the (problematic) image *par excellence* of commodity fetishism in its most dangerous and generative form (Salzani, 2009). In Johnson’s *Blood Rites* this feminine ‘allegory of the commodity/modernity’ takes on a new mobile and agential form, only to find herself arrested in the petrified discontent of the Fen landscape.

In tandem with this commodity gone rogue, so too the conceptual dictionary formed during the empirical sections of this thesis – terms that once appeared in ‘scare quotes’ – are now set free whilst simultaneously remaining (un)founded and (un)grounded in the Fen landscape. The conceptual dictionary developed during this thesis is set to work in this final chapter in an attempt to unpack the contradictions and discontents of farmland financialisation from a located and historicised position. The aim here is to destroy the semblance of organicity and wholeness present in the current debates surrounding the ‘farmland-finance nexus’ (Ouma, 2016) in which assemblages and flows are privileged over the rubble and ruin of the limit case.

In this chapter I read processes of financialisation against the grain through the material history of the Fen fields. As in Johnson's *Blood Rites* the rich soil that grounds this landscape appears as simultaneously excessive and insufficient in relation to the vampiric form of the commodity gone rogue. The Fen region of this conclusion stages the dramaturgy of historicised agricultural landscape and its petrified choreographies. It appears as a chthonic ground upon which 'operations of capital' find themselves continually sunken – mired in the bear trap of an untameable and intractable topological unconscious (cf. Mezzadra and Neilson, 2015; Ouma, 2016).

