Representing the Rural:
New Rural Imaginaries on the English Stage since 2000

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A Personal Note

Before I begin, I want to briefly acknowledge that this project has been shaped by my own experience of living in a rural village near Mansfield, Nottinghamshire. I grew up in the countryside: my Grandad was a farmer and my Dad used to be a miner at our local pit. As a family, we have had horses for as long as I can remember, and I ride out early every morning before my commute into university. While horses may, for many, be a symbol of privilege, I identify as working class in social, economic, and cultural terms. My parents do regular blue-collar jobs, I am state school educated, and the first in my family to go on to university, but owning a horse confuses people. From my first weeks at university, I have found that I spend a lot of time explaining my class identity. While social class is now widely acknowledged as an infinitely complex, slippery thing, it is clear to me that rural class signifiers are still repeatedly misread: there is little space for nuance.

This project is driven by a belief that explorations of rural life are rarely afforded the complexity and detail that they deserve. As I will argue across this thesis, representations of the English rural tend to be a bit stuck: at best, the rural serves as a quaint reminder of what – and who – England used to be, and at worst, these nostalgic rural signifiers are weaponised by the far right and used to an exclusionary, reactionary end. Such monolithic readings of rural communities have only been compounded by recent political events – including the 2016 EU Referendum and the 2019 General Election – in which former rural Labour heartlands in the North and the Midlands have been depicted in reductive, sweeping tones as Leave strongholds that now vote Tory. Having the seventh highest Leave majority in the UK and now with its first ever Conservative MP, my own hometown of Mansfield has certainly been depicted in this way. Although I have always felt a deep connection to my community, the experience of studying and teaching theatre at a Russell Group university has threatened that connection and repeatedly called the politics, beliefs, and values of my friends and family who live there into question. In order to move between both spaces on a daily basis, I have to listen and tread carefully. This is work that this thesis tries to do, too.



My morning view on my horse, Hatty (December 2020).

Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of the English rural in contemporary theatre and performance. Here, I make the case that while a survey of theatre since 2000 evidences a relatively healthy engagement with the rural across a range of English stages, these plays and performances tend to be sidelined in contemporary theatre studies. In the pages that follow, I seek to address this neglect by affording the representation of the rural a central critical focus, with the aim of demonstrating the ways in which plays about the rural are both contemporary and political, making for a rich and stimulating object of study.

Defining the rural as both a material, lived landscape and an imagined space, I draw on work from cultural geography, political philosophy, and theatre studies in my first chapter to build an interdisciplinary framework for reading the rural landscapes, communities, and practices which are represented in the plays and performances that I have identified. I then develop four thematic lenses through which the rural has been staged in England in recent years. Chapter Two considers rural national iconographies, focusing in detail on Mike Bartlett's *Albion* (The Almeida, 2017 and 2020). Chapter Three turns to the pre-industrial rural landscapes in D.C. Moore's *Common* (National Theatre: Olivier, 2017) and E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2016). Chapter Four looks to rural work on the farms that are represented in Nell Leyshon's *The Farm* (regional tour of the West Country with Strode Theatre Company, 2001; Southwark Playhouse, 2002), Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005; national rural tour with New Perspectives Theatre Company, 2017) and Bea Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars* (Theatre503, 2015; regional tour with Perth Theatre Company, 2015). Finally, Chapter Five examines race and rurality in Testament's *Black Men Walking* (national tour with Eclipse Theatre, 2018 and 2019) and *White Open Spaces* (rural tour with Pentabus, 2006; reproduced online, 2016) which was a collaboration between rural-touring company, Pentabus, and Black-led touring company, Eclipse Theatre. Through these four thematic lenses, I explore the ways in which theatre and performance attend to the complexity of the rural on the contemporary English stage, making the case that the English rural is not singular, but plural.

Introduction

Economic and environmental pressures are rapidly changing the identity of rural landscapes, but the lives of the people who inhabit these spaces are too often neglected. Despite the global climate crisis posing real, pressing threats to these precarious rural communities, the processes of decision-making and organisation continue to be located in city centres. Indeed, this idea that rural communities are 'left out' of public debate and 'left behind' by metropolitan modes of governance has become more prominent in recent years. In 2016, both the UK's EU Referendum and US Presidential election highlighted – among many other social cleavages – the apparent disconnect between metropolitan urban centres and rural peripheries, with the socio-cultural disenfranchisement of the latter being seen as key to the outcome of these seismic political events. Since then, rural communities in the US and the UK have been subject to homogenous representation in the media: while rural areas in the American Rust Belt are evoked by political commentators to symbolise the social conservatism of Trump's particular version of the American Dream, the English countryside has been depicted in similar parochial tones following the Brexit vote in 2016. Attending to new representations of the rural is thus more pertinent than ever and this thesis contributes to a wider rural turn in the arts and humanities which seeks to afford the rural the central critical attention that it has long been denied.[1]

This thesis explores the representation of the English rural in contemporary English theatre and performance.[2] As a cultural form which largely finds its infrastructure in city spaces, theatre might not be seen as an obvious medium for depicting rural experience and as my discussion in the next chapter shows, there is yet to be a sustained critical exploration of rurality in theatre studies.[3] This is not to say

[1] This impetus to capture the complexity of rural experience is evidenced in Ben Stringer's edited collection *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers, Wild Things* (San Francisco: Applied Research and Design Publishing, 2018). Stringer wrote that the collection came from a shared belief among his contributors that 'contemporary rurality's multiple and particular cultural logics require more critical attention', especially in the latter stages of what he terms 'the ecstasy of neoliberal urbanisation' (p.v and p.4).

[2] My national framing of both the rural and theatre is deliberately bounded here. This focus on England is a conscious move towards a critical study of England and Englishness at a time when the relationships between the four nations of the UK are becoming increasingly strained. As I examine in Chapter One, these existing tensions between England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland were made visible in the 2016 Brexit vote, and, more recently, in the different national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[3] I work with this idea that studies of contemporary drama tend to ignore the rural as a theme and site of performance in the next chapter. As I will show, recent volumes on the landscape of contemporary British theatre – such as Dan Rebellato's *Modern British Playwriting 2000 – 2009: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Vicky Angelaki's *Social and Political Theatre in Twenty-first Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) – do not address rural plays.

that theatre and performance avoid engaging with rural concerns: as I will argue, despite its urban orientation, theatre has a long history of representing rural experience and this theatrical interest in rurality is visible today on a range of stages across England. In this thesis, I define a 'rural play' as one which is set in a rural landscape and which represents experiences – social, economic, and cultural – that can be characterised as 'rural' in orientation.[4] It is worth noting here, too, that I use the term 'contemporary' to refer to plays and performances written and produced after 2000. As well as being a clear temporal marker of the contemporary period, the new millennium also marked a moment in which rural concerns came to the centre of public debate in the UK via the BSE crisis in the late 1990s, the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001, and the Countryside Alliance marches in 1997, 1998, and 2002. In this introduction, I attend to the plurality with which the rural is represented in these contemporary rural plays, with the aim of demonstrating the many ways in which the rural is conceived on stage, but also in England's wider cultural imagination.

Representing the Rural: Politics

Central to my approach towards the theatrical representations of rurality examined here is the idea that these representations are in dialogue with the socio-economic and political contexts in which they are produced. In this sense, cultural representations of the rural are inextricably linked to the political representation of rural communities and concerns. As I note above, one recent example of this dualism at work – and one which shapes several of the plays that I discuss in this thesis – is the UK's EU Referendum in 2016. The Brexit vote brought the political representation of rural communities into sharp focus, exemplifying an apparent tension between rural peripheries and urban centres in England.[5] Voting patterns revealed a clear divide between the city and the country: where English cities such as London, Manchester, and Liverpool were strongholds for Remain, the Country Land and Business

[4] In the next chapter, I draw on cultural geography in my theorisation of the term 'rural', offering various ways through which to understand contemporary rurality.

[5] While Wales evidenced similar dislocation between the country and the city – with the Country, Land and Business Association (CLA) noting that 51% of rural voters voted Leave – this rural/urban divide was not seen in the same way in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The complexity of Scotland's and Northern Ireland's relationships with Britain – marked in their decisive vote to remain at 62% and 55.8% respectively – are different stories to tell and require their own space to be fully explored, beyond the confines of this thesis.

Association (CLA) revealed that fifty-five percent of voters in English rural areas voted to leave the European Union.[6]

Such ideological differences between urban and rural communities have been widely reported in both academic publications and the media since 2016. For example, the academic article 'Cities and Towns: The Geography of Discontent' by Will Jennings, Jerry Stoker, and Ian Warren examines the way in which questions of social class cut across these geographic lines. Jennings, Stoker, and Warren focus specifically on the differing senses of place between Remain and Leave voters:

> Smaller towns and rural areas tended to vote to leave, while major cities tended to vote to remain [. . .] One of the key features of the politics of resentment is that in small towns and rural places in particular, people express feelings of not getting their 'fair share', of being excluded from political decision making and of feeling that their interests are being side-lined as other groups (often minorities) are given priority by political elites.[7]

This idea that rural voters feel 'excluded' and 'side-lined' in social, economic, and political spheres is central to my argument that the rural is undergoing a crisis of representation. Place-specific identities are tied up in the 'politics of resentment' that Jennings, Stoker, and Warren identify; they suggest that as the country grows more diverse, the political elite fail to attend to the needs of 'ordinary' settled communities. This is not to ignore questions of class and race which are also central to these place-specific identities: these 'ordinary', rooted communities are largely represented in the media as a white, traditional working-class demographic whose members do not identify with or feel seen by the so-called cosmopolitan, metropolitan elite. As I will detail in Chapter One, rural communities are depicted in similar monolithic tones in David Goodhart's *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the*

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[6] This data is based on the Office National Statistics (ONS) definition of rural spaces which categorises areas as 'rural' according to settlement. In this definition, the ONS differentiate between four types of settlement in England and Wales: urban (with a population over 10,000), town and fringe, village, and hamlet and isolated dwellings. The ONS claim that rural areas stretch across the latter three settlements – town and fringe, village, hamlet and isolated dwellings – and this broad categorisation defines rurality as anything but densely populated urban spaces.

[7] Will Jennings, Jerry Stoker and Ian Warren, 'Cities and Towns: The Geography of Discontent' in *Brexit and Public Opinion*,<https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Public-Opinion-2019-report.pdf>, [date accessed: 14/09/2020], 54–56, p.54.

Future of Politics in which he distinguishes between 'Anywheres', a mobile, metropolitan elite, and 'Somewheres', who have a strong attachment to place, community, and nationhood, and in doing so, tend to be more socially conservative.[8]

This geographic and ideological gap between England's cities and rural peripheries has also been widely reported in the mainstream media. Andy Beckett drew a parallel between the UK EU Referendum and the US Presidential Election in his 2016 article for *The Guardian* 'From Trump to Brexit, Power has Leaked from Cities to the Countryside'.[9] Beckett identifies the way in which rural communities are left behind by the metropolitan drive of contemporary politics, claiming that 'cities may dominate our culture, but a backlash against liberal values and multiculturalism has been led by small-town and rural voters'.[10] Elinor Goodman also highlights this issue in her 2019 *Prospect* article 'The Other Left Behind England', suggesting that while the government is attending to the disenfranchisement of post-industrial urban centres – which is captured in the creation of the Strong Towns Fund in March 2019 – rural concerns continue to be pushed to the margins. As Goodman points out 'there is – as yet – no equivalent pot targeted at rural leave voters, although they, too, feel "left-behind", albeit in different ways'.[11]

Of course, the Referendum merely activated a set of tensions that were already there. From this viewpoint, the Referendum is just one – albeit significant – political event which has shaped cultural narratives of rurality in recent years. Another moment which brought the rural to the centre of public discourse was seen in the early 2000s where, as I state above, rural practices received significant media coverage following the BSE crisis of the 1990s, the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001, and the Countryside Alliance Marches in 1997, 1998 and 2002.[12] Writing on the way in which these events marked an urgent politicisation of rural life, the rural geographer Michael Woods terms this moment

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[8] David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017).
[9] Andy Beckett, 'From Trump to Brexit, power has leaked from cities to the countryside', *The Guardian,* 12 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/12/trump-brexit-cities-countryside-rural-voters>, [date accessed: 12/07/2019].
[10] Beckett, 'From Trump to Brexit, power has leaked from cities to the countryside'.
[11] Elinor Goodman, 'The Other Left Behind England', *Prospect Magazine,* 5 May 2019, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/rural-england-left-behind-brexit-hunting-ban-remain-leave> [date accessed: 21/07/2019].
[12] These are events which I explore in detail in Chapter Four in my analysis of theatrical narratives of farming.

the 'strange awakening of rural Britain'.[13] Political events have also shaped representations of rural communities since the Brexit vote: the tensions between urban and rural England that were revealed in 2016 played out fully in the 2019 General Election, in which the Conservatives gained historic Labour heartlands in rural areas in the Midlands and the North of England, with their promise to 'get Brexit done'.[14]

Representing the Rural: Culture

If the 2016 EU Referendum marked a moment in which rural communities spoke out against their lack of political representation in the metropolitan political arena, the vote triggered a number of cultural responses which highlighted the need to 'listen' to rural concerns. Such cultural studies detail and document the complexities of rural experience which I have argued thus far are lacking in media representations of the rural. While these studies have focused on the representation of the rural across a range of cultural media, including literature, film, television, music, and the visual arts, theatre and performance have been marginalised from these interdisciplinary discussions. For example, several recent edited collections have explored contemporary representations of rurality in fiction, film, and on TV, including David Haigron's *The English Countryside: Representations, Identities, Mutations*, which began with an essay by Brendan Prendiville on the politicisation of English rural life in the early twenty-first century – a moment which I identified above – and included essays on the cultural depictions of the rural, including Renée Dickinson's study of British television serials from the 1970s to the present and Georges Fournier's analysis of Patrick Keiller's films *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010).[15] Another recent edited volume on rurality is Ben Stringer's *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Wanderers, Farmers and Wild Things,* which covered a range of cultural media, from the

[13] Michael Woods, *Contesting Rurality: Politics in the British Countryside* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.1.
[14] The Conservative landslide victory in December 2019 has been attributed to the divisive leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and Labour's relatively neutral and unclear stance on Brexit. This loss of major Labour heartlands – particularly in rural, ex-mining communities – is marked in constituencies like Don Valley, South Yorkshire, which elected its first Conservative MP since 1922. For a breakdown of the 2019 election results and specifically, the break-up of Labour's 'red wall', see: Josh Halliday, 'Labour's 'red wall' demolished by Tory onslaught', *The Guardian*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/13/labours-red-wall-demolished-by-tory-onslaught> [date accessed: 02/09/2020].
[15] David Haigron (ed.), *The English Countryside: Representations, Identities, Mutations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

BBC's televisual adaptation of J.K. Rowling's *The Casual Vacancy* (2015) to the *Great British Bake Off* (2010 – present).[16] It is also worth noting that the nature writer Robert Macfarlane published an earlier article in *The Guardian* in 2015, where he drew attention to the dominance of one particular reading of the English rural – the eerie – citing the ghost stories of M.R. James, Paul Kingsnorth's novel *The Wake* (2014), the artwork of Tacita Dean, P.J. Harvey's album *Let England Shake* (2011), and Ben Wheatley's film *A Field in England* (2013) in his range of examples.[17]

Indeed, a brief survey of contemporary culture from 2016 onwards makes clear this continuing creative interest in the rural. While much of the work that I detail here was produced in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, cultural commentators also tend to read the work that preceded it retroactively through this particular political lens. For example, writing in *The Guardian* in 2017, Xan Brookes identifies a 'new wave of British countryside movies', citing Hope Dickson Leach's *The Levelling* (2016), Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* (2017), and Clio Barnard's *Dark River* (2017) as films which reveal 'an English countryside in crisis […] isolated and impoverished, stumbling towards a Brexit that it largely voted for'.[18] In the same year, Paul Wright's *Arcadia* (2017) called upon filmic representations of the pagan rural such as *The Wicker Man* (1973) in his state-of-the-nation film project. A similar interest in the rural is evidenced in literature, with Fiona Mozley's *Elmet* (2017), Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2017), Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018), and Ben Myers' *The Offing* (2019), all taking rural England as their setting and rural life as their focus. Televisual representations of the English rural have also been popular in recent years, which is marked in the continued popularity of *Escape to the Country* (2002 – present) and *Countryfile* (1988 – present) but also new shows such as *Country Life for Half the Price* (2020), *Our Yorkshire Farm* (2018 – 2020), and the BBC mockumentary, *This Country* (2017 – 2020), which offers a satirical account of rural life in a

[16] Stringer (ed.), *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers, Wild Things*.
[17] Rob Macfarlane, 'The Eeriness of the English Countryside', *The Guardian*, 10 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane> [date accessed: 30/07/2020].
[18] Xan Brookes, 'The new wave of British countryside movies: 'It's all about the mud and the wind'', *The Guardian*, 28 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/28/countryside-the-levelling-gods-own-country-abandon-inner-city> [date accessed: 29/07/2020].

fictional village in the Cotswolds.[19] Further, rural landscapes and lives are widely represented in contemporary visual art. One might look to Rosemary Shirley's and Verity Elson's *Creating the Countryside* (2017), which brought together the work of over 100 artists, including Grayson Perry and Ingrid Pollard; Simon Roberts' *Merrie Albion – Landscape Studies of a Small Island* (2017); Andy Sewell's *Something Like a Nest* (2014); Jeremy Deller's *English Magic* (2013); and Anna Fox's *Back to the Village* (2009).

Representing the Rural: Theatre

Despite the evident desire of cultural producers to listen to rural voices and interrogate contemporary rurality from a range of standpoints, theatrical performances are repeatedly neglected within these interdisciplinary discussions. Yet contemporary theatre and performance *are* engaging with rural concerns. In an article for *The Telegraph* in February 2018 titled 'Why Rural Life is Theatreland's Hot Topic and How Brexit Has Played a Part', the theatre critic Matt Trueman declared that 'the countryside is back in town' and drew attention to a wave of rural plays that emerged on London stages, including: Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (Royal Court Theatre, 2016), Mike Bartlett's *Albion* (Almeida, 2017), Stewart Pringle's *Trestle* (Southwark Playhouse, 2017), D.C. Moore's *Common* (National Theatre: Olivier, 2017), Simon Longman's *Gundog* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2018), a revival of Peter Gill's *The York Realist* (Donmar Warehouse, 2018), Joe White's *Mayfly* (Orange Tree Theatre, 2018), and Barney Norris' *Nightfall* (The Bridge Theatre, 2018).[20] As the title of Trueman's article makes clear, this renewed interest in rural places and rural lives has been widely attributed by theatre-makers and reviewers to the Brexit vote and specifically, the rural/urban divide that it revealed. This divided geography has shaped reviewer discourse, with Trueman's assertion that the 'countryside has taken its place centre stage' highlighting the way in which the vote has generated an impetus to prioritise regional and rural concerns. In a similar vein, theatre critic Dominic Cavendish in his piece for *The Telegraph*

[19] The rural is a familiar setting for televisual drama: examples include the BBC comedy series *The League of Gentlemen* (1999 – 2017) and ITV detective drama *Midsomer Murders* (1997 – present), in addition to long-running rural soaps, such as *Heartbeat* (1992 – 2010) and *Emmerdale* (1972 – present).