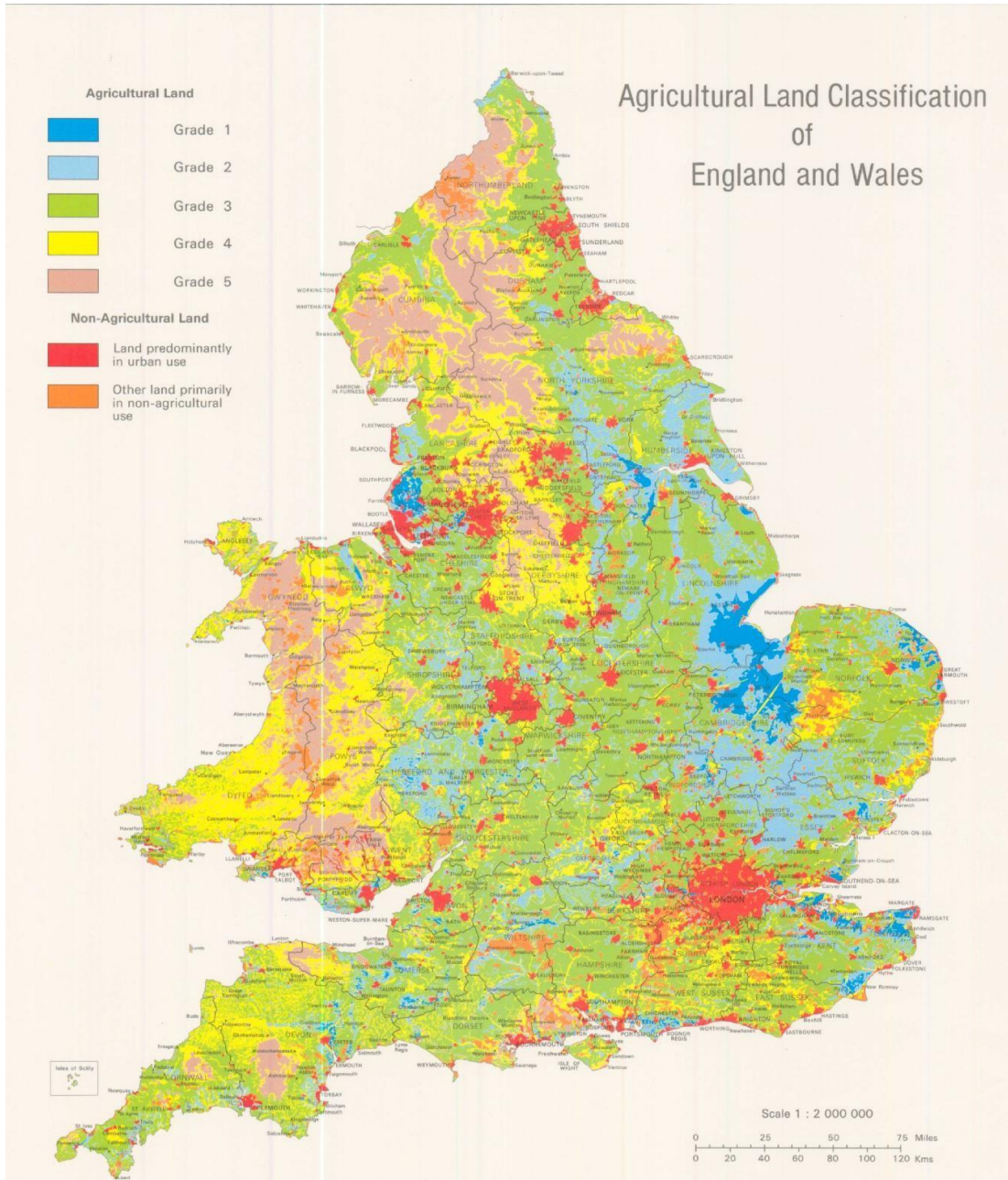


Figure 9 – Distribution of high grade arable land.

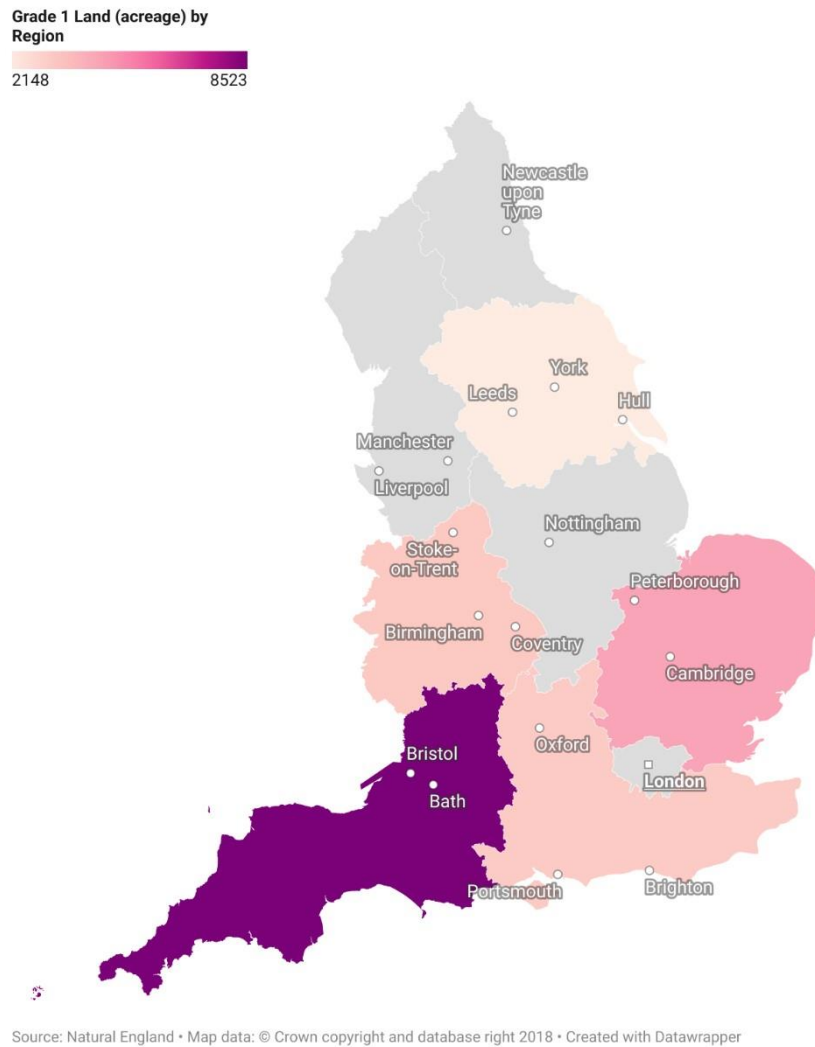


Figure 10 - Distribution of grade one land by region (2021)

8.3 Hedging one's bets.

Agricultural land values in the UK increased by four hundred percent between 1994 and 2018 (Jadevicius et al. 2018: 86). This escalation in UK farmland prices is a significant economic phenomenon. When viewed through a medium to long term lens this escalation has outrun inflation and aligns with the meaningful swellings in value of other asset classes (Siegal 2014: 448) including, but not limited to, office rents in the City of London (Devaney, 2010), Dutch housing

(Eichholtz, 1997) and US commercial office values (Wheaton et al., 2009). The increase in farmland value between 1801 and 2013 has exceeded that of gold (Jadevicius et al., 2018), leading environmental sociologist Madeleine Fairbairn (2014) to refer to farmland in our current epoch as ‘like gold with yield.’

Over the last five years the price of high grade UK farmland has doubled. Grade one and two agricultural land, such as that which makes up the fields of the Fen region, is now the most expensive farm real estate in the world and offers a better return than gold, prime London property, or the FTSE 100 (Shirley, 2022). This value increase (100 percent since 2010) has been heavily influenced by the investment strategies of portfolio managers and pension funds. Like the spectral trio in Johnson’s *Blood Rites*, financial managers have tended to view agricultural land as a safe haven. Farmland has increasingly taken on the aspect of an asset class suitable for ‘hedging one’s bets’ because it not only behaves like gold in its low correlation with other financial ratios and returns (Munton, 1985; Painter, 2010), but now outperforms it (Shirley, 2022).

The rising value of agricultural land in relation to other asset classes has attracted a wave of new scholarship regarding the financialisation of farmland (see Fairbairn 2013, 2014; Ouma, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2020; Ouma, Johnson and Bigger, 2018; Christophers, 2017). The term ‘financialisation’ refers precisely to a means of understanding the distinctive role of finance in contemporary capitalism (Albers, 2016), and its influence on space, the economy, governance, and everyday life (Fields, 2017, 2018). As research agendas regarding the increasing use of farmland as a financial asset proliferate, it is crucial to heed Fields’ warning that the concept of financialisation:

.....risks being invoked in analytically imprecise and theoretically superficial ways, potentially stretching the concept beyond meaning.... turned into an abstract force sui generis, morphing from explanandum into explanans.

(2017: 118-119)

I propose that one way of addressing this risk is to implement Walter Benjamin's particular cultural materialism of spatiotemporal frameworks. This methodology offers a direct critique of a political economy of assemblages and flows and their Bergsonian (2015) legacy, which ever runs the risk of 'stretching concepts beyond meaning'. Distinct from Raymond Williams cultural materialism (2005), and its romantic tendencies – which understand the past as a structuring element of hegemonic spatial practices (see Jackson, 1994) – Benjamin's cultural materialism emphasises moments of destruction and deformation that remain active in the present landscape. These 'integral ephemeral experiences' offer moments of contingency – reducing concepts that have transmuted into 'abstract forces sui generis' to rubble and ruin and providing a momentary glimpse of possibilities beyond hegemony. Benjamin's enduring concern with the new guises and noughts which constitute 'now time' offers an opportunity to conceive of rural space as a constellatory point of radical non-synthesis, in which fugacious contingencies glisten.

There has, as yet, been no analysis of farmland as a unique asset class that utilises a Benjaminian reading of agricultural landscape. This is due, at least in part, to the lack of a Benjaminian conceptual vocabulary of the rural. The identification of this gap in the literature and an attempt to address it through my reading of the specific limit case of the Fen landscape defines one of the key contributions of this thesis.

In what is to follow, I propose that processes of financialisation in the Fen landscape refer to historicised forces – precisely the topological unconscious – and are made available through the dialectical image allegorised in the three vampiric females of Johnson’s *Blood Rites*. Like Caryl Churchill’s dramaturgy in *Fen* (2016), Johnson uses the tropes of discontinuity, opaque characterisation and doubling (indeed tripling) that evokes both the *Mankind* play (c.1466) and Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* (2009) in the thwarted and silent gestures of her characters, who find themselves subsumed in the history of the Fen landscape. Although the Fen fields, market towns and ritual performances may – as explored in Act Two of this thesis – be caught in a beartrap of petrification, Johnson’s literary contribution reveals active forces at work in the landscape. The allegorical figure of the three women – read here as the commodities of the Paris streets of modernity gone rogue – actualises a mortification of widely held assumptions of agricultural land as a ‘safe space’ for financial commodities.