[20] Matt Trueman, 'Why Rural Life Is Theatreland's Hot Topic and How Brexit Has Played a Part', *The Telegraph*, 5 February 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/whyrural-life-now-theatrelands-hot-topic-brexit-has-played/ >[date accessed: 07/08/2020].

titled 'Want to Understand Brexit Britain? Go to the Theatre' argues that the theatre offers a space to 'map the contours of this land of confusion'.[21] This mapping is seen in the range of rural locations that these plays brought to London stages: Bartlett's *Albion* is set in an English country garden in Oxfordshire, Kirkwood's *The Children* is located in a farmhouse on the East Coast, and Norris's *Nightfall* and Gill's *The York Realist* are both set on working family farms in Hampshire and Yorkshire respectively. Noting this range of rural locations on the stage, Trueman goes so far as to say that 'the current run of rural plays is a kind of catch-up, maybe even an attempt to make amends' for the continued privileging of pressing urban concerns on London stages.[22] The Royal Court's Artistic Director, Vicky Featherstone – who is also quoted in Trueman's article – recognizes this need for a recalibration of the urban-centric focus of London theatre, claiming that "as a country, we are now paying more attention to the stories that are being told outside of city centres".[23] Trueman also quotes the playwright Barney Norris, who claims that such rural stories were already being told: "we were doing this anyway. The really interesting thing is that our plays – the bumpkins, as it were – are getting programmed in theatres".[24]

As Norris notes, playwrights have long been writing about rural environments, but this work has received little critical interest to date. While the current wave of rural plays constitutes a palpable shift in emphasis, it should be noted that theatre scholar Anna Harpin identified another 'rural turn' back in 2011.[25] In her analysis of Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (Royal Court Theatre, 2009) – a play that as I show in Chapter One, continues to be used as the dominant reference point for discussing rurality in contemporary theatre – Harpin locates *Jerusalem* in a wider trend of rural plays, alongside Martin Crimp's *The Country* (Royal Court Theatre, 2000), Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (Royal Court Theatre, 2000), Gill's *The York Realist* (Lowry Theatre, Manchester, 2001; Royal Court Theatre, 2002),

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[21] Dominic Cavendish, 'Want to Understand Brexit Britain? Go to the Theatre', *The Telegraph*, 10 December 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/want-understand-brexit-britain-go-theatre-2017-stage/> [date accessed: 07/08/2020].
[22] Trueman, 'Why Rural Life Is Theatreland's Hot Topic and How Brexit Has Played a Part'.
[23] Vicky Featherstone quoted in Trueman, 'Why Rural Life Is Theatreland's Hot Topic and How Brexit Has Played a Part'.
[24] Trueman, 'Why Rural Life Is Theatreland's Hot Topic and How Brexit Has Played a Part'.
[25] Anna Harpin, 'Land of hope and glory: Jez Butterworth's tragic landscapes', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 31:1 (2011), 61 – 73.

Butterworth's *The Night Heron* (Royal Court Theatre, 2002), Nell Leyshon's *Comfort Me with Apples* (Hampstead Theatre, 2005) and Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005).[26] Since then, Butterworth's *The River* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2012) and *The Ferryman* (Royal Court Theatre, 2017), Beth Steel's *Ditch* (Old Vic Tunnels, 2010), Dawn King's *Foxfinder* (Ambassadors, 2011), Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* (The Cut, Halesworth, 2013), E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2016), Ella Hickson's *Oil* (Almeida Theatre, 2016), Kirkwood's *The Welkin* (National Theatre: Lyttleton, 2020) and revivals of Churchill's *Fen* (Finborough Theatre, 2011) and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (National Theatre: Lyttleton, 2015) and of David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* (Donmar Warehouse, 2017) have all brought rural environments to London stages. These examples thus point to a longer trajectory of rural plays on the contemporary London stage which reach much further back than the post-Brexit turn that theatre-makers and reviewers have recently identified.

This renewed interest in the rural is not confined to London stages. Regional theatres have also staged rural stories in recent years: Donmar Warehouse's production of Gill's *The York Realist* transferred to Sheffield's Crucible Theatre in March and April 2018, while Eclipse Theatre Company's *Black Men Walking* – which I examine in detail in the final chapter of this thesis – had its premiere at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, before touring to eleven other regional theatres, including Nottingham Playhouse, the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, and Unity Theatre in Liverpool in 2018 and 2019. It is also worth noting here that rural-touring networks have been sharing rural plays with rural audiences for decades.[27] For example, Pentabus Theatre, which is based near Ludlow, Shropshire but tours nationally as the 'nation's rural touring company', has been taking rural stories from rural writers to rural audiences since the company was formed in 1974.[28] Recent Pentabus productions include *White Open Spaces* (2006 – 2007; 2016) – which I explore in my final chapter alongside Testament's *Black Men Walking* – Rory Mullarkey's *Each Slow Dusk* (2014), Simon Longman's *Milked* (2013 and 2015), Hattie Naylor's *As the Crow Flies* (2017), Joel Horwood's *The*

[26] Harpin, 'Land of hope and glory: Jez Butterworth's tragic landscapes', p.64.
[27] Rural touring networks play an important role in sharing a range of performance media with the rural communities that they visit, including live music, film screenings, dance, and drama. While this thesis is concerned with representations of the rural rather than rural sites, I explore rural-touring networks in detail in Chapter One.
[28] As I detail in Chapter One, Pentabus run a Young Writers Programme and several other workshops which support and commission new writers to produce rural work.

Wolves Are Coming For You (2017), Matt Hartley's *Here I Belong* (2016 – 2018), Deidre Kinahan's *Crossings* (2018), and Robert Alan Evans' *The Tale of Little Bevan* (2019). East Midlands based rural-touring company, New Perspectives, also continues to share rural stories with its rural audiences, with recent plays including a revival of Richard Bean's *Harvest* (2017) – which I examine in detail in Chapter Four on rural work – and an adaptation of David Rudkin's *Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You* (2016). Other active rural touring companies include Mikron, who are based in Yorkshire and are renowned for touring with their narrow boat as stage, and Eastern Angles, who are based in East Anglia, focusing on work that is produced by and for rural communities in the East of England.

However, despite such interest in the rural on a range of stages across England, the rural as both theme and site of performance has been marginalised in theatre scholarship. In *Theatre & the Rural* – the only study of rurality in the discipline so far – Jo Robinson addresses this critical imbalance.[29] Robinson cites Claire Cochrane's topographical observation that it is assumed that 'everything important in British theatre happened in London', and argues that theatre scholarship has consequently tended to be 'city-focused' with scholars mostly writing on work produced for the capital's stages.[30] I return to this idea that theatre and performance are largely urban media throughout this thesis, arguing that despite this geographic distance, there is a productive tension to be mined in the way in which urban theatres stage and inevitably shape rural stories.[31]

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[29] Jo Robinson, *Theatre & the Rural* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). It is worth noting that *Theatre & the Rural* is not a full-length book study. As part of Dan Rebellato's and Jen Harvie's *Theatre &* series – which they claim is designed to 'mould cutting-edge thinking about theatre into an easy-to-digest and easy-to-afford form' – Robinson's book offers a range of perspectives on theatre in and of the rural, despite its modest page count. *Theatre & the Rural* also came seven years after Jen Harvie's *Theatre & the City* (Basingstoke, Pagrave Macmillan, 2009), which might be illustrative of the metropolitan focus of theatre scholarship that Robinson identifies. See: *Theatre & series* webpage, <https://www.macmillanihe.com/series/Theatre-And/14409/> [date accessed: 18/05/2020].

[30] Robinson citing Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.3.

[31] Of course, the dominant economic model of theatre means that it is a cultural form which thrives where there is footfall, in large centres of population. While it is too early to understand the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on theatre, there is now scholarly opportunity to look at decentred, non-metropolitan forms of theatre and performance. For example, although many theatre companies have embraced virtual forms, rural touring might offer a way to stage performances that are compliant with social-distancing guidelines: rural-touring audiences are smaller in number and are often local to the place in which the performance takes place. This is an argument that theatre critic Lyn Gardner makes in *The Stage*, see: Lyn Gardner, 'Rural Touring Could Offer the Quickest Route Out of Lockdown', *The Stage*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/rural-touring-could-offer-the-quickest-route-out-of-lockdown> [date accessed: 09/12/2020].

Rather than viewing the urban centricity of theatre as a barrier for representing rurality and turning to the page or screen as cultural forms that are more commonly used to represent rural experience, I make the case that theatre and performance can offer ways into thinking critically about rural spaces. On the most obvious level, theatre and performance are literally place-making media: the staging of rural settings involves a set of practical decisions which can offer insights into how rural spaces are imagined and realised. At the same time, theatre's place-making – or even world-making – abilities enable theatre-makers to create rural environments for their audiences. This place-making potential is perhaps most effective in London performance contexts where the rural setting created on stage might jar with the metropolitan site in which the performance is located. In *Theatre & the Rural,* Robinson highlights this potential for theatre and performance to *change* audiences' understandings of the rural. Developing the idea of the rural alongside similarly fluid ideas of nation, she states that:

> Just as Jen Harvie argues in *Staging the UK*, that if national identities are creatively imagined, that means they are dynamic, and if they are dynamic, they can be changed (2005, p.3), so I suggest here too that these cultural mappings of the rural are also potentially dynamic and subject to change. Theatre, then, could have a key role to play in both producing and potentially changing understandings of the rural, challenging dominant views of the relationships between the urban and the rural which can affect the political, social and cultural lives of the nation.[32]

Over the course of this thesis, I develop Robinson's view that the rural can be made and more importantly, *remade* in cultural representations, with such discursive definitions of rurality guiding my analysis of the plays considered here. I also build on this idea that theatre and performance might be able to *change* audiences' understanding of the rural: indeed, theatre's live, place-making ability is central to the political potential that I ascribe to the form.

Given my emphasis on theatre's live, place-making potential, this thesis treats the plays as performances, rather than texts. In doing so, I explore the relationships between the representation of the rural that is offered to the audience in each play and the social and political context in which this representation was produced. My analysis is inevitably shaped by my own ideas of rurality – indexed

[32] Robinson, *Theatre & the Rural,* p.19 – 20.

at the outset of this thesis – which I have brought to the viewing of this material. As Cochrane and Robinson note in *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography* 'how we look affects what we see', and I am mindful that this thesis is written from a rural subject position.[33]

In most cases, I have either seen these plays live or seen a recorded version of the production.[34] However, my analysis also draws on a range of material surrounding the play-text and the production itself. Combining elements of textual and performance analysis, my approach to the primary material aims to capture the embodied nature of these performance events, giving a sense of the way in which the rural environments were realised on the stage. In order to do this, I make use of production materials sourced from theatre archives, including production photos, sketches of set designs, and pre-production advertisement material.[35] My analysis also draws on reviewer discourse to index the critical reception of the productions in question.

As for the process of selection of this primary material, the work for this thesis began with a scoping exercise in which I found and read a large number of plays – identified above – which all take rural life as their central theme. These plays were produced for London, regional, and rural stages, evidencing a rich engagement with the rural across a range of venues. This exercise enabled me to scope out a series of key themes and to identify recurring rural spatialities in this corpus of plays, which each carried their own histories of representation. These were the English country house, pre-industrial rural settings, farms, and recreational rural landscapes where Black experience is the focus. Central to this selection process was the aim to show a changing repertoire of theatrical rurals and a changing set of rural imaginaries, supporting the view taken here that there is not just one rural, but many. The structure of this thesis aims to give a sense of this progression and change, with Chapter Two beginning with the

[33] Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson, *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p.3.

[34] I have seen live performances or recorded productions of every play that is examined in this thesis, except for E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group*, Nell Leyshon's *The Farm*, and Bea Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars*. For each of these plays, I undertook further archival work to obtain production images and reviewer accounts of the plays.

[35] Given the number of plays and theatre companies under examination here, I made use of several different theatre archives to source my material. These included: The National Theatre Archives in London, the theatre and performance collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum also in London, New Perspectives' archive held at the University of Nottingham's Manuscripts and Special Collections, and Pentabus Theatre's archive which I accessed online via Shrewsbury County Archives.

dominant imaginary of the English country house in Bartlett's *Albion* and Chapter Five closing with Pentabus' *White Open Spaces* and Testament's *Black Men Walking*, which ask audiences to look again at such established readings of the rural and question the way in which rural landscapes are often depicted as white, monoethnic spaces in England's cultural imagination.

The Way Ahead

This thesis is structured thematically, with each main chapter offering a full discussion of one reading of the English rural in contemporary theatre and performance. The first chapter defines the rural and draws on work from cultural geography, political philosophy, and theatre studies in order to build an interdisciplinary frame for my analysis of the plays and performances. The second picks up on one dominant reading of the rural as national idyll and explores this collocation between the English rural and nation, with reference to Mike Bartlett's *Albion* (Almeida Theatre, 2017). Retaining this historical lens, the third chapter also engages with the rural past by turning to recent pre-industrial configurations of the rural in D.C. Moore's *Common* (Olivier: National Theatre, 2017) and E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2016). The fourth chapter then makes a move from such pre-capitalist economic readings of the rural past into the present, examining representations of rural work in Nell Leyshon's *The Farm* (Southwark Playhouse, 2002), Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005; New Perspectives Theatre Company, 2017), and Bea Roberts's A*nd Then Come the Nightjars* (Theatre503 and Regional Tour, 2017). Finally, the fifth chapter considers how the rural is activated in debates of nation, borders, and belonging and explores representations of race in Testament's *Black Men Walking* (Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre, 2018) and Pentabus and Eclipse Theatre Company's *White Open Spaces* (2016).

In each of these chapters, my analysis is focused on two connected points. First, I examine the thematic resurgence of the rural on English stages in relation to changes and tensions in the contemporary socio-political milieu. In the opening paragraphs of this introduction, I moved between political and cultural representations of the rural. This is a move that I make in and through the pages that follow, highlighting clear connections between the representation of the rural in the plays that I detail here and the social and political contexts in which they were produced. And second, building on

Robinson's claim that theatrical representations of the rural can produce and potentially *change* understandings of the rural, I consider the ways in which these theatrical representations can open up different rural imaginaries to their audiences, exploring the critical offering that each play brings to the conception of rural life. In the conclusion, I return to these two key points, evaluating how together these thematic chapters challenge any homogenous understanding of the English rural, with each offering a different, localised understanding of rural life. Indeed, the thematic structure to this thesis guides the plural definition of rurality set out here, with the chapters offering possible readings and interpretations of the rural spaces that are offered up to the audiences in each production.

Chapter One: Staging the English Rural

Introduction

In this first substantive chapter, I set out how I will approach the representation of the rural in contemporary English theatre and performance. The key terms here – theatre, England and the rural – make clear the many layers to this project, which draws on material from theatre studies, political philosophy, and cultural geography to develop an interdisciplinary framework for analysis. Responding to this range of material, this chapter is structured around these terms, and proceeds in three parts. First, I examine existing approaches which address the rural in theatre studies, taking Robinson's *Theatre & the Rural* as a point of departure. I then consider scholars who have given broader responses to place which often incorporate insights from cultural geography into their approaches, noting the ways in which some of these responses to place and performance will shape my own analysis of the plays in this thesis. Second, I highlight that the rural has for the most part been neglected in studies on contemporary English theatre and performance, demonstrating that questions about rural representations tend to be confined to discussions of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish theatre. In order to show this marginalisation of rural spatialities in an English context, I detail the places of contemporary drama that *are* of critical interest – such as the metropolis and the liminal spaces of what Marc Augé would term 'non-places' – before exploring why the rural might not be seen as either contemporary or politically important by researchers in theatre studies.[1] In the third and final part of this chapter, I define my focus on the English rural and justify my label of contemporary English theatre and performance which is deliberately bounded in its national framing. In this section, I point to the historic slippage between the terms 'England' and 'Britain' as far as the rural is concerned, and centrally address the idea of England, with the aim of critically examining many of the connected questions about Englishness and rurality that have circulated in political discourse since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Theatre, Performance, and the Rural

[1] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso Books, 2009).

Space has long been used as an optic for reading theatre and performance, with influential works including Marvin Carlson's *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz's edited collection *Performance and the Politics of Space,* and Joanne Tompkins' *Theatre's Heterotopias: Theatre and the Cultural Politics of Space*.[2] However, these approaches are most often applied to theatre buildings located in city environments. Work that does turn to performance in rural environments – such as Mike Pearson's site-specific approaches to landscape, François Matarasso's insights on rural touring, and work on amateur theatre in rural communities – tends to be centred on the importance of *site* and community to the performance event rather than the *representation* of the rural in the plays, which is my focus here.[3] Of course, questions of site are important to my analysis of the representation of the rural in this thesis, in that the places in which these rural plays are performed play a part in shaping the productions that I explore. While I do not want to separate questions of site and representation entirely, then, this chapter begins with an overview of what work has been undertaken on the representation of the rural in British theatre. I will then detail existing approaches to performance in rural sites. Threaded through these discussions is a national question, which I consider in each chapter: while there is critical attention to rural landscapes in studies on contemporary Irish, Scottish, and Welsh theatre and performance, the rural appears less often as a theme and site in an English critical context. This is the result of a set of political and cultural differences between England and its neighbouring nations, which I explore in the final section of this chapter.

In *Theatre & the Rural,* Robinson examines the rural as both a represented space and performance site in several national contexts. From the outset of her book, she makes clear that the rural has been marginalised from theatre studies and attributes this to the way in which established theatre

[2] Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986); Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995); Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz (eds.), *Performance and the Politics of Space* (London: Routledge, 2013); Joanne Tompkins, *Theatre's Heterotopias: Theatre and the Cultural Politics of Space* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[3] See for example: Mike Pearson*, 'In Comes I': Performance, Memory and Landscape* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007); Francois Matarasso, *Only Connect: Arts Touring and Rural Communities* (London: Comedia, 2004); Kerrie Schaefer, Delyth Edwards and Jane Milling, 'Performing Moretonhampstead: rurality, participation and cultural value', *Cultural Trends*, 26:1 (2017), 47-57.

buildings are conventionally found in cities. As I noted in the Introduction, Robinson cites Cochrane's observation of the prejudice in British theatre history that assumes that 'everything important in British theatre happened in London', arguing in turn that 'theatre scholarship is often city-focused, whatever the nation being considered'.[4] In Robinson's spatial approach to performance in rural spaces, then, she borrows insights from cultural geography and rural studies. Working with cultural geographer Tim Cresswell's idea that rural places are brought into being by a series of social, economic, and cultural practices, she also draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and Raymond Williams, in addition to key thinkers in rural studies, such as Nigel Thrift, Keith Halfacree, and Paul Cloke. In doing so, Robinson brings a range of perspectives on space and place into a specifically rural interdisciplinary framework, an approach that forms the foundation of my own definition of the English rural in the final section of this chapter.

In her survey of thematic readings of the rural across theatre history, Robinson is alert to the implications of theatre's metropolitan perspective, warning that it may have contributed to a 'categorisation' of the rural in which it is represented in strictly symbolic and imaginative terms.[5] Tracking recurring rural tropes from the Early Modern period to the present day, she notes that the rural is most often depicted as magical, liminal or 'other' across theatre history, with examples including the transformational forest in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and more recently, the 'other' rural communities shown in Arnold Wesker's *Roots* (Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 1959) and David Rudkin's rural horror *Afore Night Come* (Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 1963). As Robinson points out, one critical lens which has been central to reading such representations of the rural in the context of Early Modern drama in particular is Northrop Frye's 'green world'. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye identified the properties of the 'green world' in Shakespeare's comedies, with the premise that

[4] Robinson citing Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.3; quoted in Robinson, *Theatre & the Rural*, p.7 – 8. As I will go on to show later in this chapter, the metropolitan perspective that Robinson points out is most clear in scholarship on contemporary British theatre where – with the exception of Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* – plays about the rural are scarcely mentioned at all.
[5] Robinson, *Theatre & the Rural,* p.15.

> Shakespeare's type of romantic comedy follows a tradition […] which has affinities with the medieval traditions of the seasonal ritual play. We may call it drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land […] In all of these comedies there is the same rhythmic movement from normal world to green world and back again.[6]

Frye's definition of the 'green world' moves beyond the idea that the landscape in these plays is merely a backdrop to dramatic action. Drawing a parallel with the medieval tradition of seasonal ritual plays, Frye highlights that the 'green world' is predicated on cycles, with the natural world often having its own temporal structures that are connected to the rhythms of the earth and to the seasons. This notion of cycles is also central to Frye's claim that the 'green world' is not static: it has the ability to actively *change* its characters, a rhythm which he identifies in the movement 'from normal world to green world and back again'. Despite his focus on Early Modern drama, Frye's concept of the 'green world' has provided a useful spatial and conceptual tool which enabled scholars to think critically about rural environments in theatre studies.[7] Several features of Frye's 'green world' remain relevant to my reading of contemporary rural plays. The difference between the 'green world' and 'normal world' might be viewed as the movement between rural and urban environments – a theme which cuts across each of the plays and performances under examination here – and I develop Frye's critical approach to rural temporalities over the course of this thesis, outlining the ways in which rural plays not only open up a different space, but also a different time, for their audiences.