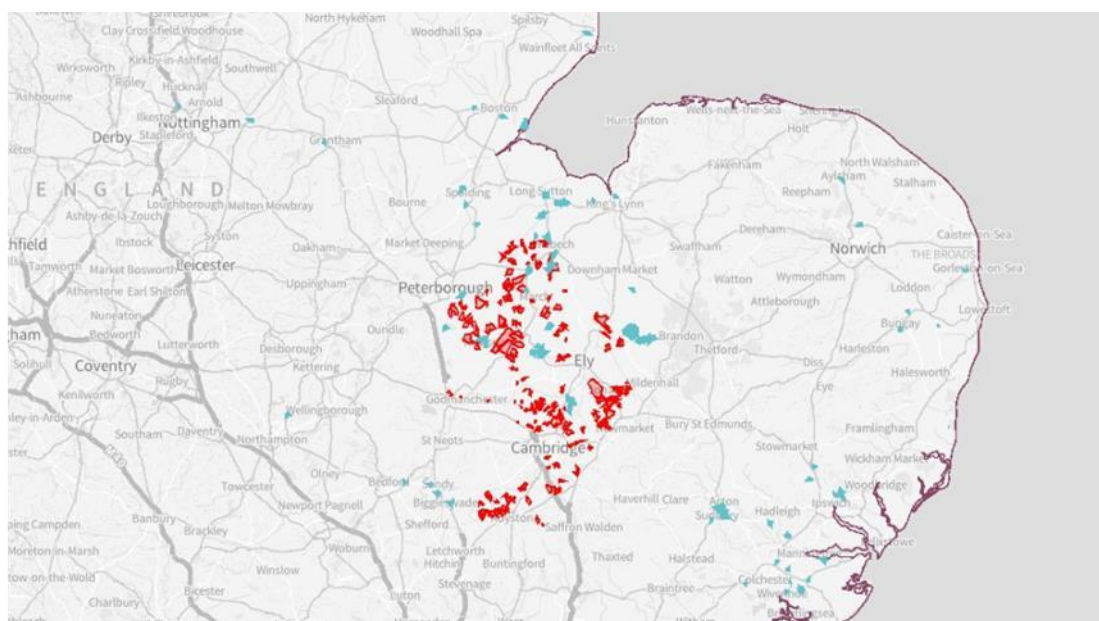


Figure 11 - Cambridgeshire County Farms Estate (red) Grade one arable land (blue)

8.4 Duplicitous Diversification.

I first became aware of the importance of the Cambridgeshire County Farms Estate (CFE) to the Fen landscape during a visit with Harry, a reserve manager on the Nene Washes reserve near Whittlesey. As we neared the edge of the reserve, a man in a dilapidated tractor pulled over to speak with Harry. After he had departed, Harry explained:

He's one of the County Farms Estate tenants. You'll be able to spot them easily because of the run-down nature of their equipment. The farmers who work for the corporations, or private landowners tend to have shiny new tractors. Those who lease their farms from the Council generally don't have two pennies to rub together, like him, struggling along with rusty old machinery.

Nationally, the CFE is one of the major institutional landowners in England and Wales. The formation of these local authority owned rural estates can be traced back to the 1892 Small Holdings Act which was implemented by parliament in an effort to counter the concentration of land in large private estates, and to stall the loss of smaller scale farming practices in the face of large scale urban migration. CFE estates aimed to provide opportunities for young people to enter farming careers. This was formalised in law in the Agriculture Act (1970) which imposed statutory duties on all councils with farms to "make it their general aim to provide opportunities for persons to be farmers on their own account" (p. 39).

Whilst Cambridgeshire CFE still provides agricultural opportunities for new and existing tenants, it completely disengaged from CFE regulations during a 1988/89 restructure. It is now a CFE in name alone. This large rural estate is maintained