Theatre and Performance *in* the Rural

While the first half of *Theatre & the Rural* defines the rural through an interdisciplinary framework and explores its thematic representations across theatre history, in the second half of the book, Robinson addresses performance *in* rural sites, turning to the work of the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS)

[6] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticisms: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p.193.
[7] As one of the early tenets of literary criticism, *Anatomy of Criticism* is more often associated with textual readings of plays. Yet Frye's model is still used as a way of thinking about rural settings in drama today. For example, as I explore later, Graham Saunders combines Frye's 'green world' with Bakhtin's 'carnival' in his reading of Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Reappropriation in Contemporary British Drama: 'upstart crows'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

(founded in 2006), National Theatre Wales (NTW) (founded in 2009), Welsh theatre company, Brith Gof, and East Midlands rural-touring company, New Perspectives (who have been taking work to rural sites since 1979 when the company became the first rural-touring company for the East Midlands) in her case studies. Indeed, an alternative approach to this thesis project would be to look at the rural as a *site* of performance. As already noted, discussions of rurality in theatre studies tend to be based on site – with the idea of community-building at the centre – rather than representation, with work on amateur and site-specific theatre exploring the relationships between performance, place, and community in rural contexts. While these approaches are important – and rural-touring networks in particular are vital to the social and cultural life of many rural communities – such detailed analysis of rural sites is not work that I will undertake in this thesis. However, I will consider how the places in which these plays were performed – whether it be a London theatre, regional theatre or village hall – shaped the representation of the rural that is shown on stage.

Several of the plays discussed in the following chapters were performed on both London stages and in regional and rural performance contexts. For example, Nell Leyshon's *The Farm* – a play that I explore in detail in Chapter Four where I examine theatrical representations of farming and rural work – began life touring to rural sites in the West Country with Strode Theatre Company in 2001, before its London premiere at the Southwark Playhouse in 2002. In contrast, Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005) and Bea Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars* (Theatre503, 2015) – examined alongside Leyshon's play in Chapter Four – both premiered in London theatres before national rural tours with New Perspectives and Perth Theatre respectively. In her topographical approach to British theatre in the twentieth century, Cochrane points out that such connections shaped theatre in 2000, suggesting that 'the most appropriate image might be theatre as an organism formed from interlocking cells or clusters of activity'.[8] This idea that British theatre operates in geographic 'clusters of activity' is central to my analysis of the plays explored here, which are situated within networks of influence and movement between London, regional, and rural stages. These connections are also at work in less obvious ways: Simon Longman, whose play *Gundog* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2018) begins my fourth

[8] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire*, p.239.

chapter, was appointed writer in residence for Pentabus Theatre in 2014, following the national rural tour of his debut play, *Milked* with the company in 2013. Defining itself as the 'nation's rural-touring company', Pentabus does not only take work *to* rural communities, but also focuses on drawing rural stories *from* them in its development programmes, with the company's slogan reading 'in every field, village and street, there lives a rural story'.[9] Rural touring companies are also frequent collaborators with city-based theatre companies. As I explore in Chapter Five, Pentabus worked with Eclipse Theatre (England's regional, Black-led touring company) in 2016 to produce *White Open Spaces*, a series of podcasts about race in the countryside. More recently, as a result of the suspension of all live performance during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, rural-touring companies, Pentabus and Eastern Angles, joined Paines Plough's nationwide project *Come to Where I Am*, a series of twenty-eight placed plays that have been streamed online.[10] Such connections between rural-touring companies and London stages demonstrates the 'interlocking' movement that Cochrane identifies. While I am aware of the power dynamic embedded in these 'clusters of activity', with London theatres continuing to benefit from the bulk of Arts Council funding and drawing theatre-makers and writers from the regions, I aim to stress these connections in this thesis, highlighting theatrical interest in the rural across a range of stages.[11]

As Robinson illustrates in her examples, which include the NTS's first project *Home* (2006) – which was comprised of ten performances made for and sited in ten different places in Scotland – and New Perspectives' rural tours of Amanda Whittington's *Last Stop Louisa's* (2000) and Julie Wilkinson's *On Saturdays This Bed is Poland* (2006), there are a range of ways for theatre and performance to engage with rural place, from rooted site-specific pieces to rural-touring models. What is made clear in these

[9] Pentabus Theatre Company website, <https://pentabus.co.uk/> [date accessed: 24/06/2020].

[10] For more information, see: <https://easternangles.co.uk/news/come-to-where-i-am> [date accessed: 22/05/2020]. The performances are all free to access and can be found on Paines Plough's website, see: <https://www.painesplough.com/play/come-where-i-am> [date accessed: 02/01/2021]. Other collaborators with Paines Plough on this project include, Pitlochry Festival Theatre, Open Clasp Theatre Company Newcastle, Reading Rep, Sheffield Theatres, Derby Theatre and Theatre by the Lake, Keswick. The project builds on Paine Plough's *Come to Where I'm From*, a podcast series that began life in 2010 in which playwrights wrote a short play about the place that they are from. The performances are all stored on an app which presents a map of the UK to the user, enabling them to select a play from each region.

[11] Despite meeting the target outlined in Arts Council England's (ACE) 2013 'Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital Report', which sought to ensure that 75% of National Lottery Project Grants go to England's regions, according to a 2019 ACE report, London still attracted about a third of ACE's *total* investment from 2018/2019. See: <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/london-receives-third-all-ace-funding> [date accessed: 01/06/2020].

examples is the way in which these performances were written for the places in which they were performed, albeit to varying degrees. While site-specificity was central to NTS's *Home*, the rural-touring practices of New Perspectives might be understood as site-generic in that they take rural plays to rural communities. Yet this work is usually relevant to the time and place in which it tours. For example, Whittington's *Last Stop Louisa's* – which is set in a transport café on the A15 – was staged to chime with Lincolnshire's return to the East Midlands after the redefining of regional boundaries at the time of the play's premiere, while Wilkinson's *On Saturdays This Bed is Poland* detailed the lives of migrant agricultural workers across the East Midlands at a time when anxieties around Romania and Bulgaria's integration into the EU were increasingly visible in media discourse. While these projects engage with place and community in different ways and to varying degrees, Robinson identifies one question which can be applied to any performance in a rural site, she asks: 'How do theatre-audience relationships change when theatre comes to the audience, and to the place in the rural landscape where the audience is already 'at home'?'[12] Of course, not all audiences watching a performance in the rural will be 'at home'.[13] However, this idea that the audience might be *closer* to home is a resonant one and these connections between performance, place, and community have guided much thinking on rural touring and amateur theatre so far in theatre studies.

Community artist and cultural critic François Matarasso captures the value of this contact in his book *A Wider Horizon* where he terms it the 'art of closeness'.[14] In this study of Creative Arts East (an arts organisation that serves Norfolk and Suffolk), Matarasso explores how rural touring creates a sense of togetherness in the local community. He argues that these performances

> Provide reasons to meet and talk for weeks of preparation beforehand and, often, for months of discussion afterwards. As arts events, they offer memorable experiences, and can provoke lasting debates, becoming part of the shared history that is a basis of community.[15]

[12] Robinson, *Theatre & the Rural*, p.9.
[13] Despite this caveat, Matarasso notes in *Only Connect* that 'the proportion of non-residents attending village hall productions is still small […] with only 9% of people travelling more than 20 miles; nor can it be assumed that all these have come from towns' (p.109).
[14] François Matarasso, *A Wider Horizon*, (Wymondham: Creative Arts East, 2015), p.2.
[15] Matarasso, *A Wider Horizon*, p.12.

Here, Matarasso identifies the way in which performances in the rural – where the audience members might be, in Robinson's terms, 'at home' – can be community-making as they become a part of the social and cultural life of that particular place. In terming rural touring a process of 'co-production', he also highlights that these performances do not only draw people from the local community, but also encourage locals to play an active role in hosting the event. As Matarasso makes clear, the performance itself – whether it be a play, a musician or a stand-up comedy act – is just one part of the evening and the emphasis lies in the shared labour undertaken to host the event and the shared space taken up by the audience on the night. This idea that the pull of rural-touring productions tends to be in the occasion rather than the art itself is also highlighted by the National Rural Touring Forum who note that 'In the main, audiences attending rural touring venues are local community members. They might therefore be attending for social reasons, whether or not they have an interest in live performance'.[16]

Matarasso attends to the social and cultural value of rural touring in his wider work, bringing critical attention to a performance network that is often side-lined in theatre studies. In *Only Connect*, an earlier exploration of rural-touring practices in England, which was commissioned by the National Rural Touring Forum, he captures the reach of rural-touring schemes and argues that 'the ripples will run far and long – linking people with art'.[17] It is worth pointing out that rural touring is built on such links. In England, there are now thirty-five rural-touring schemes that come under the National Rural Touring Forum, which was established in 1997.[18] This spirit of connection is also evidenced in the distribution model itself which is comprised of a network of people who are required to work together to bring art to the village hall. From the staff at the National Rural Touring Network who structure the distribution of the work by providing a 'menu' for the promoters in each village to choose from, the volunteer promoters who select the performances each season, the locals who work together to provide refreshments around the edges of the performance event, and the performers themselves, it is clear that

[16] National Rural Touring Forum, 'Rural Touring in a Nutshell - a Brief Overview for Companies and Performers (2015)' <https://www.artsalive.co.uk/UserFiles/NRTF%20RuralTouringinaNutshell.pdf> [date accessed: 19/05/2020], p.1.
[17] Matarasso, *Only Connect,* p.8.
[18] The National Rural Touring Forum webpage, <https://www.ruraltouring.org/members/scheme-directory/?groups%5B0%5D=membership-level-1&region&genres%5B0%5D&limit=30&order=asc&member_search&members-page=2> [date accessed: 09/12/2020].

the rural-touring model reaches from the local place of each village hall into a web of wider regional and national structures.

A similar emphasis on the community and place-making properties of theatre in the rural is also evidenced in recent work on amateur theatre. Helen Nicholson, Nadine Holdsworth, and Jane Milling write in the introduction to *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* that 'Amateur theatre is part of the biographies of public buildings, integral to community-building and place-making, and central to the creative and cultural lives of those who, year after year, make theatre for the love of it'.[19] As with Matarasso and rural-touring theatre, Nicholson, Holdsworth, and Milling make clear that amateur performance becomes part of the social and cultural life of the places in which it takes place. While they are not writing exclusively on rural communities, the idea that the history of such performances is written into the biographies of public buildings emphasises the shared sense of place and sense of community which is often vital to theatre in the rural. The importance of performance in creating this shared sense of place is captured by Kerrie Schaefer, Delyth Edwards, and Jane Milling in their article 'Performing Moretonhampstead: rurality, participation and cultural value' where they examine performance practices in the market town of Moretonhampstead.[20] Here, they explore three types of performance – amateur theatre, community theatre, and carnival – through the lens of everyday participation. In doing so, they ask how participation in such performance-based practices might develop a sense of belonging to this rural community, drawing on methods from cultural geography and rural studies in their article.[21] However, these thick studies of performance sites are concerned with community-making rather than with the content of these performances and specifically, with their *representations* of the rural.

[19] Helen Nicholson, Nadine Holdsworth and Jane Milling, *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.3. One might also look to the village drama of Mary Kelly (founder of the Village Drama Society in 1919), which was often staged in rural locations. For an introduction to Kelly's work, see: Mick Wallis, 'Unlocking the Secret Soul: Mary Kelly, Pioneer of Village Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16:4 (2000), 347 – 358.

[20] Schaefer, Edwards and Milling, 'Performing Moretonhampstead: rurality, participation and cultural value'.

[21] In their study, Schaefer, Edwards, and Milling draw on the place theory of Edward Casey and recent work in rural studies (including that of Paul Cloke) to define rurality. See: Schaefer, Edwards, and Milling, 'Performing Moretonhampstead: rurality, participation and cultural value', p.48 – 49.

A similar interdisciplinary approach to performance in the rural is the site-specific work of theatre practitioner and academic, Mike Pearson, who demonstrates a longstanding commitment to place in his practice. Pearson's interdisciplinary perspective is most clear in *Theatre/Archaeology: Disciplinary Dialogues,* where, writing with archaeologist Michael Shanks, he proposes a blended framework for understanding theatre within landscapes. Pearson defines site-specific work as performances that are not just *about* the places in which they are set, but as 'conceived for' and 'mounted within' them.[22] In doing so, he emphasises the embeddedness of these performances, noting that their site-specificity marks a meshing together of the performance's 'then and there' and the audience's 'here and now'.[23] In order to bring out the subjectivity which is embedded in each individual's sense of place in these interactions with performance, Pearson invokes the Welsh word '*cynefin*' which translates to a 'site of familiarity or identification', defining the term as 'a ground level experience, landscape not as scenery but as a social construct, a palimpsest'.[24] Pearson's definition of '*cynefin*' as a 'palimpsest' captures both the depth of engagement with the site that is aimed for in site-specific work, but also the layering of individual and collective experiences that make up a sense of place.

This deep approach to place and performance is also seen in Pearson's practice, which has generated much critical interest. Heike Roms writes on Pearson's work with Brith Gof, highlighting the way in which the theatre company rejected purpose-built theatre buildings. She notes that

> Throughout its history the company adapted locations in which, as Pearson proposed, 'a Welsh, particularly a Welsh rural audience, would feel more at ease in' (Kaye 1996: 210) – here too we find a discourse of home deeply woven into the work. The locations included barns, chapels and farmhouse kitchens and, in its later site-specific practice, post-industrial sites such as

[22] Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre Archaeology: Disciplinary Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.23.
[23] Pearson and Shanks, *Theatre Archaeology,* p.23.
[24] Pearson and Shanks, *Theatre Archaeology,* p.139.

railway stations (*Pax*), disused car factories (*Gododdin*) and abandoned iron foundries (*Haearn*), all regarded as metonymies for Wales at large.[25]

Roms draws on similar ideas of 'home' and proximity that Robinson uses to contextualise performances in the rural. Further, Roms' note that 'a discourse of home' was 'deeply woven into the work' chimes with the subjectivity inherent in Pearson's use of the term '*cynefin*' as a site of familiarity or identification. Yet Roms is careful to point out that while such connections between location, identity, and performance might seem straightforward and coherent in the sites listed above, Brith Gof sought to actively challenge these connections between place and identity through their performances. Further engagement with the particularities of rural place is also seen in Pearson's project for 'Small Acts at the Millennium', *Bubbling Tom*, a walking tour of the village in Hibaldstow in rural North Lincolnshire in which he told his story of the landscape by drawing on his own childhood memories.[26] In her chapter on site-specific performance, Fiona Wilkie makes clear the political potential in the rural local in this walking tour. Noting the juxtaposition between Pearson's focus on the local and personal in *Bubbling Tom* and the stretchy, totalising narratives of globalisation that were circulating at the turn of the new millennium, she argues that 'the millennium is invoked here as an impetus for creating, challenging and asserting a range of "official" and "counter" memories'.[27] As this brief discussion of Pearson's work makes clear, this is not just a question of reach – in taking performance to rural landscapes – but also one of contact and the depth of this engagement between the performance, its site, and the audience that inhabit it.

Such thick approaches to performance, place, and community that are visible in rural touring, amateur theatre, and site-specific practice often require a degree of embeddedness either in the theatre company or in the community itself, which, as I have already noted, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Further, much of this work – both in terms of theatre practice and in the critical studies that explore that practice – is centred on site and reception rather than representation, which is of course my focus here.

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[25] Heike Roms, 'Staging an Urban Nation: Place and Identity in Contemporary Welsh Theatre' in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama* (eds. Mary Luckhurst and Nadine Holdsworth) (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), pp.95 – 109, p.101.

[26] Pearson details this approach at length in *'In Comes I': Performance, Memory, and Landscape*.

[27] Fiona Wilkie, 'The Production of Site: Site-Specific Theatre' in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, pp.78 – 94, p.88.

However, the interdisciplinary frames used to define performance in these rural contexts – particularly in the use of place theory and rural studies – are ones which are evidenced in my approach to the plays in this thesis. As such, I build my discussion on two key points that are threaded through the above studies of performance in rural places. First, I will be mindful of the metropolitan focus of theatre itself, a critique which is at the centre of Robinson's and Cochrane's work. And second, I will retain the interdisciplinary approach to rural place which characterises many of these studies, especially those evidenced in Pearson's site-specific theatre.

A Note on National Difference

What is made clear in the above examples of performances *in* the rural is the focus on Scottish and Welsh contexts, particularly in relation to the new national theatres. The National Theatre of Scotland and National Theatre Wales both follow a 'theatre without walls' model, taking their performances to as many places and communities as possible. In contrast, the Royal National Theatre – which is technically Britain's national theatre institution but does not explicitly say so – is building-based and operates from London's South Bank, the centre of the capital city.[28] This absence of a national qualifier speaks to a much wider problem in which England is naturalised as the hegemonic centre of Britain, and indeed of the UK. One of the main aims of this thesis is to draw attention to the national prefix in the framing of my project which seeks to explore the representation of the *English* rural in contemporary *English* theatre. Despite its clunky sound, my stress on the English context is underpinned by a deliberate political decision. The plays under examination in this thesis were all produced on English stages and I want to avoid homogenising Scottish and Welsh experience under the label of contemporary British theatre. This specificity is important because as I will go on to show in the

[28] The 'Royal' prefix is often elided, with the institution mostly being referred to as the National Theatre. Announcing the 2018/2019 programme, the National's artistic director Rufus Norris declared that although the building was awarded its 'Royal' prefix in 1988, the marketing team deliberately choose to avoid it due to its elitist connotations. He argues that 'This place has to be a community centre and the fact is that [using the prefix] may alter that perception'. See: Norris quoted in Patrick Sawer, 'National Theatre admits it avoids using Royal prefix for fear of appearing 'elitist'', *The Telegraph,* 3 October 2018 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/03/national-theatre-admits-avoids-using-royal-prefix-fear-appearing/#:~:text=Britain's%20national%20theatre%20has,it%20is%20an%20elitist%20institution.>[date accessed: 25/06/2020].

remainder of this chapter, there is already a strong rural tradition in both practice and scholarship in Scottish and Welsh performance contexts. As such, this thesis starts to fill that gap in relation to the English rural. This brings me to my second, connected point: this project approaches the *English* rather than the British rural. My insistence on the term English is important: the Scottish and Welsh rurals are different landscapes which undertake different ideological work in their respective national imaginations. The image of rural England has been repeatedly used to represent Britain and I will spend time exploring this slippage between the two national terms throughout this thesis. In specifying this English focus both on the landscape represented and the origins of the plays discussed, I aim to bring broader critical attention to the representation of English national experience.

If you look outside England to Scotland, Wales, and across to the Republic of Ireland, there is evidence of a much longer history of engagement with representations of the rural in these national theatrical cultures. To date, most academic scholarship has focused on the Irish rural. As I will show in Chapter Three in my discussion of pre-industrial rural England, the premodern Irish West became a cornerstone of modern Irish drama for the way in which it marked national and cultural difference to Britain. Indeed, the work of Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, and J.M. Synge at the Abbey Theatre was a national project that was critical to forging Ireland's cultural imagination and asserting its political independence. In recent years, contemporary Irish playwrights have addressed the stranglehold that the rural West continues to have over Ireland's national psyche, with writers such as Marina Carr, Enda Walsh, and Anglo-Irish Martin McDonagh all engaging with rural imaginaries in their writing.[29] Declan Hughes wrote trenchantly against this rural dramatic tradition, asking 'Who the hell do we think we still are?' in the title of his famous essay, where he noted that contemporary Irish theatre did not reflect the

[29] While I discuss premodern Ireland in Chapter Three on pre-industrial England, one example of a contemporary rural Irish play is Marina Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* (Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 2000), an epic tragedy that spans three generations of rural life in the midlands of Ireland. Given the prevalence of the rural in Ireland, a self-reflexive, counter-tradition has also developed, which can be seen, for example, in Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (National Theatre, 1996) and more recently, in Enda Walsh's *Misterman* (Black Box Theatre, Galway, 2011). In an interview with Sean O'Hagan in *The Guardian*, Walsh stated that his aim with the play (which is set in Inishfree, the place that W.B. Years celebrated in his poem, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree') was to show 'a rural Ireland that looked like somebody had taken a hammer to it'. See: Sean O'Hagan, 'Interview: Enda Walsh 'I Tried to Take a Hammer to Rural Ireland', *The Guardian*, 1 April 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/apr/01/enda-walsh-cillian-murphy-misterman-interview>[date accessed: 01/06/2020].

globalised Ireland of the Celtic Tiger period.[30] Despite such frustration with the Irish rural in theatre studies, a body of work has also emerged in recent years which is sophisticated in its theorisation of the temporalities and spatialities of the Irish West.[31] While I explore this work on premodern rural Ireland in more detail in Chapter Three in relation to my reading of premodern rural England in D.C. Moore's *Common* and E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group*, these approaches are critically focused on Ireland's historic subjugation to Britain, with postcolonial theorising shaping many of these studies.[32] Recognising this importance of place to Irish theatre, Chris Morash and Shaun Richards develop a spatial framework for reading Irish drama in *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*. In their book, they draw on theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Pierre Nora – who will also feature in this thesis – to develop their spatial analyses.[33] While Morash and Richards' chapters address the spatiality of Irish theatre, and particularly the rural West, they develop 'a conceptual map' for others to adopt spatial approaches in different national contexts, and this project is, in part, an attempt to respond to their invitation.