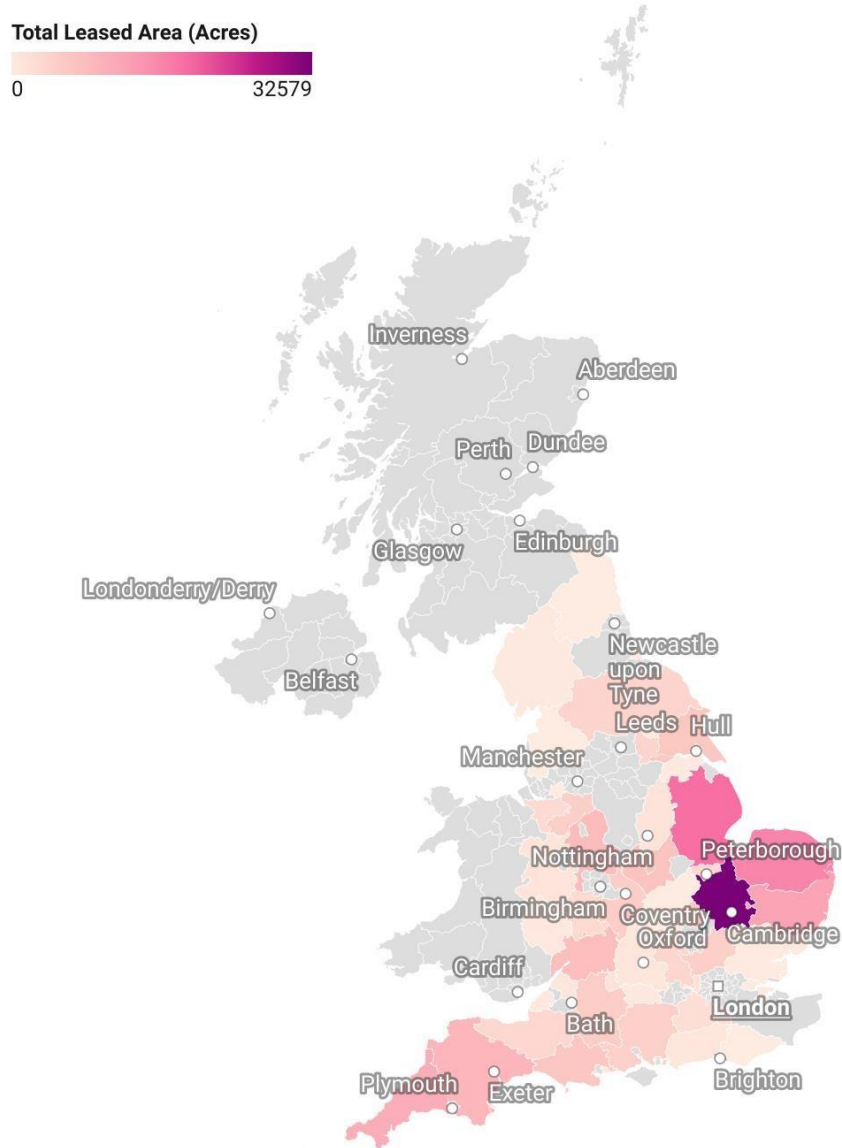
and managed as part of an integrated property profile in accordance with wider local authority objectives (Prince, 2012: 148). What this means in real terms is that Cambridgeshire's CFE is used as a financial asset, generating additional income through various uses of this property, rather than through the generation of capital receipts as part of a disposal strategy. The management of Cambridgeshire CFE as a financial asset is guided by 'strategic asset management' principles. Under the New Labour and coalition governments of the 1990s and early 2000s this appeared through the aspect of a Giddens-inspired move to a 'Big Society' (Espiet-Kilty, 2016). By this I mean that the CFE estate was used mainly for material diversification, as part of a perceived transfer of power away from a centralised state and back to communities at the local level. This 'diversification' of uses included the building of wind farms for the generation of renewable energy, the provision of land to the RSPB and local wildlife trusts, and the letting of land to Network Rail for car parking. In yearly systematic reviews of the best use of property, intentions are recurrently voiced regarding the use of the CFE for social good, for instance the construction of nature trails, recreational sites, increased provision for Gypsy and Traveller communities, and educational services. Regardless of this, the Fenland area – where a large concentration of this estate is based – remains mired in a deprivation of services and facilities.