While representations of the rural do not dominate Scottish theatre practice or criticism to the same degree as in Irish theatre, the Scottish Highlands can be seen to function in a similar way to the rural West in Ireland in that both landscapes are used as a common cultural shorthand to mark national and cultural differences from England. Nadine Holdsworth highlights the way in which the Scottish Highlands have come to function as a particularly important national iconography in Scottish culture. Noting how the Highlands have been a site of political contestation since Culloden, the Clearances, and more recently, the discovery of North Sea oil in the 1970s, she writes that

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[30] Declan Hughes, 'Who the hell do we think we still are?: Reflections on Irish Theatre and Identity' in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (ed. Eamonn Jordan) (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), pp.8 – 16, p.8.

[31] These studies embrace the radical potential of rural Ireland for the way that it is often represented as premodern and pre-capitalist: the anti-thesis of modern Britain. See, for example: David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008) and Christopher Collins, *Theatre and Residual Culture: J.M. Synge and Pre-Christian Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[32] See, for example: David Lloyd's *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Movement* (Durham, US: Duke University Press, 1993).

[33] Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.5.

> It is a place associated with many of the battles and narratives of resistance embedded in the Scottish psyche in the face of the greater political and economic might of England following the 1707 Act of Union. For a nation intent on defining itself as other to its English counterpart, the Highlands serve as a useful marker of difference – geographically, culturally and linguistically.[34]

As Holdsworth notes, a famous theatrical representation of this landscape is John McGrath's *The Cheviot, The Stag and The Black Black Oil*, which first toured around Scotland with community theatre company 7:84 in 1973.[35] The play tracks social and economic change in the Highlands from the Clearances in the eighteenth century to the discovery of North Sea oil at the time of the play's premiere, and drew on Scottish cultural practices such as Gaelic ballads and a *ceilidh* in its performance, mobilising what Holdsworth terms 'markers of [cultural] difference' in both production and content of the show.

In her chapter, Holdsworth focuses on more contemporary Scottish plays which are set in the Highlands, including David Greig's *Victoria* (RSC, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2000) and *Outlying Islands* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2002).[36] In doing so, she suggests that since the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the Highlands have again become a site of theatrical interest due to the national autonomy that the landscape represents. She notes that 'throughout history, the Highlands have been a site of national self-consciousness, political battle and contestation, so perhaps it is unsurprising that Scottish playwrights returned there to explore the human potential to evolve and adapt as new futures beckoned.[37] In this sense, then, the Scottish Highlands work as a national iconography in a similar way to the West of Ireland: both landscapes act as cultural markers of difference from Britain and both are emblematic of political independence.

This connection between the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and the flourishing cultural landscape is also highlighted by Trish Reid in her article 'National Theatre of Scotland: Theatre

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[34] Nadine Holdsworth, 'The Landscape of Contemporary Scottish Drama: Place, Politics and Identity' in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Theatre,* pp.109 – 124, p.110.
[35] Robinson also discussed *The Cheviot the Stag and the Black Black Oil* in *Theatre & the Rural*.
[36] Holdsworth also reflects on the pre- and post-devolution drama of Sue Glover, including *The Straw Chair* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 1988) and *Shetland Sagas* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2000).
[37] Holdsworth, 'The Landscape of Contemporary Scottish Drama: Place, Politics and Identity', p.122.

Without Walls'. Reid notes the way in which the NTS is 'first and foremost a child of the devolutionary moment' stating that

> With the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, after a hiatus of almost three hundred years, Scotland had entered a dynamic new phase in its history in which a growing sense of distinctiveness and autonomy in Scottish culture was increasingly tangible and in which the performance of stories about and for Scotland, had peculiar currency.[38]

Here, Reid highlights that storytelling is central to the processes of national identity construction. Indeed, she notes that these nation-making processes were particularly important following the opening of the Scottish Parliament, an event which she argues marked a 'dynamic new phase in [Scotland's] history'.[39] The work of the NTS was thus vital: it had the task of staging stories of contemporary Scotland and sharing these with the widest possible audience. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the NTS's debut project, *Home*, evidenced this level of engagement by reaching ten different geographic locations. Reid proposes that

> By virtue of its geographic inclusiveness and pronounced regionalism *Home* emphasized and evidenced a confidently heterogeneous Scotland, while at the same time eschewing any notion that the nation could somehow be distilled in one production onto a single main stage in Glasgow or Edinburgh.[40]

This emphasis on plurality – on the different places and different stories that make up contemporary Scotland – captures the forward-facing outlook of the NTS – and indeed, of Scotland – at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Such a burgeoning of national culture was also seen in Wales following the opening of the Welsh Assembly in 1999. Like the NTS, National Theatre Wales (NTW) – founded in 2010 – adopt a similar theatre-without-walls approach, with the website proudly claiming that 'the nation of Wales is

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[38] Trish Reid, 'Theatre Without Walls: The National Theatre of Scotland', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 5:1 (2017), 86 – 97, p.88.

[39] A similar cultural energy can also be traced back to the failure of the referendum on Scottish Independence in 1979. After the failed referendum, a cultural revival occurred, which was led by Scottish writers including Alasdair Gray, Janice Galloway, and Liz Lochhead in the 1980s – a movement that has since been termed the Second Scottish Renaissance. In the absence of constitutional power, this vibrant cultural boom became a space in which Scottish voices could be heard.

[40] Reid, 'Theatre Without Walls: The National Theatre of Scotland', p.91.

our stage'.[41] As noted above in relation to performances in the rural, Mike Pearson's work with NTW evidences the same commitment to rural landscapes that was shown in his earlier work with Brith Gof in the 1980s where post-industrial landscapes were used as a key site of contestation for Welsh national identity. In addition to this critical attention to the rural landscapes in Brith Gof's and Pearson's wider practice, I would add that Kirsty Sedgman's work on theatre audiences engages with similar questions of the relationships between performance, place, and community in Welsh theatre. Sedgman's *Locating the Audience: How People Found Value in National Theatre Wales* explores NTW's heterogeneous approach to place and performance. In her study, she engages with rural communities in the Brecon Beacons when exploring Katie Reilly's version of the Ancient Greek tragedy, *The Persians*, which was produced by Mike Brookes and Mike Pearson in 2010.[42]

Despite the number of English rural plays that I have identified in this thesis, there is no parallel tradition of scholarship in relation to the representation of the rural in contemporary English theatre. In the final section of this chapter, I address contemporary configurations of Englishness following Scottish and Welsh devolution, noting England's naturalised but not codified constitutional power and the anxiety around cultural expressions of Englishness. I will argue that the lack of critical interest in the English rural in contemporary theatre studies is due to England's historic position as the hegemonic centre of Britain. Indeed, the cultural construction of the Irish West and Scottish Highlands are both predicated on being *independent* from Britain – and in their bare ruggedness, these landscapes are celebrated for being the opposite of the rolling green hills of England's pastoral idyll. Much of the anxiety around expressions of English rurality is due to its imperial associations: the English rural imaginary has historically been used as a key image within Britain's imperial project and continues to be used by the far right in present political discourse. Yet before I explore these cultural readings of the English rural in the final part of this chapter, I first aim to demonstrate the marginalisation of the rural

[41] National Theatre Wales website, <https://www.nationaltheatrewales.org/about-us/> [date accessed: 02/06/2020].
[42] See: Kirsty Sedgman, 'The Persians' in *Locating the Audience: How People Found Value in National Theatre Wales* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2016), pp.121 – 159.

from contemporary English theatre and performance, highlighting the palpable metropolitan focus of this work in comparison to the Scottish, Welsh, and Irish traditions of theatre practice and criticism.

As I noted in the introduction, what little work has approached representations of the English rural in contemporary English theatre has often been focused on Butterworth's *Jerusalem.* Not only is *Jerusalem* a key reference point for theatre reviewers when writing about other rural plays, it is also the point of departure for scholars writing about contemporary rural England. For example, it is the play with which Robinson opens her book and is also used by scholars outside of the discipline as the key example of rurality and Englishness on the stage.[43] Although my intention is to look beyond *Jerusalem* in this thesis, I will briefly address the discussions that the play has generated in contemporary drama in order to explore the ways in which they evidence the richness of the rural as a theme – rather than site – of performance.

Set on St George's Day in the fictional West Country village of Flintock*, Jerusalem* is a play which is about England, not Britain. Ultz's scenography attests to this reading: the forest clearing where Rooster's dilapidated mobile home is now embedded in the earth is replete with signifiers of Old England including a faded Cross of St George which is present before but not during this first scene, an air-raid siren, a Wessex Flag, and the Second World War helmet and goggles that Rooster dons in the first main scene.[44] Spanning a period of twenty-four hours, the play focuses on the rural community's celebrations at the annual Flintock fair – where there is much excitement about the brewery's sponsored Morris dancing and anticipation over when the current May Day Queen, Phaedra Cox, will return to the fair to hand over the crown – and simultaneously, the eviction of Butterworth's divisive protagonist from the forest clearing. Competing senses of place structure Butterworth's play: the residents of the encroaching New Estate (embodied in the Kennet and Avon council officials, Fawcett and Parsons) want to remove Rooster from his spot in the landscape; the youth of the village flock to him to indulge

[43] For example, cultural geographer David Matless references the play in the Preface to his 2016 edition of *Landscape and Englishness*. See: Matless, 'Passport to Plenty', *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016). Elsewhere, political theorist, Michael Kenny discusses the play in his book, *The Politics of English Nationhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and literature scholar Katy Shaw incorporates the play into her analysis of the use of the past in contemporary literature in *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-first Century Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
[44] Jez Butterworth, *Jerusalem* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), p.6.

in the Dionysian excess of sex, drugs, and general misrule that his place on the fringe seems to offer; and Rooster lays his own mythical claim to the land through his ancient Romany blood. Butterworth's slippery representation of rural England has garnered a range of critical responses, which I will now briefly detail.

While most scholars have focused on Butterworth's protagonist in their reading of the play, Robinson, Anna Harpin, and Simon White turn to the rural environment in which the play is set. Robinson uses the play to open *Theatre & the Rural*, noting how Butterworth offers a complicated representation of the English rural from the outset, one that she argues is 'double-edged'.[45] In doing so, she also draws attention to the contrasting geographies between the rural landscape represented on stage and the metropolitan cityscape in which the Royal Court and Apollo theatres are located, framing a tension between the rural play and urban performance context which she notes is commonplace in theatrical representations of the rural. In contrast, Harpin approaches the play through theatrical form rather than geography, reading it through the optic of tragedy.[46] Following Dan Rebellato's claim that globalisation has made it difficult for state-of-the-nation plays to cohere due to uncoupling of 'state' from 'nation', Harpin locates *Jerusalem* in a wave of other rural plays and placed theatrical responses which she terms 'the resurgence of the local' in theatre-making.[47] The tragedy that Harpin identifies is an ecological one: she suggests that Butterworth's play asks us to think about the land that 'we are preparing for the next generation' and laments the loss of Rooster and his mythological heritage which binds him to the Wiltshire landscape.[48] As such, she suggests that Butterworth's celebration of the rural local offers an antidote to the ever-expanding spaces of globalisation, writing that 'the preoccupation with geographical minutiae and the natural landscape marks a countermove to the non-spaces and boundary-less homogeneity of global capital and its devastating environmental consequences'.[49] It is worth noting here that the scale of Butterworth's production – with two West End transfers and a run

[45] Robinson, *Theatre & the Rural*, p.2.
[46] Harpin, 'Land of hope and glory: Jez Butterworth's tragic landscapes'.
[47] As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, Harpin cites rural plays such as Nell Leyshon's *Comfort Me with Apples* (Hampstead Theatre, 2005), Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005), and Peter Gill's *The York Realist* (The Lowry, Manchester, 2001), alongside other placed projects such as Paine Plough's *Come To Where I'm From*, which I cited earlier in this chapter.
[48] Harpin, 'Land of hope and glory: Jez Butterworth's tragic landscapes', p.63.
[49] Harpin, 'Land of hope and glory: Jez Butterworth's tragic landscapes', p.66.

on Broadway – was not concerned with the local at all but profited from a corporatised, global theatre network. Such an ecological reading might thus be undermined by the carbon cost of the play's lengthy runs at the Royal Court, the Apollo Theatre, and the Music Box Theatre in New York. Yet this idea within the play that the rural local constitutes a 'countermove' to increasingly placeless global structures is a dominant reading of the rural in the twenty-first century, and one which I develop over the course of this thesis.

Simon White takes the competing senses of place that Robinson and Harpin identify as a starting point in his analysis of the play. Identifying the way in which the Kennet and Avon council try to sanitise the wood by removing Rooster from it, he argues that 'the way of seeing the land that emerges from "hegemonic middle-class culture" is bound-up with the rationalist-capitalist mindscape that so dominates the westernised world'.[50] Here, White draws on the loaded terms of the art critic John Berger, noting that looking at the landscape is never neutral but is underpinned by a set of socio-economic structures that determine different 'ways of seeing'.[51] In addition to borrowing Berger's Marxist framework, White also draws on political-economy approaches to rural studies through his assertion that the battle over the land is bound up in a 'rationalist-capitalist mindscape'.[52] As I will detail in my review of existing approaches in rural studies at the close of this chapter, such political-economy methods are predicated on Marxist interpretations of land and capital. Despite this sophisticated theoretical framing of Butterworth's rural – where he combines insights from Tim Ingold, Raymond Williams, and Michael Woods, who, as I show later, are all key thinkers that have shaped contemporary rural studies – the remainder of White's article focuses on the character of Rooster and the Blakean illusions in the play, exploring Rooster's mythical potential through the lens of what he terms the 'mythopoetic Blakean imagination'.[53]

This rich intertextual dimension to Butterworth's play has determined how scholars write about the rural environment in which it is set. Compared to the Pied Piper, Puck, Pan, and even Christ in his

[50] Simon White, 'The Blakean Imagination and the land in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem', Journal of Contemporary Drama in English,* 7:2 (2019), 259 – 280, p.260.
[51] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008).
[52] White, 'The Blakean Imagination and the land in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem'* p.260.
[53] White, 'The Blakean Imagination and the land in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem',* p.265.

ability to seemingly rise from the dead, Rooster is widely viewed by critics as a tragic hero of epic proportions.[54] Working with these epic and Shakespearean allusions, Graham Saunders views *Jerusalem* through the lens of festive comedy.[55] As discussed at the outset of this chapter, Saunders draws on Frye's concept of the 'green world' and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'carnival' to highlight that Rooster's Wood offers Dionysian release and a temporary suspension of order for the locals that frequent it. David Farrier also views the play through the lens of festive comedy, pairing it with Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* (The Cut, Halesworth, 2013) in his article, 'Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre'.[56] However, Farrier also details the mechanisms of nostalgia at work in Butterworth's vision of old, green rural England, citing Svetlana Boym's theorising on 'restorative' and 'reflective' forms. Indeed, nostalgia is central to many cultural representations of the English rural and I draw on Boym's framework in Chapter Two where I discuss national readings of rurality in relation to Mike Bartlett's *Albion.*

Holdsworth also explores these nostalgic resonances in Butterworth's rural and examines the way in which he engages with narratives of romantic rurality.[57] While her chapter is mainly concerned with social abjection – she turns to the denigration of travelling communities in the media at the time, marked in the Dale Farm eviction in 2011 and represented in Channel 4's reality show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2010 – 2012) – the final section looks to romantic representations of travellers.[58] This idea of romantic rurality is connected to Rooster's traveller status and specifically, the mythic quality of his ancient Romani blood. Holdsworth suggests that Byron's Romani heritage offers a 'useful cultural marker', outlining that a series of romantic images have coalesced around the traveller figure in relation to 'industrialization, urbanization, the onset of modernity and the technological age, which

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[54] For a full discussion of these intertextual resonances, see: Julia Boll, 'The Sacred Dragon in the Woods: On *Jerusalem*', *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & The Arts*, 14 (2012), 1 – 14.
[55] Saunders, 'Festive Tragedy: Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem (2009)' in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Reappropriation in Contemporary British Drama: 'upstart crows'*.
[56] David Farrier, 'Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre', *The Journal of Eco-Criticism*, 6:2 (2014), 1 – 15.
[57] Nadine Holdsworth, **'**These Green and Pleasant Lands: Travellers, Gypsies and the Lament for England in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*' in *Twenty-first Century Drama: What Happens Now?* (eds. Siân Adiseshiah, and Louise LePage) (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.175 – 191, p.186.
[58] Social abjection also guides Boll's article, 'The Sacred Dragon in the Woods: On *Jerusalem*', where she highlights Rooster's abject and mythic characterisation, reading him in Giorgio Agamben's terms as *homo sacer*, 'bare life'. In doing so, she states that the play is not just about the state of England, but also about the way in which England treats its outcasts (p.2).

prompted nostalgia for a preindustrial, rural world'.[59] Indeed, Rooster's innate knowledge of the wood attests to such romantic readings of the traveller and his rallying against the council's eviction warrant brings these two ways of living – one corporate and governed by the clock, and one mythological and governed by the rhythm of the earth – into full view.

As this brief scoping out of critical responses to *Jerusalem* makes clear, the play's commercial success prompted a range of discussions on form, intertextuality, class, and Englishness in contemporary theatre. While rurality is not the central critical focus of all of these contributions, these questions are inextricably linked to the rural landscape in which the play is set. For example, formal readings of the play are grounded in Frye's concept of the 'green world' and the carnivalesque properties of Rooster's Wood; class is explored through the lens of the traveller and rural labour (note, for example, Davey's description of his work at the abattoir); and Englishness is navigated through symbolic rural customs – seen most clearly in the Morris dancing and the May Day pageant at the Flintock Fair – but also via the deep mythologies that Rooster claims are rooted in his spot of the English earth. While these discussions may not explicitly be about rurality, then, I suggest that the play has opened up the English rural as a site of academic inquiry in contemporary theatre and performance.

Jerusalem also sets up a series of recurring themes about the rural that I take forward in my analysis of the plays in this thesis. First, the play explores the metonymic relationship between the rural and English national identity, not least through its loaded title but also through the romantic ramblings of the Professor, who celebrates May Day customs: he later declares that this forest clearing offers 'A time to commune with the flora and fauna of this enchanted isle. To abandon oneself to the rhythms of the earth'.[60] This national reading of the English rural registers most clearly in Chapter Two, 'Rural and Nation', where I examine the English country garden in Mike Bartlett's *Albion*. Second, as Paul Kingsnorth notes in his essay in the programme for the Apollo production in 2010, the play asks its

[59] Holdsworth, **'**These Green and Pleasant Lands: Travellers, Gypsies and the Lament for England in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*', p.186. David Kerler also views Rooster as the embodiment of this anti-capitalist, pre-industrial impulse and with reference to Blake's original verse, explores what 'the dark satanic mills' might look like in the contemporary moment. See: Kerler, 'Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem and Postmodern Precariousness' in *Of Precariousness: Vulnerabilities, Responsibilities, Communities in 21st-Century British Drama and Theatre* (eds. Mireia Aragay and Martin Middeke) (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2017), pp.63 – 77.
[60] Butterworth, *Jerusalem,* p.52.

audiences to think about how rural spaces are governed: who has the rightful claim to the land, Rooster or the Kennet and Avon council?[61] Such questions run through each chapter of this thesis but are perhaps most clear in Chapter Three in my analysis of D.C. Moore's *Common* in relation to the Enclosure Acts, in Chapter Four where I consider the changing nature of agricultural work and the role of the government and big corporations in these changes, and in Chapter Five where I examine the racialisation of the rural, asking how Pentabus' and Eclipse's *White Open Spaces* and Testament's *Black Men Walking* explore the politics of belonging for Black people. Third, while the play is embedded in an English context, as Harpin points out, the play is also concerned with regional and local identities. This celebration of the rural local – played out most clearly in Davey's stubborn localism where he declares that his 'ears pop' if he leaves Wiltshire – chimes with a wider movement in which local, placed perspectives represent what Harpin terms a 'countermove' or even an antidote to the placeless structures of neoliberal globalisation.[62] This positioning of the rural local against urban modernity is a familiar mode of understanding and representing the rural which I examine in each chapter. Finally, I suggest that threaded through each of these points is a sense that the old rural England that Butterworth represents on stage is disappearing from view. This registering of a rural temporality – one that is responsive to the ground and its mythic, seasonal rhythms – against the notional speed of the increasingly urban present comes into play in each of my chapters, where I explore not only the different rural spatialities on stage, but also the different temporalities that underpin them.

The Places of Contemporary English Theatre[63]

Despite *Jerusalem*'s potential to spark further academic inquiry, the anticipated 'rural turn' in theatre studies never really happened. A similar turn was anticipated in playwriting: Simon Longman – who shows a clear commitment to representing rural life in his plays – claims that he thought that *Jerusalem*

[61] Paul Kingsnorth, 'Oak, ash and thorn', *Jerusalem Programme*, <http://paulkingsnorth.net/2010/01/20/oak-ash-and-thorn/> [date accessed: 24/06/2020].
[62] Butterworth, *Jerusalem,* p.24; Harpin, 'Land of hope and glory: Jez Butterworth's tragic landscapes', p.66.
[63] While most of the playwrights detailed below were born in England and produce plays for English theatres, there is one exception: the Scottish playwright, David Greig. I have included Greig as a key playwright of the placeless tradition, who often produces work for English stages. As I will detail, he moves between placed plays set in Scotland and non-places, such as airports and train stations.

would prompt a 'big re-energising of rural stories', but notes that this theatrical interest in the rural took a while to develop.[64] As I identified in the introduction to this thesis, rural plays were staged before and after *Jerusalem*, but these were not commented on until the EU Referendum, which prompted, at best, an attempt to represent rural life in the metropolitan cultural arena, and, at worst, what playwright Barney Norris termed 'a vulture tourism' in which theatre-makers turned to rural environments to try and make sense of the division between urban centres and rural peripheries that the vote revealed.[65] Despite the number of popular rural plays by established playwrights that I identified in my introduction, such as Caryl Churchill's *Fen* (University of Essex Theatre, 1983) and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (Traverse Theatre, 1976), Martin Crimp's *The Country* (Royal Court Theatre, 2000), Peter Gill's *The York Realist* (Lowry Theatre, London, 2001), Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005) and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (Royal Court Theatre, 2016) and *The Welkin* (Lyttleton Theatre: National Theatre, 2020); the work of playwrights such as Nell Leyshon, Simon Longman, and Barney Norris, who demonstrate a consistent engagement with rural lives across their work; and theatre-makers such as Gavin Stride (the former Artistic Director of New Perspectives, now Farnham Maltings), who have been taking rural stories to rural communities for decades, this work has not received a great deal of critical attention.

With the exception of Vicky Angelaki's chapter 'The Country and the City in Post-War British Playwriting: Lyricism Interrupted' in the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to British Playwriting Since 1945*, there has been little critical attention given to rural environments in contemporary theatre studies.[66] A brief scoping of recent collections makes clear the urban focus of the field, with Dan Rebellato's *Modern British Playwriting 2000 – 2009: Voices, Documents, New*

[64] Simon Longman quoted in Matt Trueman, 'Why Rural life is theatreland's hot topic - and how Brexit has played a part'.

[65] Barney Norris in an interview with Daisy Bowie-Sell, 'Barney Norris: 'Brexit is the reason for all the rural plays around at the moment', *What's On Stage*, 3 May 2018, <https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/barney-norris-rural-plays-nightfall-interview-bridge_46481.html> [date accessed: 25/05/2020].

[66] As her title implies, Angelaki draws on Raymond Williams' seminal text, *The Country and the City* to explore the different urban and rural spatialities in contemporary British drama. Framing her discussion through Martin Crimp's *The Country* (Royal Court Theatre, 2000) and *The City* (Royal Court Theatre, 2008) she goes on to problematise the country/city binary, calling for 'a dissolution of the binary and for an essential synthesis in how we view both spaces (urban and rural), [one that] does not seek to smooth out or flatten individual characteristics' (p.3) In her survey of contemporary British playwriting – which ranges from the country house of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* to the unnamed city that buzzes in the background of Simon Stephens' *Pornography* – Angelaki makes clear that there are multiple urbans and rurals, in addition to the many spaces in between.

Interpretations (2013), Angelaki's edited collection *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground* (2013), Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage's edited collection *Twenty-first Century Drama: What Happens Now?* (2016), and Angelaki's *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (2017) all turning to work that is predominantly set and performed in city environments (in most cases, London).[67] And while the commercially and critically popular playwrights that recur in these collections – such as Martin Crimp, Mark Ravenhill, Caryl Churchill, and debbie tucker green – turn to a range of spatialities in their work, these are mainly urban in their configuration. City environments might be seen as default in these contemporary plays, then, particularly those that are produced and staged in London.[68] For example, the noise of the city is marked in Crimp's *The City* (Royal Court Theatre, 2008) and Churchill's *Love and Information* (Royal Court Theatre, 2012), while the heady consumerism of city life is captured in Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (Finborough Theatre, 1996) and Dennis Kelly's *Love and Money* (Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, 2006). A theatrical interest in liminal spaces is also evidenced in contemporary playwriting, such as the hotel room in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (Royal Court Upstairs, 1995) and the train station and airport in David Greig's *Europe* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 1994) and *San Diego* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2003). A similar international reach is also evidenced in tucker green's work, with *truth and reconciliation* (Royal Court Theatre, 2011) shifting between Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, and *ear for eye* (Royal Court Theatre, 2018) oscillating between unnamed locations in the UK and US. Furthering Robinson's claim that the London-centricity of performance *sites* render theatre scholarship 'city-focused', it is my contention here that this is also a question of *representation*: I suggest that the urban steer of contemporary playwriting has shaped approaches in theatre studies.

[67] Rebellato, *Modern British Playwriting 2000 – 2009: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*; Vicky Angelaki (ed.), *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Adiseshiah and LePage (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*; Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain*.

[68] As I have already noted, this is *not* the case for contemporary Scottish and Welsh drama. In order to acknowledge these national differences, I call for specificity when applying the label 'contemporary British theatre', asking which of the three nations within Britain is under consideration.

Contemporary plays that can be defined in loose terms as 'social realism' often take urban environments as their settings. In *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: From Margins to Mainstream*, Lynette Goddard examines the work of Roy Williams, Bola Agbaje, debbie tucker green, and Kwame Kwei-Armah, and explores the spatialities at work in their plays, including the inner-city street in Williams and the council estate in Agbaje.[69] Where Goddard addresses the spatiality of council estates in Agbaje's *Gone Too Far!* (Royal Court Theatre, 2007) and *Off the Endz* (Royal Court Theatre, 2010) and Williams' *Fallout* (Royal Court Theatre, 2003), Katie Beswick affords the council estate a central critical focus in her book, *Social Housing in Performance: The English Council Estate on and off Stage.*[70] In her study, Beswick foregrounds her own lived experience in a similar way to my own approach at the outset of this thesis. She uses an autoethnographic method and draws on her experiences of living, visiting, and working on council estates when tracking their representations across popular culture, mainstream theatre, and in site-specific and applied performance, with case studies ranging from Cheryl Cole to Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (Royal Court Theatre, 1982). In her interdisciplinary spatial approach, she combines insights from Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, Soja's concept of 'third space', and the place theory of Michel De Certeau and Cresswell.[71] While Lefebvre, Soja, and De Certeau in particular are considered urban theorists, such an embedded approach to place is visible in work on site-based discussions of performance *in* the rural – particularly in that of community, amateur, and site-specific theatre that I detailed earlier in this chapter.

However, as with this project, Beswick's work is predominantly concerned with representation. While she does turn to a range of applied theatre practices that are located in council estates (including Box Clever's *Puck of the Estate* (2009–2012)), she notes that the 'overarching aim of *Social Housing in Performance* is to explore the role theatrical and other (newspaper, television, film, visual art)

[69] Lynette Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: From Margins to Mainstream* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
[70] Katie Beswick, *Social Housing in Performance: The English Council Estate on and off Stage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). While of course not all council estates are located in cities, the case studies that she considers are predominantly urban in their configuration.
[71] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 1991); Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 1996); Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (California: The University of California Press, 2011); Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2011).

representational practices might play in 'producing' (Lefebvre 1991) estate spaces'.[72] Indeed, Lefebvre's triadic understanding of space as 'conceived', 'perceived', and 'lived' is evidenced in her attention to political and cultural representations of council estates and everyday performance of 'council estateness', where she problematises questions of authenticity, asking how these representations, practices, and lived experiences shape each other. I will take a similar place-oriented approach in this thesis, but will focus in turn on representations of different *rural* spatial imaginaries: on the English country garden in Chapter Two, pre-industrial rural landscapes in Chapter Three, farms in Chapter Four, and open landscapes of rural recreation (such as the Peak District) in Chapter Five.

Another spatiality that is explored in contemporary theatre studies is that which Marc Augé would term the 'non-place'. Drawing on airports, train stations, hotels, and motorways in his list of examples, Augé defines the non-place as 'a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity'. [73] Yet, these are not empty: they are transitional spaces that people are required to move through in the exchange of capital; as Augé points out, 'the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it'.[74] As noted above, the non-place is increasingly present in contemporary drama, prompting a number of spatial approaches to the analysis of place and capital. Such spatial approaches are particularly marked in scholarship on Greig, who turns to the non-place in several of his plays, such as *Europe* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 1994) and *San Diego* (Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, 2003). For example, Clare Wallace captures the way in which Greig oscillates between located and unlocated settings in his plays, writing that 'Greig's work is emblematic of the cosmopolitan cultural practice that Dan Rebellato outlines in *Theatre & Globalization*, one that is aware of its roots while continually striving for the possibilities of exchange and engagement with a wider world of human concerns and responsibilities'.[75]

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[72] Beswick, *Social Housing in Performance*, p.4.
[73] Augé, *Non-Places,* p.63
[74] Augé, *Non-Places*, p.81
[75] Clare Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.232. For an alternative approach to discourses of postmodernity and globalisation in Greig's drama, see: Dan Rebellato, 'Local Hero: The Places of David Greig'*, Contemporary Theatre Review*, 26:1 (2016), 9 – 18. Here, he draws attention to the placed work of Greig – visible in plays such as *Victoria* (RSC, 2000) – which parallels his global approach.

In a recent article titled 'Nation and Negation (Terrible Rage)', Rebellato takes this discussion of non-places further and goes as far to identify a trend of theatrical 'placelessness' in contemporary British theatre.[76] With reference to the UK's EU Referendum in 2016, Rebellato turns to Goodhart's sweeping distinction between 'Anywheres' (mobile, metropolitan Remain voters) and 'Somewheres' (Leave voters whose identities are bound *in* place: in local, regional, and national structures) to explore the way in which theatre – figured here as a liberal, metropolitan institution – might negotiate such questions of nation, borders, and belonging that were circulating in media discourse at the time. Covering a range of work – from Greig to Churchill, Kane to Stephens – Rebellato identifies playwrights who fracture, distort, and even do away with place altogether in their writing. After examining plays that are denuded of spatial reference such as Sam Steiner's *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons* (Warwick Arts Centre, 2015) and those that are set in variations on what Augé would term 'non-places', such as the hotel room in Kane's *Blasted,* Rebellato suggests that

> Place is variously estranged, unspecified, annulled, orphaned, globalized, generalized, combined, relativized and scenographically anonymized. The question to consider then is whether this strong tendency in British playwriting, in Goodhart's terms, expresses an Anywhere ideology that itself expresses the interests of global capital.[77]

In tracing how place is refigured through the mechanisms of global capital in these plays, Rebellato does question if this deconstructive, placeless approach in the theatre sells itself out to homogenous global discourses and expresses an 'Anywhere' ideology. Yet he is optimistic about the potential of these liminal spatialities in the theatre, suggesting that 'these plays perhaps are an attempt to stage a community without boundaries, without identity, a world of infinite democracy, a gesture towards a world between and beyond somewhere and anywhere'.[78] Here, Rebellato points to the theatre's potential to stage the idea of a borderless, placeless community implicit in the post-nation narratives of the Remain camp. A similar impulse to move away from national labels is marked in Adiseshiah and LePage's edited collection *Twenty-first Century Drama: What Happens Now?* While they claim in their

[76] Dan Rebellato, 'Nation and Negation (Terrible Rage)', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 6:1 (2018), 15 – 39.
[77] Rebellato, 'Nation and Negation (Terrible Rage)', p.29.
[78] Rebellato, 'Nation and Negation (Terrible Rage)', p.36.

introduction that the essays that follow take on a British perspective, they highlight that 'British is excluded from [their] volume's title and rationale'.[79] Noting the way in which this national prefix demands a complex taxonomical exercise due to the 'global composition' of many theatre companies and the global reach of the social, political, and economic issues that they explore, Adiseshiah and LePage deliberately abandon the British qualifier in their study of contemporary drama.

In a recent article 'Small Stories, Local Places: A Place-Oriented Approach to Rural Crises', I respond to Rebellato's idea of theatrical placelessness and propose that his deconstructive approach might exclude a seam of society for whom a sense of place is central.[80] I argue that while his article is insightful in its consideration of the dialectic between place and capital in 'Anywhere' narratives, the 'Somewheres' – on the inverse of this dyad – are left behind in this mode of analysis. As such, I suggest that this readiness to do away with ideas of nation and bounded placed identities might need to be checked, and I call for 'a parallel focus on place, region and locality'.[81] In contrast to Rebellato, then, I look to plays that stage communities with boundaries in this thesis: each play is located and engages with a range of local, regional, and national identities through their rural settings.

Despite such explorations into non-place and even placelessness in theatre and performance, the city contextualises these discussions. Many non-places – whether it be airports, train stations, or hotels – are, of course, located within or close to cities, with the city being the hub of capital exchange. In terms of performance site, too, the London-centricity of British theatre places it in what cultural geographer, Doreen Massey would term a 'world city', a nexus of social, economic, and cultural capital.[82] Several studies have already drawn attention to performance in and of the city, including Jen Harvie's *Theatre & the City*, Michael McKinnie's *City Stages: Theatre and Urban Space in a Global*

[79] Adiseshiah and LePage, *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now?*, p.2.
[80] Gemma Edwards, 'Small Stories, Local Places: A Place-Oriented Approach to Rural Crises', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 8:1 (2020), 65 – 82.
[81] Edwards, 'Small Stories, Local Places', p.71.
[82] Doreen Massey, *World Cities* (London: Polity, 2007). Focusing on these social, economic and cultural conditions, Jen Harvie adopts a cultural materialist approach to the production of and participation in art in *Fair Play – Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

City, Nicholas Whybrow's edited collection *Performing Cities,* and most recently, Angelaki's *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis*.[83]

In *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis*, Angelaki focuses on the city, and how it shapes both character and spectator. In her study of plays by Churchill, Bartlett, Kelly, Duncan Macmillan, Nick Payne, Crimp, Simon Stephens, tucker green, and Lucy Prebble, Angelaki highlights that in most of these cases, the city is the primary focal point. As she makes clear in the book's title, Angelaki is careful to note the *British* context of these cities, stating in her introduction that she deals with 'new plays produced for British stages from 2000 onwards, with a distinct focus on the post-2010 period, in the aftermath of the recession'.[84] This stress on post-crash British theatre perhaps directs the metropolitan spatiality of her study, with images of the London Stock Exchange in the City of London emblematic of a financial crisis that was predicated on the placeless networks of global, invisible capital. Indeed, in her acknowledgments Angelaki claims that living in Central London – where such 'social, political, financial, environmental crises' were visible on the ground 'on such a large and illuminating scale' – inevitably shaped her approach to the plays considered in the book.[85]

Foregrounding the role of the spectator, Angelaki notes that the connecting thread between these plays is that they are all experimental in form and 'imagine the spectator as an individual in the sense of an elemental part of a community of spectators and citizens'.[86] It is important to stress that this 'community of spectators and citizens' is in every case metropolitan: the plays each address contemporary city living and were all performed in London. It is this performance context which is thus central to the challenge that the plays present to the spectator in order to disturb what Angelaki terms the 'dominant social and political narratives of neoliberalism and governmentality' that surround them.[87] She argues that the city is the fabric that connects these macro social and political crises to both the personal lives of the characters represented in the plays and the audience watching them: she writes

[83] Jen Harvie, *Theatre & the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Michael McKinnie, *City Stages: Theatre and Urban Space in a Global City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), Nicholas Whybrow (ed.), *Performing Cities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[84] Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre,* p.5.
[85] Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre,* p.xi.
[86] Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre*, p.4.
[87] Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre,* p.4.

that 'cities, whether named or not, feature prominently, indispensable parts of the protagonists' mental, emotional and physical constitutions, becoming the de facto locale of crisis'.[88] This idea that cities are 'the de facto locale of crisis' in these plays highlights the way in which the social and political crises that Angelaki identifies are not only geographic, they are also etched into the emotional and cognitive cartographies of individuals. In order to theorise such connections between the individual, socio-political discourse, and the built environment, Angelaki draws on insights from urban geography, political philosophy, and sociology, including the work of David Harvey and Nikolas Rose, who adopt a biopolitical approach to their analysis of contemporary cities and the neoliberal state structures that govern them.[89]

Although each chapter takes a different thematic focus, Angelaki draws up a list of themes in her introduction which she argues recur across the work of the playwrights that she examines, writing that the plays address questions of 'citizenship, community and responsibility, austerity, mobility and identity, therapy culture and insularity, urban alienation and mental health, science, industry and ethics'.[90] While the metropolitan context is central to her study of the spectator, I want to highlight here that the social and political crises that she identifies for the neoliberal subject are not uniquely urban. Indeed, it is my contention in this thesis that rural environments, despite their nostalgic and conservative associations, are equally contemporary and political. For example, in each chapter, I repeatedly engage with questions of belonging that surround *rural* citizenship, community, and identity, as I consider the ways in which the plays ask their audiences to reflect on the dynamics that make up a rural community: asking who belongs, who does not, and why. Such questions of belonging guide my final chapter where I explore how *Black Men Walking* and *White Open Spaces* write back to the hegemonic whiteness of rural landscapes. While Angelaki notes that the 2011 Occupy protests demonstrated resistance to the spatial hegemony of the superrich in major cities, in Chapter Three I turn to similar questions of public/private space, but in relation to Moore's *Common* – a play about the enclosure acts, a historical movement that literally marks the realisation of land as capital. This thesis also makes clear that the

[88] Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre,* p.15.
[89] For a detailed discussion of the processes of governmentality and biopolitics, see: Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Free Association Books, 1999).
[90] Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre*, p.11.

operation of politics is not confined to urban spaces: rural politics is a theme which I bring out fully in Chapter Four, with reference to the Countryside Alliance movement and other more militant activity of rural pressure groups. Questions of mobility into and out of rural places also run through the chapters here: for example, counter-urbanisation is considered in Chapter Two, where the protagonist of *Albion*, Audrey, moves from London to rural Oxfordshire to start a new life, while the pressure of external forces – such as the government and city-based businesses that seek to relocate their offices in converted farmhouses – threaten the agricultural landscapes in Chapter Four. Similar parallels can also be drawn between social atomisation in big cities and rural loneliness, a theme which features in each chapter; scientific developments might be seen in the technologisation of agricultural practices, examined in Chapter Four; and the urban austerity that Angelaki identifies is also visible in discussions of rural poverty, which circulate within each of the chapters in this thesis.

What is evident in this scoping of placed approaches to contemporary English theatre is the lack of attention to rural environments. As I will go on to argue in the next section, this can be attributed to three connected observations that I have made about exploring the English rural in theatre and performance. First, on the most obvious level, theatre often takes place in urban contexts, with London remaining the nucleus for theatre-going activity. This is thus a question of proximity: the stories that are told are usually urban because the theatres themselves are located in urban settings. When asked about the glut of rural plays that appeared on London stages after the UK EU Referendum in 2016, the Artistic Director of the Royal Court, Vicky Featherstone, makes this claim, stating 'We see the impact of not giving [marginalised urban] voices a space, creatively, whereas in cities, we don't feel the impact of not giving the same space to rural voices'.[91] Secondly, I suggest the marginalisation of the rural in contemporary drama is also due to its themes and representations. In fact, the rural might be perceived as the *opposite* of contemporary. As I go on to show, rural imaginaries are often associated with the past; they are often depicted in settled temporal terms and used to a nostalgic, conservative end. Given such associations of political apathy or social conservatism, I will ask whether this makes the rural an uninteresting object of study in contemporary theatre studies. The aim of this thesis is to challenge this

[91] Vicky Featherstone quoted in Trueman, 'Why rural life is now theatreland's hot topic – and how Brexit has played a part'.

assumption and assert that the rural can take its place beside the city in the discipline, offering a stimulating site for the discussion of place, politics, and community. And thirdly, taking this national labelling of contemporary British theatre studies, it is important to note that in the English context, the rural bears the indelible mark of Britain's colonial project and continues to be used by the political right to picture the nation in such imperial and regressive terms. In my deliberately bounded framing of the English rural and English theatre and performance, I aim to attend to this complex and often uncomfortable conceptual work with care and nuance at a time when tensions between the four nations that make up the UK are increasingly visible in political discourse.[92]

Defining Rural England

The final part of this chapter focuses on my own approach to the English rural in contemporary English theatre and performance. Here, I bring together a range of approaches from cultural geography and political philosophy to flesh out my definition of the English rural, with the aim of contextualising the different rural imaginaries that I explore in the chapters that follow. As I have already made clear, national questions are intricately imbricated in my discussion of rurality in this thesis. Thus, before I go on to fully define the rural, I attend to its English qualifier, noting the ways in which my work intersects with a range of critical approaches to England and Englishness that are circulating with a renewed sense of urgency in the contemporary moment.