In the organisational arrangement of Cambridgeshire's CFE the fifteenth century figure of the reeve gestures. Encoded in this hieroglyph is the monocultural arrangement that founds and grounds the apparent diversification of this rural estate. It beckons us to remember this landscape's prehistory as a conduit for the transmission of a Christian drama of a unified England and the stage this

organisation set for the emergence of the estate manager – that ‘proto-typical corporate person’ who scaffolded a burgeoning ‘rule of law’ based on the enforcement of property rights. The CFE enacts a spatial mimesis of the old monastic landscape – the silt islands now appear as market towns that hover over a mire of monoculture arrangements. In our current epoch the Fen region silently mimes its petrified discontent – it is a germinate gem in which the desert that inspired its monastic formation appears in multiple guises including, but not limited to, its democratic, biodiversity and socio-economic choreographies. Simultaneously, the diversification that appeared in the form of material heterogeneity of business uses for Cambridgeshire’s CFE under the previous political drive for a ‘Big Society’, now descends upon the Fen region – like Johnson’s vampiric trio – in the new guise of globalised financial capital.

County Farms Estates: 2018 Let Area by Local Authority

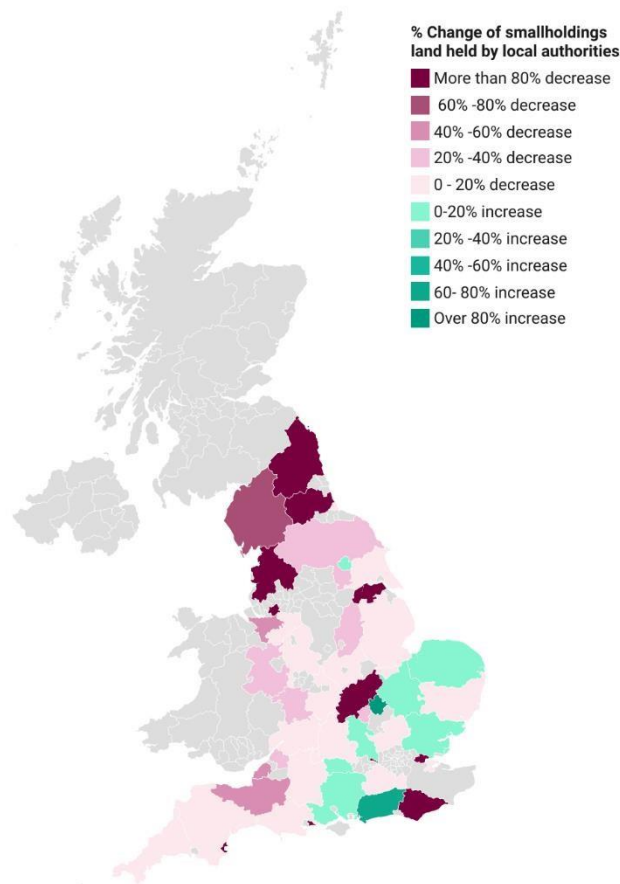
Data obtained from Graham, K; Shrubsole, G; Wheatley, H; Swade, K (2019) Reviving County Farms. CPRE.



Map: Rowan Jaines • Source: CPRE • Map data: © Crown copyright and database right 2018 • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 12

Changes to area of smallholdings land held by local authorities 2010 and 2020



Source: DEFRA • Map data: © Crown copyright and database right 2018 • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 13

8.5 A petrified choreography of loss.

In March 2018 the total land held by CFEs was estimated at 220,000 acres (DEFRA, 2018). Cambridgeshire CFE alone owns around fifteen percent of this total – around 33,000 acres (ibid). When visualised – as in figure 12 – Cambridgeshire CFE emerges as a limit case not only with regards the management of arable land by UK local authorities but also, more pertinently, in relation to discourses regarding the financialisation of land by state actors.

Whilst Christophers (2017: 70) is correct when he states that the assets strategy of UK governments and local authorities from the 1970s onwards have broadly focused on the disposal of public land, and the concordant reduction of the size of the public estate through the sale of land to private-sector actors, I propose that it is in the exception rather than the rule that the past and the future coalesce in meaningful ways. Cambridgeshire CFE acts as one such limit case. Rather than disposing of arable land over the last fifty years, it has not only retained but continues to grow its estate. Importantly, although the management and spatial dynamics of Cambridgeshire CFE is in many ways exceptional – as shown in figure 13 – Cambridgeshire’s rural estate is not the only CFE in England that is in the process of increasing its landed assets. This is due at least in part to the success of the consultation that land agent Hugo Mallaby from Cambridgeshire CFE provided for Norfolk CFE (Norfolk County Council, 2017: 19-32) between 2015 and 2017, after which Norfolk County Council implemented many of the estate management techniques utilised by Cambridgeshire County Council. Thus, this concluding chapter points to important directions for future research, primarily in understanding the risks and potential of the use of rural land as a financial asset by local authorities.