As I identified in the introduction, questions of England's political and cultural identity have become increasingly prominent since the 2016 UK EU Referendum. While the difference in voting patterns between England and Wales in particular might seem marginal – England had the highest Leave vote at 53.4% compared to 52.5% in Wales, 44.2% in Northern Ireland and 38% in Scotland – Britain's vote to leave the EU has largely been represented as an English 'problem' in media discourse.[93] Political commentators such as Anthony Barnett and Fintan O'Toole follow this reading of the Referendum. Barnett, for example, wrote that the driving force behind the Leave vote was 'England without London'

[92] As I outlined in the introduction, this division between England and Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland was not only marked in the Brexit vote in 2016 but also in the handling of the coronavirus pandemic.
[93] For a more detailed breakdown of the 2016 Referendum result, see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results> [date accessed: 23/06/2020].

in his book *The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit and America's Trump*, which in its title alone makes clear his view that Brexit was about England.[94] O'Toole makes a similar case in *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*, arguing that narratives of English exceptionalism, which had particular traction in 'left behind', predominantly white, working-class communities, were instrumental in securing the Leave majority.[95] Barnett and O'Toole are part of a wider movement of scholars who have called for a renewed critical focus on England following the Referendum. If the Referendum marked a crisis of communication in which different groups were shouting from their entrenched positions, this move towards a study of England and Englishness can be understood as a critical listening exercise, which aims to uncover some of the contradictions and complexities in England's political, social, and cultural make-up.

Central to this work is the view that Brexit simply activated a set of tensions that were already there. However, it is difficult to pin down one social, political, or cultural moment in which such debates around England and Englishness began. While many contemporary writings on England – such as Michael Kenny's *The Politics of English Nationhood* – use the 1990s as a starting point for their discussions of Englishness, primarily due to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies in 1999, Tom Nairn pointed to England's ambiguous cultural and constitutional identity as early as 1977 in a different devolutionary context on the run up to the 1979 Referendum on Scottish Independence.[96] For Nairn, England is both central and marginalised – a paradoxical position that he terms the 'English enigma'.[97] Given that he was writing twenty years before devolution and just under forty years before Brexit, Nairn's opening sentence to *The Break-Up of*

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[94] Anthony Barnett, *The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit and America's Trump* (London: Unbound, 2017). John Denham takes a similar view, which captured in 'England: A Nation Divided?', Lecture delivered at the Speaker's House, House of Commons, 27 June 2018, <https://englishlabournetwork.org.uk/briefings-and-key-speeches/john-denham-england-a-nation-divided-25-6-18/> [date accessed: 09/09/2020]. As one of Barnett's frequent collaborators, Denham has also written extensively on England for Open Democracy – the open-access political website that Barnett founded in 2001.

[95] Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Apollo, 2018).

[96] Michael Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977).
O'Toole also looks back to the mid-twentieth century to contextualise current discourses of English exceptionalism. In *Heroic Failure*, he traces this line of thought backwards to the Second World War, identifying England's obsession with the German enemy. In doing so, he goes on to show the emergence of this anti-German ideology across key moments of the late twentieth century, including the BSE crisis which I examine in Chapter Four on representations of English farms.

[97] Nairn, 'The English Enigma' in *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, pp.291 – 306.

Britain certainly feels prophetic: he writes that 'only a few years ago, the break-up of Britain seemed inconceivable'.[98] Much of Nairn's discussion is located in the events of the nineteenth century, as he highlights that the British state did not undergo the same processes of democratisation as other states in Western Europe during the bourgeois revolutions. In doing so, he points out the way in which the British state is predicated on feudal structures, such as the House of Lords and the Crown Powers, but he also looks back further still, noting that Britain's political system and cultural identity is still entangled in its imperial past. This idea that England – as the centre of Britain – cannot come to terms with its colonial history is also central to Paul Gilroy's work and is discussed at length in his book *Postcolonial Melancholia.*[99]

For the purposes of this thesis, I highlight the 1990s as a decade in which England began to creep to the centre of political, cultural, and public discourse in Britain, arguing that this is the result of three distinct features. First, as I outlined above, the political constitution of Britain changed in this decade. The devolutionary movements in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – which resulted in the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies by Westminster in 1999 – emphasised the absence of England's own constitutional power.[100] At the same time, increased European integration – which was marked in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty – led to a surge in English nationalism, a political moment that Ben Wellings argued in *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace* was more influential than devolution.[101] Second, the 1990s saw a growing popular interest in Englishness, marked during Euro 96 where the St George Flag replaced the Union Jack, a

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[98] Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, p.11.

[99] Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). For a full discussion on the way in which British culture – and specifically, the discipline of English literature – has historically functioned as an informal constitution in the absence of a codified one, see: Michael Gardiner, *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, the Nation and the Canon* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Here, Gardiner makes the claim that English Literature is the literature of Britain, not England – a connection that he traces back to Britain's imperial project. This naturalisation of England as the hegemonic centre of Britain is also visible in drama and is captured, as I outlined earlier in this chapter, in the absence of a national prefix to The National Theatre. Gardiner makes a convincing case that the British constitution is 'more cultural than formal', noting that it 'allows it to change 'invisibly', or ideologically, with tremendous subtlety, and especially in literature, through apparently natural processes' (p.2). Crucially, Gardiner identifies that this 'knit' between English Literature and the British state formation began to loosen in the 1950s as a result of the contraction of Empire but came under increased strain in the late 1990s with the devolutionary movements in Scotland and Wales (p.1).

[100] This issue of England's constitutional identity – and its complexities and contradictions – is often referred to as the 'English Question' or the 'West Lothian Question' in political discourse.

[101] Ben Wellings, *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace (British Identities Since 1707)* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

defining moment in which Arthur Aughey claims that 'something happened to English national identity'.[102] The ubiquity of such popular, national markers might also be loosely connected to a mounting *populist* Englishness at this time. While the rise of both the BNP in the early 2000s and UKIP in the mid-2010s was short-lived, the success of these parties can be attributed to the centrality of a discourse of English exceptionalism in both of their campaigns.[103] As I noted in the previous section, while devolution prompted Scotland and Wales to look outwards and to the future – a progressive cultural identity which is captured in the democratic shape of their new national theatres – England tends to look inwards and is defensive in its cultural formation. This brings me to my third reason for locating this discussion of England in the 1990s: the decade also marked the beginning of a flurry of studies – both popular and academic – which attended to English culture and aimed to explore such defensive associations.[104] Indeed, Matless wrote in his 2016 edition of *Landscape and Englishness* that Englishness 'became a minor publishing phenomenon' in the late 1990s and early 2000s, citing Jeremy Paxman's *The English* (1998), Robert Colls' *The Identity of England* (2002), Krishan Kumar's *The Making of English National Identity* (2003), and Andy Medhurst's *A National Joke* (2007), in addition to reissues of Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* (1985) and *A Journey through Ruins* (1991) in 2009 and Colls and Philip Dodd's edited collection *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920* (1986) in 2014.[105] In the next chapter 'Rural and Nation: Mike Bartlett's *Albion*', I engage with several of these works, considering the ways in which ideas of rurality register in these national debates.

[102] Arthur Aughey, *The Politics of Englishness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.1.
[103] The growth of nationalist parties is captured in the rise of the BNP under Nick Griffin in the early 2000s and the peak of UKIP in the 2015 General Election, where it overtook the Liberal Democrats and became the third most popular political party in the UK.
[104] For a full discussion of contemporary representations of England in a range of cultural media, see: Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*. Kenny's book predominantly focuses on the political and constitutional identity of England, but also includes analysis of public polls on English parliaments and a survey of Englishness across a number of cultural forms. Covering a range of work – from Julian Barnes' novel, *England, England* (1996) to the poetry of Philip Larkin, the acoustic/folk singer Frank Turner's *England Keep My Bones* (2011) to Shane Meadows' film and subsequent televisual series *This is England* (2006 – 2015) – Kenny explores many different cultural representations of Englishness. Yet while his discussion includes analysis of Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, Kenny's engagement with theatre and performance is otherwise relatively limited. As I noted in the introduction and show later in this chapter in relation to interdisciplinary discussions of rurality, theatre and performance are often sidelined from such expansive surveys of contemporary culture.
[105] Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p.12. In his survey of recent explorations of English culture, Matless also cited the 2006 interactive, online project, *Icons: A Portrait of England* and the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony as two examples of outward-facing representations of contemporary England.

Central to many of the studies listed above is an acknowledgement of the challenges of writing about England and Englishness. As I have already made clear, England as an idea is difficult to explore not only because of its associations with the political right and the British Empire, but also due to it being a slippery object of study. England is not only a material place; it is also, in Benedict Anderson's terms, 'an imagined community', a conceptual space which is mobilised by different groups in different ways at different times.[106] As I have noted and will go on to show, the rural faces the same problems: it is a material landscape but also an imagined place, and discourses of rurality and Englishness are often synonymous with each other, bearing the same conservative and imperial markers. As such, I suggest that there are two potential ways to navigate the idea of England. First, one can avoid writing about England due to its regressive, parochial associations and choose Britishness as a national marker, a move which is evident in New Labour's spin on Cool Britannia as a new, cosmopolitan, and metropolitan vision. Such a view was also captured by playwright David Hare in 1999 when he argued that 'most of us look with longing to the republican countries across the Channel… We associate "Englishness" with everything that is most backward in this country'.[107] As I outlined in the previous section on the spaces of contemporary drama, this desire to move from national to global structures is evident in the theatre, particularly in the dominance of 'non-places' as dramatic settings and what Rebellato termed a tradition of 'theatrical placelessness', which chimes with these post-nation narratives.[108] More recently, the cultural critic Alex Niven has made a similar claim in *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England*.[109] Arguing that England is too damaged to be a site of critical inquiry due to its associations with the political right, Niven goes as far

[106] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1991).
[107] David Hare cited in Michael Collins, *The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class* (London: Granta, 2004), p.229.
[108] This move from national to global structures in theatre and performance is of course the core argument to Rebellato's influential chapter 'From State of the Nation to Globalization: Shifting Political Agendas in Contemporary British Playwriting' in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, pp.245 – 262.
[109] Alex Niven, *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England* (London: Repeater Books, 2019).

to argue that we should do away with the idea of England altogether and instead take up a dispersed model of regional devolution.[110]

The second, alternative approach that I have identified is the choice to address England directly, but with a conscious and critical awareness of the freight that it carries. Indeed, this is an approach which characterises many of the cultural studies from the 1990s and early 2000s that I outlined above but also more recent work, such as Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps' *Performing Englishness: Identity and Politics in a Contemporary Folk Resurgence*.[111] As Winter and Keegan-Phipps rightly point out, a body of academic work has emerged since the late 1980s – or as I have argued here from the early 1990s – which is predicated on the idea that 'Englishness, once accepted as the hegemonic component of Britishness, needs to be investigated, questioned, problematised and historicised.'[112] Such a call for criticality is also made by Kenny in *The Politics of English Nationhood* where he tracks a recent tradition of work that recognises, in his terms, 'the recuperative potential' of Englishness.[113] This need to problematise but also recover English cultural narratives is highlighted by Matless at the close of his preface to the 2016 edition of *Landscape and Englishness*. Drawing on Seamus Heaney's call to look *in* rather than *up* to England and Nairn's demand that the 'English need to rediscover who and what they are, to re-invent an identity of some sort better than the battered cliché-ridden hulk which the retreating tide of imperialism has left them', Matless gestures towards the potential for England to carve

[110] It is worth pointing out that Niven defines his book as 'part cultural polemic, part memoir' and it is therefore not rigorous in its theorising of what this regional model might look like in constitutional terms. While his argument that England has little sense of its own national culture is convincing, his alternative model of regional devolution is less so, particularly considering that the processes of devolution are state led.
[111] Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps, *Performing Englishness: Identity and Politics in a Contemporary Folk Resurgence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
[112] Winter and Keegan-Phipps, *Performing Englishness*, p.3.
[113] Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, p.14. One approach that Kenny identifies as part of this tradition that mines 'the recuperative potential' of Englishness is the rural local focus that Paul Kingsnorth outlines in *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland* (London: Granta, 2008). In his book, Kingsnorth calls for a patriotism which he terms is 'benign and positive' and predicated on 'place not race, geography not biology' (p.285). Kenny proposes that one project that captures this approach is Common Ground's *England In Particular*. Common Ground are an arts and environmental charity who describe themselves on their website as an organisation that 'encourage you to stand up for your place'. The *England In Particular* project began life as an interactive, online resource and was published as a book in 2006, see: Common Ground, *England In Particular: A Celebration of the Commonplace, the Local, The Vernacular and the Distinctive* (London: Saltyard Books, 2006). In its examination of just under 600 subjects, Common Ground term the project 'an encyclopaedia of local distinctiveness' which is about 'a way of looking, cherishing detail, patina, the commonplace and the particular'. See: Common Ground website, <https://www.commonground.org.uk/shop/england-particular/> [date accessed: 16/06/2020].

out an alternative national identity which is alert to – but not governed by – its imperial past.[114] In doing so, he references Alasdair Gray, a leading literary figure from the second Scottish renaissance of the 1980s that I identified earlier in this chapter and asks

> Is there a grain of material here to parallel thirty years of Scottish cultural work, following Alasdair Gray's 1984 call: 'Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation'? This may be a fanciful thought, with no parallel political project of independence from a dominant power; although UKIP might see the EU referendum that way. There are at least however cultural complexities to quarry, richer than sometimes allowed, which might variously appeal and appal […] If something must be made of Englishness, there is plenty to mine.[115]

This preface was written before the Brexit vote, which did see UKIP representing the Referendum as a parallel political project of independence, with narratives of English sovereignty central to their Leave campaign. However, as Matless tentatively suggests, this moment might also be viewed as the starting point for the construction of a more *progressive* English identity which deals with such 'cultural complexities'. In the context of theatre and performance, then, this 'grain of material' that he identifies might refer to the potential for England to stage itself in more progressive cultural terms. The beginnings of such a movement can already be traced in the recent run of high-profile plays about England that have been brought to London stages since Britain left the EU on 31 January 2020: the Almeida Theatre revived Mike Bartlett's *Albion* in February 2020, the National Theatre also premiered Roy Williams and Clint Dyer's *Death of England* on the Dorfman stage that month, and on 23 April 2020, St George's Day, Sonia Freidman Productions announced that Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* will be revived in 2021, with Mark Rylance set to play the fêted role of Rooster Byron once more.[116]

In the next chapter, I explore this rural national iconography in Bartlett's play, taking the English country garden as my primary focus. As I will show, the play looks back to the inter-war period through the character of Captain Weatherbury, who founded the garden in 1919; he comes on to the

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[114] Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p.23.
[115] Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p.24.
[116] Williams' and Dyer's *The Death of England: Delroy* (the sequel to *The Death of England*) re-opened the National Theatre in October 2020 following its closure due to the COVID-19 shutdown. Theatres were again closed mid-way through *Delroy*'s run, but the play was streamed online for free via YouTube on the 18 November 2020.

stage in the Prologue but remains present in the narrative through Audrey's research about the garden's history. Indeed, Audrey does not only grieve *in* Albion – for her dead son, James who died while serving in the British army in Afghanistan – she also grieves *for* Albion and longs for a return to inter-war landed English culture. This longing is clear when she levels a critique at the English for the way in which they avoid the past, arguing that 'Most other countries preserve their past. The embarrassed and insecure English discard it. And then complain when the replacement isn't any good'.[117] While Audrey's comment here is obviously contentious, it chimes with the approach taken in this thesis that it is important to talk about England in specific terms; throughout the play, she openly confronts the uncomfortable imperial and classed dimensions of English national culture that I discussed above. However, this national inflection of the rural is present, even if more to the background, in the other chapters of this thesis, with political and cultural debates on Englishness shaping many of the plays that I examine here. In the third chapter, I turn to the pre-industrial English rural, drawing comparisons with the premodern West in Ireland. In identifying these national differences, I draw on postcolonial Irish theatre criticism and adapt these frameworks to theorise England as the coloniser, the centre. In the fourth chapter on farming, I contextualise these plays in the socio-political moment in which they were staged – noting, for example, the euroscepticism that was visible in media coverage concerning the EU ban on British beef during the BSE crisis in the 1990s. Finally, in the fifth chapter, I turn to the imperial configuration of the English rural specifically, considering how *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* write back to the idea that the rural is an inherently white spatial imaginary.

The same questions asked of Englishness can be asked of the rural. As Raymond Williams points out in *The Country and the City*, the connection between the rural and nation can be traced in the etymology of 'country', a term which is used to define both rural and national territory.[118] In the pages that follow, I explore this synonymy, drawing out the way in which the rural has historically operated as a visual register for England. In the final section of this chapter, then, I map out the ways in which the rural – as both a material place and conceptual space – has been defined in cultural geography,

[117] Mike Bartlett, *Albion* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), p.37.
[118] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Vintage Classics, 2016), p.1. This is not unique to English but is also the case in French, with *pays* meaning both rural land and nation.

drawing attention to the heterogeneity of lived rural landscapes and the notion that cultural histories of the rural are not necessarily fixed in idyllic, nostalgic terms, but instead move across the political spectrum.

As noted above, the rural is difficult to define due to it being both a physical landscape but also a conceptual space, or, as rural sociologist Marc Mormont puts it, 'a category of thought'.[119] Matarasso highlights the material and imaginative dimensions of the rural in *Only Connect*, claiming that it is a place in which people 'work, live and play' but also a 'landscape of the mind'.[120] Given that the rural's physical and symbolic aspects co-exist and often overlap, the idea that rural space is *produced* will be treated as a given in this thesis. Many of the approaches to rural space that I detail below are influenced by the work of spatial theorists Lefebvre and Massey, who have been integral in understanding space not as 'an empty 'container', but as something that is practiced and always in the process of production.[121] With attention to the processes that shape the production of space, I follow Lefebvre's and Massey's line of thought, viewing space as an inherently social and political construction. While distinctions between 'space' and 'place' have been subject to rigorous critical debate for decades, I use the terms relatively interchangeably in this thesis as both refer to spatial concepts that are socially produced.[122] In general, I use 'space' when describing rural space in abstract terms and 'place' when referring to a specific geographic location. In this sense, I adopt the 'thick' approaches to space and place in performance put forward by Beswick and Pearson that I outlined earlier in this chapter, highlighting the social, political, and cultural factors that shape the processes of place-making in each play.

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[119] Marc Mormont, 'Who is rural? Or how to be rural: towards a sociology of the rural' in *Rural Restructuring: Global Processes and their Response* (eds. Terry Marsden, Philip Lowe, Sarah Whatmore) (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990), pp.21 – 44.
[120] Matarasso, *Only Connect*, p.9.
[121] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.170.
[122] The main distinction between 'space' and 'place' is subjectivity and the idea of belonging. While 'space' is theorised as an abstract phenomenon, the creation of a 'place' from 'space' involves some kind of emotional or affective investment. For a full discussion of the distinction between 'space' and 'place', see: Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). For further analysis of the processes of place-making, see: Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* and Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Early approaches in rural studies in the 1970s sought to describe and define what constitutes physical rural space, drawing distinctions between 'rural' and 'urban' characteristics.[123] As rural geographer Keith Halfacree points out, these functional approaches – which were governed by positivist methods of scientific inquiry – struggled to find coherent definitions of the rural due to the range of rural spatialities: he writes that 'a list of these could include: countryside, wilderness, outback, periphery, farm belt, village, hamlet, bush, peasant society, pastoral, garden, unincorporated territory, open space'.[124] In the late 1970s and 1980s, the study of rural space then moved towards a political-economy approach where scholars drew on neo-Marxist methods in their analyses. Such approaches resulted in a proliferation of studies on rural planning and rural class analysis. As contemporary capitalist processes began to blur the distinctions between urban and rural spaces, some scholars suggested that the discipline should abandon the term 'rural' as an analytical category due to this taxonomical exercise. Such a view is taken by Linda Lobao, who pointed out that there had been 'a spatial loosening' of elements that were once considered rural and urban.[125]

From the early 1990s onwards, the discipline of rural studies was then shaped by the 'cultural turn' which was influential across humanities and the social sciences. Returning to Matarasso's terms, this saw a shift in focus from economic readings of the material rural landscape – the land in which people 'work, live and play' – to cultural representations of the rural where it might be understood, in his terms, as a 'landscape of the mind'.[126] Before I consider some of these representations, I want to highlight that despite the idea that the rural is performed being central to this cultural turn in rural studies, there is yet to be a sustained engagement with theatre. For example, in *Rural*, Woods covers a range of dramatic representations – from televisual dramas such as *Heartbeat* (1992 – 2010) and *Midsomer Murders* (1997 – present) to films such as *The Wickerman* (1973) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) – but does not make any reference to stage performances in his range of case studies. In

[123] Early functional approaches to rural geography were led by John Fraser Hart in the UK and Hugh Clout in the US.
[124] Keith Halfacree: 'Rural Space: Constructing a Three-Fold Architecture' in *Handbook of Rural Studies* (eds. Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Rooney) (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), pp.44 – 62, p.45.
[125] Linda Lobao, 'A Sociology of the Periphery Versus a Peripheral Sociology: Rural Sociology and the Dimension of Space', *Rural Sociology*, 61:1 (1996), 77 – 102.
[126] Matarasso, *Only Connect*, p.9

rural studies in general, 'performance' is most often used to denote everyday performances of rural practices. Such thinking is underpinned by De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Lefebvre's idea of 'lived' and 'perceived' space, which detail the ways in which the quotidian performance of certain practices 'make' space. The application of performance analysis to these rural practices is clear. For example, as I discuss in Chapter Four, Woods analyses the Countryside Alliance marches in theatrical terms, noting how the rural marches – which brought not only rural bodies, but also hounds and horns to Central London – were scripted, choreographed, and staged before their metropolitan audiences and TV cameras. This use of a theatrical vocabulary to describe rural practices is also seen in the work of Tim Edensor. In his range of examples which include country pubs, village fetes, and carnivals, he suggests that rurality is inherently performative, arguing that 'different rural performances are enacted on different stages by different actors'.[127] Such performative definitions of rurality are also central to more recent edited collections that I cited in my Introduction, such as Haigron's The *English Countryside: Representations, Identities, Mutations* and Stringer's *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers, Wild Things*.[128]

Recent work in rural geography has grappled with this layering of material and cultural definitions of rurality, leading to relational approaches that highlight the many political, economic, and cultural readings of the rural which work with and against each other on the ground.[129] Examples of these relational approaches include Halfacree's three-fold architecture of rural space –modelled on Lefebvre's spatial triad from *The Production of Space* – and Woods' relational rural, which is predicated on Massey's theorising of space as 'networked' in *For Space.* Halfacree's triadic understanding of rurality follows Lefebvre's three-fold model of space as 'perceived' (brought into being by social practices), 'conceived' (represented, usually by outsiders), and 'lived' (everyday lay experiences), with the categories 'rural localities', 'formal representations of the rural' and 'everyday lives of the rural'.[130] Despite the structure implied in Halfacree's tripartite model, crucially, these three categories are not

[127] Tim Edensor, 'Performing Rurality' in *The Handbook of Rural Studies,* pp.484 – 495, p.484.
[128] Haigron (ed.), *The English Countryside: Representations, Identities, Mutations*; Stringer (ed.), *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers, Wild Things*.
[129] For a broad overview of approaches to rural space, see: Paul Cloke, 'Conceptualizing Rurality' in the *Handbook of Rural Studies*, pp. 18 – 28.
[130] Halfacree, p.291.

fixed, but are flexible: they can interact at any given time, creating moments of synthesis and friction. Woods' relational model takes its shape from such moments. Following Massey's view that space is produced via a series of 'practices, trajectories, interrelations', he argues that 'the rural comprises millions of dynamic meeting-points, where different networks, and flows and processes are knotted together in unique ways'.[131] In this relational definition, Woods emphasises that the rural is not the finite, localised spatial imaginary that is so often represented in cultural discourse.

Despite the range of relational approaches that attest to this 'networked' reading of contemporary rurality, rural England is still often depicted in nostalgic, bounded terms. I therefore want to close this chapter with a note of caution, highlighting that uncritical nostalgia – the simple longing for the past – continues to characterise cultural representations of the English rural. Williams captured this idea that rural landscapes are used to a nostalgic end as early as 1973, in his prescient *The Country and the City*. Noting that the rural is often held as a nostalgic reminder of the past in cultural discourse, he suggests that representations of the rural – or in his terms, the country – become 'apparent resting places, the successive Old Englands to which we are confidently returned'.[132] Here, Williams' view of representations of the rural as 'apparent resting places' captures the way in which it is often celebrated precisely for its perceived stasis, while his observation that we are 'confidently returned' to these Old Englands identifies the discursive utility of the rural past outlined above.

However, Williams suggests that returning to these 'Old Englands' does not always have to be an exercise of uncritical, often conservative nostalgia. He suggests that it is productive to look at these representations – these 'Old Englands' – 'in their own terms', arguing that

> The apparent resting places, the successive Old Englands to which we are confidently returned but which then start to move and recede, have some actual significance, when they are looked at in their own terms […] But again, what seemed a single escalator, a perpetual recession into history, turns out, on reflection, to be a more complicated movement: Old England, settlement,

[131] Michael Woods, *Rural (*London: Routledge, 2010), p.291. For a reading of global ruralities, see: Woods, 'Re-Imagining the Global Village' in *Rurality Re-Imagined*, pp.2 – 11.
[132] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.17.

> the rural virtues – all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question.[133]

Here, Williams demands a specificity when analysing such readings, and, in suggesting that they are looked at in 'their own terms', he foregrounds the contextual conditions in which these representations are produced. In doing so, Williams avoids lumping together rural spatialities and past temporalities and instead highlights the fact that cultural representations of the rural 'mean different things at different times'.

In the pages that follow, I adopt this contextualised approach to the rural landscapes represented on stage, ensuring that I locate each of these representations in the social and political moment in which they were produced. By looking at these theatrical rurals 'in their own terms', I also take Williams' view that the temporal and conceptual structures of nostalgia can be productive and potentially radical. This is a reading that I develop fully in the next chapter through Svetlana Boym's concepts of 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia where I consider the way in which grief and nostalgia are central to the representation of the English country garden in *Albion*. I then revisit Boym's 'reflective' and 'restorative' nostalgia in the fourth chapter of this thesis alongside Alastair Bonnett's theorising of 'radical nostalgia', with the aim of exploring the radical potential in returning to traditional farming practices in Leyshon's *The Farm*, Bean's *Harvest*, and Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars*. Chapter Three develops a similarly complex reading of rural temporality in relation to the representation of the rural past in Moore's *Common* and Crowe's *The Sewing Group*, as does Chapter Five, where I examine how *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* mobilise Black rural histories in order to validate the presence of Black people – both present and historic – in their represented rural landscapes.

One key reading of rural England which is governed by a nostalgic temporal movement is that of 'Deep England'. While the term was first coined by Patrick Wright in *On Living in an Old Country* in 1985, the liveness of Wright's original definition – which is centred on embodied national experience – is often lost in contemporary usage. For example, Angus Calder's version of 'Deep England' is locked into symbolic readings: he writes that it stretches from 'Hardy's Wessex to Tennyson's Lincolnshire,

[133] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.17.

from Kipling's Sussex to Elgar's Worcestershire'.[134] Calder's 'Deep England' is thus sustained by cultural representations of the rural; it is an imagined, rather than lived geography. The term has become more popular since the EU Referendum in 2016 and is readily deployed in media discourse to describe socially conservative English rural areas.[135]

While 'Deep England' seems to have become a buzzword, the full meaning of the term is often misrepresented. In *On Living in an Old Country*, Wright argues that

> Deep England can indeed be deeply moving to those whose particular experience is most directly in line with its privileged imagination. People of an upper middle-class formation can recognize not just their own totems and togetherness in these essential experiences, but also the philistinism of the urban working class as it stumbles out, blind and unknowing, into that countryside at weekends.[136]

As Wright makes clear, 'Deep England' is predicated on an *experiential* claim to national knowledge. This idea that rurality and Englishness are experienced through tactile codes plays out across each chapter in this thesis. For example, this tactile engagement with the land is seen in the military subtext to *Albion* in Chapter Two which examines the connection between the figure of the soldier and the English soil, but also in *Common* in Chapter Three where the villagers assert their belonging to the commons through their intimate knowledge of the land. Yet in the theatrical representations of farming life discussed in Chapter Four, this contractual bond with the earth is under threat: supermarket conglomerates and changes to state regulations rupture the relationship between the farmer, livestock, and the soil. However, I want to close this chapter on a note of caution: these experiences – and by extension, representations – of rural England are not available to everyone. The idea of 'Deep England' is deeply classist in that the axes of inclusion and exclusion are determined by a set of material conditions which enable these 'essential' experiences. At the same time, 'Deep England' can mobilise

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[134] Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.182.
[135] For example, in *The Guardian*'s satirical profile for 'Deep England', it is defined as 'insanely white'. See: 'This is Deep England: warm ale, village greens, cheeky milkmen', *The Guardian*, 11 April 2017, < https://www.theguardian.com/politics/shortcuts/2017/apr/11/deep-england-brexit-britain> [date accessed: 11/08/2020].
[136] Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), p.82.

an exclusive, xenophobic discourse through its focus on origins and roots, a reading which I consider in my next chapter on *Albion* but also in detail in Chapter Five where I explore the ways in which *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* write back to the racialisation of the rural as a white space.

Chapter Two: Rural and Nation in Mike Bartlett's *Albion*

Introduction

In this first thematic chapter, I take forward the ideas of 'Deep England' and nostalgia – as two related concepts which are central to representations of the English rural – in order to explore the reading of the rural as nation in Mike Bartlett's *Albion.* In contrast to the other rural plays discussed in this thesis which represent lived and worked landscapes, the country garden in Bartlett's play is an aesthetic construction which I later define in Pierre Nora's terms as a *lieu de mémoire* for national rural iconographies. *Albion* is thus a useful starting place with which to begin the substantive discussion of rural theatrical representations, as it deals precisely in the symbolic dimensions of the rural that I identified in the previous chapter.

With that title, it is indeed clear from the outset that Bartlett engages with the rural as a national iconography: 'Albion' is an Old English term for the island of Britain, but is often used in a literary context to signify a specifically English national imaginary.[1] Questions of nation, nationalism, and national identity framed *Albion*'s premiere in October 2017 and its revival in February 2020: the play premiered at the Almeida just over a year after the Brexit vote and was subsequently revived there in Britain's newly 'independent' context, following its exit from the EU into the transition period on 31 January 2020. In this chapter, I examine how the play engages with such national questions through its English rural setting, exploring the ways in which Bartlett turns to a series of 'Old Englands' at a time when England's place within Britain and indeed, Britain's place in the world is increasingly contested.

Restoring the English Country Garden

This framing of *Albion* as a play about the English nation is made clear from its opening moments. The play opens to the sound of Edward Elgar's 'The Spirit of England: Op. 80 No.3: For the Fallen' as a soldier enters the garden depicted on stage, pausing only to cup a handful of soil, and allowing it to run

[1] For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as 'a literary term for Britain *or* England, often used when referring to ancient or historical times'. See: *The Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/albion>, [date accessed: 14/01/2019].

through his fingers, before the stage returns to full blackout.[2] We later learn that this soldier – who is fully clad in the British military uniform of the First World War – is Captain Weatherbury, returning to his Oxfordshire home after World War One. The conjunction of Elgar's music – an English composer whose legacy is bound up in wartime England – and Weatherbury's gesture of touching the land foregrounds the connections between sacrifice, soil, and Englishness that Bartlett explores across the four acts of his play. While many reviewers have read the play through the lens of Brexit, it is also worth noting the centrality of the military subtext here: the play premiered in 2017 during the First World War centenary years (2014 – 2018) and references to World War One punctuate the narrative.[3]

After this brief encounter with Weatherbury, the play then leaps forward a century to 2017 for the first main scene and for its three-hour duration, the audience follow the protagonist, Audrey, a designer of high-end textiles from London, on her venture to restore the garden to its former glory. As the niece of one of the previous owners of the house, Stanley Upthorne, Audrey visited Albion as a child and it is clear that her restoration project is driven, in part, by nostalgia for her own childhood and for that experience of English landed culture, which she worries is disappearing from view. Before the audience even meet Audrey, her daughter, Zara, suggests that she represents the typical monied urban incomer who buys their way into rural communities.[4] Zara explains the way in which her family left Muswell Hill for 'the middle of nowhere' to Matthew, the elderly gardener, and laments that for her, the move from London to the country marked the end of 'friends, work and opportunity'.[5] This contrast that Zara makes between the city as a place of opportunity and potential and the country as one of

[2] Although Laurence Binyon's verse to Elgar's piece does not feature in the play, it is worth noting that it directs the listener's attention to the English soil, with his stress on the 'innermost heart of their [the soldiers'] own land' connecting the legacy of the fallen soldiers to the land. See: Binyon, 'For the Fallen' in *For the Fallen and Other Poems* (Los Angeles: HardPress Publications, 2012).

[3] Other theatrical representations of the First World War around this time include Rory Mullarkey's *Each Slow Dusk* which toured nationally to rural venues across England with Pentabus Theatre in 2014 and *Blood and Chocolate*, a collaboration between Pilot Theatre, Leeds-based theatre company, SlungLow, and York Theatre Royal, which drew on headphone and radio technologies in its walking performance around York in 2013.

[4] Later in the play, Audrey acknowledges that she cannot shake this label of the urban incomer in the village. Indeed, she notes that the people who live there are so hostile towards her that she cannot even buy a coffee in the local café (p.99). Bartlett thus engages with a familiar piece of rural sociological commentary on the urban outsider in a tight-knit rural community. In doing so, he nods to narratives of counterurbanisation which describe the movement of people from urban to rural areas. Variations on the rural idyll often guide these movements, pulling individuals from the city to the country. For a full discussion of the rural idyll, see: Brian Short, 'Idyllic Ruralities' in *The Handbook of Rural Studies* (ed. Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Rooney) (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), pp.133 – 148.

[5] Bartlett, *Albion*, p.11.

isolation and stasis is a familiar trope in cultural representations of the urban and the rural, and one which Williams identifies in *The Country and the City.* In his survey of literary representations, Williams writes that 'powerful hostile associations' have been layered on the country and the city: 'on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation'.[6] Bartlett's play feeds into this long literary tradition of setting up an urban/rural binary: Zara longs for the capital precisely for the 'noise, worldliness and ambition' that it offers, while Audrey escapes to the country from a life of work in London.[7]

Yet despite the self-indulgence evident in Audrey's approach to the project, which is criticised by the local community and her own family, her compulsive undertaking of the restoration is also due to her grief for her son, James, who was killed while serving in the British army in the most recent war in Afghanistan. In this way, Audrey intends to use the garden as Weatherbury did a century earlier: as a site of memorialisation for fallen soldiers. Bartlett repeatedly draws on these connections between Audrey and Weatherbury, and the centrality of this military subtext is marked not just by the haunting of the garden by military figures at key points in the play, but also in the title of the garden in which it is set. Audrey later reveals that the 'Red Garden' takes its name from the mass bloodshed that Weatherbury witnessed in the First World War.

Although audiences only see the 'Red Garden' on stage, Audrey explains that this is one of the thirty-one 'rooms' of Albion: she recalls that that the garden was made up of 'thirty-one separate rooms, or compartments as Weatherbury called them […] [it] can never be appreciated in one view. It has to be experienced as a journey' (p.18). This compartmental structure was replicated in the Almeida production: the thrust stage was dressed as an island-shaped lawn with an oak tree resting upstage, and the space was framed by a stone wall. While the lawn and oak tree appeared natural but were in fact artificial, Miriam Buether's set design featured real bedding plants, and as the play unfolded, members of the cast, in role, restored the garden onstage via a series of planting scenes (see Figure 1). This motif of natural cycles was also captured in the naturalistic lighting: the lighting technician, Neil Austin, explained that the play's outdoor setting demanded different lighting states – sunrise, midday, sunset,

[6] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.1.
[7] Indeed, in Act Three, Audrey claims that 'London's a workplace, not a home' (p.81).

dusk, and night – and he also made use of the oak tree to cast shadows.[8] The metronomic rhythms of the lighting and the planting and uprooting scenes ensure that the members of the audience witness many of the transformations of the garden, and are invited to experience it in Audrey's terms as a 'journey', a process of restoration and later, decline.



FIGURE 1: Production image of Mike Bartlett's *Albion*, directed by Rupert Goold (2017).

Image copyright: Marc Brenner.

[8] Neil Austin in conversation with Luke Jones, *Theatre Voice*, 25 October 2018, <http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/neil-austin/>, [date accessed: 31/10/2018], [13.07 – 15.53].

As a garden of thirty-one rooms, the scale of Albion is clear: the house – which Audrey's husband, Paul, reveals has seven bedrooms and four bathrooms – and gardens combined can be viewed as a typical English country house. Such houses, as I detail below, continue to function as an English national iconography. In a Nick Hern podcast which was released during the national lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, Bartlett said that this setting took its inspiration from Hidcote, a National Trust property in Chipping Campden, Oxfordshire, and that Weatherbury's story is modelled on Hidcote's former owner, Lawrence Johnston.[9] Despite this reference to a real country house, there are no specific geographic markers to locate the garden of Albion within the play, beyond the stage direction that states that it is '*attached to a house in Oxfordshire*' (p.8). While other rural plays accentuate the importance of place and locality – for example, in Butterworth's *Jerusalem* and Bean's *Harvest* the characters' dialogue is replete with spatial markers local to their Wiltshire and East Riding of Yorkshire settings – Bartlett's garden, despite that stage direction, could be located almost anywhere in the South of England. In this sense, then, *Albion* seems to operate as a conceptual space rather than a located place.[10] What matters here is the play's exploration of this conceptual space: as I will detail, the country garden is synecdochic for England as a whole, and Bartlett asks wider questions of English history and culture through this carefully crafted rural setting.

While the details of Albion's geographic location are limited, then, Audrey does offer a developed description of its style and origins. She explains that

> The point is each room had a theme. An exploration. No English garden had investigated things like that. It was either landscape or cottage. Albion was the first to fuse those two approaches. The chaos of nature in a formal setting. It's of vital historical importance, and…look at it! The

[9] See: <https://soundcloud.com/nickhernbooks> [date accessed: 21/07/2020]. The creative team also visited Hidcote before the 2020 revival of *Albion*. For more details on this visit, see Tom Brennan's (the Associate Director) blogpost: <https://almeida.co.uk/albion-an-english-country-garden> [date accessed: 08/09/2020].

[10] This use of the English country garden as a 'type' marks a departure from the representation of the lived and worked rural landscapes which are seen in the farms depicted in *The Farm*, *Harvest* and *And Then Come the Nightjars* in Chapter 4. The 'typed' nature of this English country garden in Oxfordshire draws strength from the cultural history of the Cotswolds more broadly. The Cotswolds were the focus of the British arts and crafts movement in the mid to late nineteenth century. Led by thinkers such as William Morris and Charles Robert Ashbee, this movement marked a meeting point between social radicalism and English ruralism. Key sites of the movement are located in Oxfordshire: Morris lived at Kelmscott Manor – a country house in the village of Kelmscott in West Oxfordshire – from 1871 until his death in 1896, and Ashbee's Guild and School of Handicraft moved from London to Chipping Campden (the market town in which Hidcote is located) in 1902.

> quintessential English Country Garden, this was the first. Lawrence Weatherbury's masterpiece. It's referred to in all the guides at the time as being absolutely radical and absolutely beautiful. And well…look at it now. You'd never know (p.15 – p.16).

This short description works to piece together the type of garden that Albion was in the 1920s. Through Audrey's note that each room had an individual theme, Bartlett identifies the way in which Albion is tightly structured and controlled; it is an aesthetic experiment rather than an open leisure space.[11] Further, in marking its novelty, Audrey refers to two other key garden designs: the landscape and cottage garden. While the landscape garden triggers expansive rural imaginaries of country estates, such as the work of eighteenth-century landscape-architect Capability Brown at Blenheim Palace near Woodstock, Oxfordshire or Burghley House, Lincolnshire, Albion is smaller in scale and the space is compartmentalised. Yet the garden is also more elaborate than a 'cottage' design and its experimental aspect does not fit with the homeliness that characterises the English cottage garden tradition.