In what follows I will present the case that Cambridgeshire County Council engages with its CFE as an asset based germinate gem – undoing the widely held belief that the UK does not use publicly owned land as a true financial asset (cf. Christophers, 2017, 2018). I assert that changes to land legislation in the post Brexit period have intensified this process. Crucially I argue that this does not represent a new “regime of accumulation” (Schindler and Kanai, 2018: 828) but rather, it is the reanimation of what I want to call a petrified choreography of loss.

Issues regarding the financialisation of Cambridgeshire's CFE become particularly significant when viewed in light of the relationship between prime (Grade one and two) agricultural land and increasing land values. When viewed at a regional scale, the east of England has the second highest concentration of Grade one arable in the country (see figure 10). However, although the south east has a nominally higher spatial area of prime land, it is dispersed not only geographically, but also between stakeholders, as the local authorities in this region disposed of large quantities of their rural estates in the wave of disposals between the 1980s and the present.

The prime arable land in the east of England is, on the other hand, monopolised by Cambridgeshire CFE. By looking closely at Cambridgeshire's strategic goals for the coming decade, unarticulated principles regarding the 'diversification' of UK rural land proposed by the UK government's post Brexit agricultural policy come into view. Most pertinently, this regards the issue of using rural land as a multiple financial asset to – in Cambridgeshire County Council's terms – instigate a programme of 'doubling nature'. In real terms this means retaining and growing the current estate whilst treating it simultaneously as a financial asset. This is articulated in Cambridgeshire County Council's *Capital Strategy 2022-2023* in which they outline an intention to invest £2.7 million in CFE with an anticipated £5 million pounds return in an 'invest to earn' scheme:

The Commercial, Finance and Property Teams are considering strategies to maximise yield and protect investments. In order to increase our yield it is likely that we will need to consider investments where the risks are marginally greater. This can be achieved [...]

Our Multi-Class Credit investment is expected to be made in August, which will diversify our portfolio, add liquidity and is forecast to increase returns. This indicator projects our expected net income from all commercial investments against the 6% [...] it is expected that the portfolio will meet the target.

The minimum threshold for Property Funds is the return that would have been achieved if the money had remained invested within Money Market Funds, rather than investing it in property funds.[...]

Multi-Class Credit investment is expected to be made in August, which will diversify our portfolio, add liquidity and is forecast to increase returns.

(Cambridgeshire Council Council 2022:
65)

Put more simply, the monopolisation by Cambridgeshire CFE of prime arable land of the drained Fens interacts with the rising value of agricultural land in this moment of danger, in the formation of financial germinate gem. Prime agricultural land in the Global North is anticipated to continue rising in the face of impending food shortages related to the increasing devastation of agricultural landscapes in the Global South by climate change related phenomena. In addition to this, in the financial ecosystem – despite recent increases – interest rates are still sitting near sixty-year lows. Farmland in our current epoch, in Fairbairn’s (2017) parsing, acts like ‘gold with yield’ and – in relationship to UK CFEs, who are increasingly following Cambridgeshire CFE’s lead in expanding their rural estates and utilising land as a financial asset – will require further research.

Far from the romantic notions of CFEs held by public intellectuals such as George Monbiot (2018) – who calls for a return to this model, which he imagines will create opportunities for new farmers – this management of rural assets by local authorities threatens to intensify rather than dissipate monocultural arrangements across social, political and environmental spheres. The financial aims of Cambridgeshire CFE – in an area where the desert dominates ecological, democratic and economic life for many of its inhabitants – reveal the way in which rhetoric of a sustainable post Brexit agricultural sector acts as “an empty signifier whose potential resides in its multiple interpretations and contingency of meaning”

(Westman and Castán Broto, 2021: 2). This rhetoric is a discourse “cloaked in emancipatory terminology” which prevents “the flourishing of radical ideas” (ibid) and that ensnares the landscape in the interminable bear trap of more of the same. To be clear, Cambridge CFE ruptures the notion that local authority owned agricultural land acts as opposition to ever-larger industrial farm units – instead it appears as a mimetic reproduction of these units.

The Fens – that landscape whose aura “most approximates to Nothing” (Swift 2015: 13) – contains the germinate gems of its own vengeful hope. As the ekphrastic form of Cambridgeshire CFE’s monopoly over this landscape intensifies, so does a moment of danger. Like Johnson’s vampiric commodities gone rogue, untethered from their spatial coordinates, the very forces that promise to continue to increase the value of this land also threaten to subsume it. As the climate crisis intensifies and sea levels rise, the Fen landscape threatens to disrupt this process of financialisation through a return of the flood. As the process of the production of more of the same intensifies, in an ekphrastic swelling, a moment of danger gestures. In the words of Henry, the Green Party councillor:

The biggest risk is nothing is going to change. And if nothing changes, we're heading for self-destruction in terms of climate. We should be more concerned than other places because we are at serious risk of flooding. If the sea levels continue to rise, the sea defences will eventually break, and a lot of Fenland is going to be underwater. So doing nothing, businesses usual, carrying on trying to tweak the economy towards growth. That's the big risk.



8.6 Haunted by Nothing.

In its most strident form – more so than in the body of this thesis – I recommend that the development of a political geography that emerges from a conception of urban and cultural life as glittering and glimmering with the shards of the rural is of utmost importance. To be precise, this must be a theory of ruin rather than one of progress, circulation, assemblages or networks.

In the body of this thesis, I have made the case that the urban does not emerge rhizome-like from the rural, rather it is composed of endless iterations of loss, and bound together by silent gestures – “hands doing fast work out of sight” (Johnson,

2017: 24). The Fen landscape of this work gestures to the discontent inherent in the interminable arable task of Hesiod's farmer – of making nature's unstable and unpredictable, chthonic ground consistently productive.

As the climate crisis intensifies, the supposedly natural ground of food production hurtles back into view as a site not of progress but of rubble piled up – the accretion of silt that forewarns the flood. The main contribution of this thesis is in this call for a method for paying heed to the political and philosophical importance of rural life. As such, this requires that Geography revisits Hesiod's *Works and Days* as well as developing a Benjaminian critical vocabulary of the rural.

Hesiod's farmer – like Moses' Israelites – is barred from storing too much grain, not because it is immoral but because it is not wise. By stressing the importance of refusing to accumulate goods, these early writings bring to mind the radical and contingent possibilities that emerge from paying close attention to agricultural practices and landscapes. I propose that it is in the arable field that the past and the future reveal themselves as intertwined and always available in the present moment. Capitalism, that cult that “knows no holiday” (Benjamin, 2002: 260), is ceaseless in its storage of grain, invoking an interminable spatial organisation of sepulchures – monocultural arrangements of enclosures where petrified remains rise revenant in endless new forms of more of the same.

A Benjaminian philosophy of the rural presents the opportunity for a geographic analysis that recognises not only the ‘moment of danger’ in our current epoch but also the contingency and possibilities which are immanent within the relationship between the human and the arable field. Simultaneously the rural provides an opportunity to read Benjamin's work against the grain – mortifying and

dismantling the urban phantasmagoria in which his discourse is embedded in order to find new ‘truth values’ within his analysis. Nowhere is this more true than in the figure of the prostitute, that figure of commodity fetishism *par excellence* who is never given a her own voice, but is used as a mere sign. As explored at the beginning of this chapter – through the allegorical narrative of Johnson’s vampiric trio in *Blood Rites* – the figure of the prostitute takes on new aspects when situated in the rural ground of our current epoch. The Fen landscape of this thesis opens potential directions for thinking about Benjamin’s commodity as it materialises as both savage and porous on the stage of the arable field.

The Fen region of this thesis holds on its surface the strange temporalities that emerge from the banishment of the rural to the topological unconscious of geographic thought. What is at stake here is crucial. I argue that without the development of a critical Benjaminian philosophy of the rural in our current epoch, we will remain caught in the bear trap of Aristotle’s intractable arable unconscious, which animates flows and networks without acknowledgement of the theological, mythical and mystical materials that marble and vein the landscape. In absence of this cognizance we find ourselves, like the Fen region, haunted always by the desert and the flood – ensnared in a landscape populated by spectral workers, who endlessly gesture mournfully upon the surface of a field that “most approximates to Nothing” (Swift 2015: 13).

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