The mention of Captain Weatherbury's first name, Lawrence, in the above quotation is another clear allusion to Hidcote, with Lawrence Johnston being the name of the garden's founder. Johnston was an American who bought Hidcote – which had previously been farmland for centuries – in 1907 and developed his work there until 1948 when the garden was passed on to the National Trust. There are further similarities between Hidcote and Albion: Hidcote's aesthetic experimentation is described in detail on the National Trust's website where reference is made to its 'intimate garden rooms', including a 'Bathing Pool garden' and 'Red' garden – both of which feature in Bartlett's play.[12] Beyond the garden's roomed design, parallels can also be drawn between Johnston and Weatherbury. For example, Audrey mentions that Weatherbury had another garden in Menton, on the French Riviera, which is another allusion to Johnston, who had a garden called Serre de la Madone in Menton (p.37).

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[11] As Audrey explains, the English country garden condenses the 'chaos of nature into a formal setting', and this marks a contrast from other plays which tend to draw precisely on the chaotic wildernesses of rural spaces, such as the charmed wood in Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (Royal Court Theatre, 2009) and the eerie marsh in Butterworth's earlier play *The Night Heron* (Royal Court Theatre, 2002) (p.15). We can also trace this theatrical interest in rural wilderness further back to the 1980s, including in the haunted fenland of Caryl Churchill's *Fen* (The Public Theater, New York, 1983) and even to the seventeenth century with the transformative, enchanted forests in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It.*

[12] The following information is taken from Hidcote's National Trust webpage. See: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hidcote/features/research-and-the-archives-at-hidcote> [date accessed: 08/09/2020].

Further, the National Trust detail the ways in which Johnston often hosted events for the Garden Society, which they define on Hidcote's webpage as 'a horticultural gentleman's club', and this elite, exclusive social dimension to the country garden is evidenced in *Albion* when Audrey recalls the parties from her childhood visits in the 1970s. Far from being working land, then, Hidcote came to symbolise aesthetic experiment, privilege, and connection – a reading which is replicated in Bartlett's representation of Albion in his play.

An interaction between Audrey and her new neighbour, Edward, emphasises Albion's aesthetic value. Rejecting the idea that the garden should be a communal space, Audrey argues that 'there is delicate work to do here […] this is a larger project now, something of national importance, to restore this vital part of our heritage' (p.19 – 20). If Albion is modelled on Hidcote, Audrey's grand claims to the garden's 'national importance' are not as hyperbolic as they may seem. Using Audrey's terms to describe Weatherbury in the play, Johnston was 'a visionary', who brought Hidcote to national attention through his plant-hunting expeditions around the world (p.18). He travelled to the Swiss Alps, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and China throughout the 1920s and 1930s, bringing new varieties of seeds back to this garden in the Cotswolds. This colonising language articulates the imperial charge of Johnston's work, particularly in the reference to his 'plant hunting expeditions' in Britain's former colonies in Zimbabwe and Kenya. In this sense, Hidcote was an English country garden with a global reference point and its design and purpose partly reflected the reach of the British Empire.

Although Bartlett's representation of Albion does not reveal the imperial connections that inspired the design of such compartmentalised, roomed gardens of the period, the play draws strength from another rural imaginary from outside England: the Russian country house. *Albion*'s garden setting contains echoes of Anton Chekhov's drama, namely his 1904 play *The Cherry Orchard.* It is worth noting that Chekhov's interest in the country garden goes beyond the setting of his plays.[13] In addition to working as a writer, he was also a doctor and grew homeopathic remedies in the garden of his second home in the country, his *dacha*.[14] His passion for gardening is seen in the notebook that he left with his

[13] Chekhov and Hidcote's founder, Lawrence, were working in a similar timeframe: Chekhov lived in his garden, Melikhovo, between 1892 – 1899 and Lawrence bought Hidcote in 1907, just a decade later.
[14] I will return to this medical purpose of gardening later in this chapter when I read the garden of Albion through the lens of nostalgia, and specifically, the medical definition of this term.

literary works which detailed the 157 plant species in his garden and is further captured in his correspondence with journalist Mikhail Menshikov in 1900 where he wrote 'I think that if I wasn't a writer, I could be a gardener'.[15] As Marianna Hunt notes, Chekhov's interest in gardening runs deep in his oeuvre and is perhaps marked most clearly in the Gayev family's desperate attempts to save their garden in *The Cherry Orchard.* Several theatre reviewers highlighted the way in which *Albion*'s fourth act operates in this distinct Chekhovian rural mode. For example, Michael Billington claims

> Like most dramatists who adopt rural settings, Bartlett can't keep Chekhov out of the picture. The fourth act palpably evokes *The Cherry Orchard*, and with Audrey's daughter an aspiring writer who falls for a famous novelist and harshly jettisons another would-be scribe, the echoes of *The Seagull*'s triangle of Nina, Trigorin and Konstantin are thunderous.[16]

The evocation of *The Cherry Orchard* is certainly strong at the play's close: Audrey's distress over leaving the house and gardens echoes that of Ranevskaya as the preparations are in place for her to sell Albion to a property developer, who plans to demolish the house and build a block of upmarket flats on the grounds.[17]

'Deep England' and the Uses of Nostalgia

Bartlett clearly draws on this symbolic, Chekhovian geography, importing the iconography of the Russian country house and Chekhov's style into an English context. Yet this rural imaginary – which is built on privilege – is already established in England, with the country house being a popular representation of the rural in England's cultural imagination. It is here that I want to return to Patrick

[15] Anton Chekhov quoted in Marianna Hunt, 'Chekhov's Green Fingers Beyond The Cherry Orchard', *Financial Times*, 18 September 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/8e65aa7a-b11e-11e8-87e0-d84e0d934341> [date accessed: 08/09/2020].

[16] Michael Billington, '*Albion* review – Mike Bartlett captures nation's neurotic divisions', *The Guardian,* 18 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/oct/18/albion-review-mike-bartlett-almeida-london>, [date accessed: 12/03/2019].

[17] This inevitable return of the urbanite to the city is a familiar narrative arc in theatre of the rural. Audrey's imminent return to London chimes with Ada Kahn's and Dave Simmonds' move back from Norfolk to London at the end of Arnold Wesker's 1959 play *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 1960), which was revived along with the other two plays from his trilogy, *Chicken Soup with Barley* (Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 1958) and *Roots* (Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 1959) at the King's Head Theatre, London in 2013.

Wright's idea of 'Deep England', which I introduced as one dominant reading of rurality in the previous chapter. In his original definition of the term, Wright argues that

> Deep England can indeed be deeply moving to those whose particular experience is most directly in line with its privileged imagination. People of an upper middle-class formation can recognize not just their own totems and togetherness in these essential experiences, but also the philistinism of the urban working class as it stumbles out, blind and unknowing, into that countryside at weekends.[18]

As I noted in Chapter One, Wright's definition of 'Deep England' is predicated on an experiential claim to national knowledge, but these experiences are not available to everyone. Indeed, the classed dimensions of 'Deep England' determine the axes of inclusion and exclusion: this particular national experience is only available to those who have the means to access it. Given the emphasis that Audrey places on the garden's aesthetic value, there is no question that we are in 'Deep England'. While the use of Elgar in the prologue and the final moments of Act Two and Act Four makes direct reference to one of the 'Deep Englands' that Calder identifies in 'Elgar's Worcestershire', the play's setting also engages with the symbolic geography of the country house – particularly that of the National Trust – which captures the privilege and social hierarchy that underpins this particular reading of rural England.[19] In *The Rise and Fall of the Stately Home*, Peter Mandler explores this notion that the country house visualises an old English social order: he argues that country houses represent 'the quintessence of Englishness: they epitomize the English love of domesticity, of the countryside, of hierarchy, continuity and tradition'.[20] Citing the 1981 Granada Television production of *Brideshead Revisited*, Mandler suggests that something of 'a country-house mania' began in England in the 1980s, a few years after Audrey's visits to Albion as a child. This 'country-house mania' is still present today: one might look to ITV's televisual serials *Downton Abbey* (2010 – 2015) and *Sanditon* (2019), in addition to period films, such as *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), *Atonement* (2007), *Jane Eyre* (2011), and *Great Expectations* (2012), which were all filmed in English country houses belonging to the National Trust. In siting his

[18] Wright, *On Living in an Old Country,* p.82.
[19] Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p.182.
[20] Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p.1.

play in a country garden, then, Bartlett engages with this loaded rural imaginary which stands for a particularly privileged definition of Englishness.

However, Wright's definition of 'Deep England' is not only concerned with national images or symbols; it is an idea which is practiced and sustained over time.[21] Bartlett's play represents English culture in Wright's experiential terms: *Albion* is centred on the ways in which Audrey aims to recapture the 'Deep England' of her youth. Drawing on Wright's original definition outlined above, the restoration project can be seen as an attempt to reconnect with and work through the 'totems and togetherness' that this 'essential experience' offered to her. Wright's idea that 'Deep England' is something that you *do* rather than something that you *have* is thus clearly played out in *Albion.* After all, audiences watching Bartlett's play witness Audrey physically attempting to rebuild her England – her Albion – as she negotiates her own memories of the garden and its history, a nostalgic practice which I examine in detail in the next section.

As might be expected of a play with such a freighted title and setting, the restoration of this country garden has been read allegorically by theatre critics as an attempt to represent England after the EU referendum in 2016.[22] In his review in *The Independent*, Paul Taylor labels the play 'a Brexit drama', while Alex Sierz wrote in a recent article that it is 'the best post-Referendum play' to date.[23] Despite the fact that the word 'Brexit' remains unmentioned, there are obvious nods to the Brexit vote: Audrey's friend, Katherine, a famous author, expresses her distaste for what she terms an 'unnecessary plebiscite', and later, she and Audrey have a heated debate about Katherine's new novel, in which she

[21] This liveness is central to Wright's view that there is no single or fixed 'Deep England': instead, there are many and these adapt and change to meet the context in which they are evoked.

[22] As I highlighted in the introduction and Chapter One, questions of England's political and cultural identity have become increasingly prominent since the 2016 UK EU Referendum, with the vote to leave the EU being largely been represented as an English 'problem' in media discourse. Political commentators such as Barnett, O'Toole, and Denham all follow this reading.

[23] Paul Taylor, '*Albion*, Almeida Theatre, London, review: A work of deeply absorbing emotional richness', *The Independent*, 18 October 2017,<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/albion-almeida-review-a8006626.html> [date accessed: 12/03/2019]. Aleks Sierz, 'British Theatre after Brexit: One Year On', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art,* 40:3 (2018), p.60 – 70, p.62. Bartlett's play can be located in a body of work that responds directly to Brexit. Other theatrical responses include, Carol Ann Duffy's and Rufus Norris' *My Country*, a verbatim response to the referendum result which premiered at The National Theatre in February 2017, before touring across the UK, and Headlong Theatre's and The Guardian's *Brexit Shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation* (2017). As a series of minisodes written from and for different geographical and social positions in the UK, *Brexit Shorts* was streamed for free online in June 2017.
See: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/series/brexit-shorts> [date accessed: 10/12/2020].

patronises working-class Leave voters, naming them Patricia Smallmind and Gary Numb (p.66).[24] But rather than simply identifying the Brexit allegories within *Albion*, I suggest that a specific focus on nostalgia contextualises Bartlett's play in a much longer rural national tradition. While nostalgia was certainly one of the key tenets of the Leave campaign, my analysis in this chapter focuses on the way in which Bartlett uses grief and nostalgia to explore two connected rural imaginaries which carry a rich history of national representation: wartime rural England and the country house.

Indeed, the programme to the 2020 revival offers nostalgia and country-house culture as two ways to read the play, with essays titled 'Nostalgia as a Political Force' by the political scientist Sophia Gaston and 'Preservation for the People' by the historian Adam Page. As I noted in the previous chapter, nostalgia and the idea of 'Deep England' (which is epitomised in the country-house model) are dominant ways of reading the rural. However, nostalgia and the idea of 'Deep England' encode more than a simple longing for the past; both involve complex memory work, and it is this work which forms my focus for the remainder of this chapter. Given the way in which Bartlett deals with the symbolic dimensions of the rural in his play, I read *Albion* as a memory store for these two connected imaginaries of wartime rural England and country-house culture. First, I focus on Audrey's personal motives for restoring Albion, exploring how she uses the garden – and specifically the connection to its founder, Captain Weatherbury – to grieve for her son, James. In doing so, I address the way in which Bartlett's play mobilises a range of cultural narratives (including that of Elgar) centred on wartime England. My discussion then develops from this idea of grieving *in* to grieving *for* Albion as I close with a full examination of Bartlett's staging of the country-house rural imaginary in 2017 and 2020 – at a time when questions of English national identity and its grounding in the land of this island, Albion, are increasingly contested.

[24] Bartlett's characters are also stereotyped and lend themselves to a similar satirical reading: Audrey is the rich Londoner who buys her way into this rural community; Zara is the aspiring writer who falls for Katherine, the author; and Krystyna is represented in reductive tones as the 'good immigrant'. In this sense, the evocation of character types is in itself a form of memory work as Bartlett calls back on other cultural texts to define his characters. This kind of character typing is often seen in representations of the rural: the idea of the urban, monied incomer who buys their way into the rural is a popular one, as is the depiction of close-knit – often parochial – rural communities, who are reluctant to welcome new people.

In her essay in *Albion*'s programme, Gaston makes the case that nostalgia is a political force, referring to the traction of Trump's nostalgic promise to 'Make America Great Again' in the 'rustbelt' of the US and to similar claims to 'Make Britain Great Again' which were propagated by the Leave campaign in the run-up to the EU Referendum in the UK. Citing key thinkers such as David Lowenthal, Owen Hatherley, and Paul Gilroy who have each identified nostalgia's political potential in a British context, Gaston notes the way in which British nostalgia in particular is tied up in imperial narratives, an idea which is developed fully by Gilroy in his theorisation of 'postcolonial melancholia'.[25] She then details the work of Svetlana Boym and Boym's delineation between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia, with 'restorative' nostalgia referring to 'restoration (from re-staure – re-establishment) […] a return to the original stasis' and 'reflective' pointing to 'a deep mourning that performs a labour of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future'.[26] In this sense, restorative nostalgia is concerned with rebuilding the past with an emphasis on authenticity and originality, while reflective nostalgia might be viewed as a type of mourning, a *process* of remembering. In her essay, Gaston draws mainly on 'restorative' forms, arguing that the nostalgic resonances in contemporary populist discourse in the US and UK are restorative for the way in which they promise a return to the past and operate on an exclusionary praxis. In contrast here, I develop a reading of *both* 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia in my analysis of the garden as a memory store, suggesting that these paradigms bring out the complexity of the temporal work that is performed in this rural setting.

Grieving *in* Albion

In *The Future of Nostalgia,* Boym highlights the military origins of the term, citing the seventeenth-century Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, who defined nostalgia as the feeling that soldiers felt when away from home, 'the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one's native land'.[27] Nostalgia's associations with soldiers, war, and the idea of a homeland chimes with *Albion*'s military subtext, a

[25] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Owen Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (London: Verso, 2016); Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*.
[26] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Simple Books, 2002), p.49 and p.55.
[27] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.1.

parallel which I explore in detail below.[28] In its seventeenth-century definition, nostalgia was conceptualised as a treatable medical condition which had physical symptoms. Boym cites the symptoms that were listed in Hofer's studies as seeing and hearing ghosts, losing touch with the present, and confusing real and imaginary events.[29] Yet Hofer claimed that the nostalgic patient – in his case, a Swiss soldier far from his homeland – could be successfully treated with a dose of Alpine milk, a few leeches, and a trip to the Swiss Alps, with the taste, sight, and feel of the homeland grounding the patient's illusory state. Hofer's insights into the causes and treatments of nostalgia therefore bring the tension between the metaphysical longing and the material 'cure' to the fore: the ineffable feelings of loss and longing can be relieved by a tactile engagement with material signifiers of home.

Audrey exhibits many of the 'symptoms' of the nostalgic soldiers that Hofer cites as she begins to negotiate the garden through tactile codes. The restoration project itself is a material construction, which is built from the affective material that Hofer describes: the garden is constructed from Audrey's memories of visiting the garden as a child. Nostalgia is the main driving force behind her project, and this is made clear when the audience first meet Audrey: bustling on to the stage with her new neighbour, Edward, and her husband in tow, she recalls 'I just about remember it [the gate] – the metal's frozen up now, but I remember the touch of them, along with my grandfather's pipe smoke, crumpets on the terrace, the lily pond' (p.13). The energy and sense of conviction that Audrey brings to the project and on to the stage is central to realising the play's comedic tone. As the play unfolds, Audrey's enthusiastic recollections prove tiresome for her family, but she continues to share her childhood stories, despite her uninterested audience. This sensory description of the garden also makes clear the affective dimension to her project, as her vision for Albion is located entirely in the realm of memory. Just as the taste of Alpine milk and the scent of the Swiss Alps could trigger a nostalgic reaction from Swiss soldiers who

[28] As I noted earlier, the play's Chekhovian subtext also furthers this quasi-medical reading of nostalgia in the garden. In his medical practice, Chekhov drew on natural remedies grown from his garden and his legacy is captured today in the Anton Chekhov Foundation's project, Anton Chekhov's Garden. The project aims to create a series of gardens in the UK, Ukraine, and Russia which follow the design and principle of Chekhov's own garden, Menshikov. In 2018, one of these gardens – which was designed by Anna Benn and Hannah Gardner – was adapted into a show garden for the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, before being transferred to the Culm Valley Integrated Centre for Health in Devon where is serves its original medical, rehabilitative purpose. See: Anton Chekhov's Garden webpage, <http://antonchekhovfoundation.org/garden.html> [date accessed: 12/11/2020].

[29] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.3

were away from home, Audrey's memory of Albion is underpinned by the taste of crumpets and the smell of her grandfather's pipe. However, as Boym states, 'the alluring object of nostalgia is notoriously elusive' and this is evident in Audrey's synesthetic recollections.[30] Memory is the key term here: Audrey's recollections of Albion supersede its material reality as she continues to gild this romanticised idea of the English rural landscape. In this way, it would seem that Audrey attempts to recreate a *dreamscape* of Albion rather than a *landscape.*

However, as the garden is gradually transformed by the characters who work away at the soil on the stage, Audrey repeatedly stresses that authenticity is key to the restoration project. Audrey's insistence that the restoration must be exactly true to her memory of Albion chimes with Boym's definition of 'restorative' nostalgia which she claims, 'puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps'.[31] This idea that Audrey intends to 'rebuild the lost home and patch up memory gaps' of the garden is highlighted when the gardener, Matthew, explains to Zara that Audrey has ordered hundreds of snowdrops to bring her memory of Albion back into being: he claims that '[she] said they were everywhere, although I think that is unlikely. Either way, she wants them back' (p.11). Audrey's orders to fill the garden with snowdrops mark her attempt to recreate the garden as close to memory as possible, and in doing so, 'patch up' the gaps in her memory with material evidence. Yet Matthew's doubt over the accuracy of Audrey's memory emphasises that that nostalgia is comprised of both rememberings and misrememberings, truth and fiction, which manifests, in Boym's terms, as 'an invented tradition'.[32]

Boym further outlines the way in which 'restorative' nostalgia is underpinned by truth; she argues that 'restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition […] restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth'.[33] In this sense, then, a restorative nostalgic believes that they are simply recreating the past, rather than performing or practicing nostalgia. This accent on truth and authenticity is pertinent to Audrey's conceptualisation of the ethics of rebuilding Albion as she repeatedly brings the importance of evidence and history on to the stage. Bartlett

[30] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.xiv.
[31] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia,* p.41.
[32] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia,* p.43.
[33] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.xviii.

highlights the importance of truth to his protagonist through making clear the research that she undertook before purchasing the house and garden. When her knowledge of the estate is questioned by her family and friends, Audrey is defensive:

> PAUL: She's been reading a book.
>
> AUDREY: *Books*, plural actually Paul. And papers, letters (p.18).

Audrey's insistence that she has read a wide range of materials – books, papers, letters – shows that she is reconstructing Albion from empirical evidence, drawing on both her own 'reliable' memories and an (unspecified) archive on the history of the house and garden.[34] The importance of truth and authenticity to Audrey's excavatory work is also captured in her delight when she receives Weatherbury's trowel as a birthday gift from her husband. This object consolidates the connections between the past and the present, Weatherbury and Audrey, and in doing so, seems to authenticate her project as she is literally given one of the tools of the garden's creator.

While Albion's restoration is in part driven by Audrey's nostalgia for her own visits to the garden as a child in the 1970s, it soon becomes clear that the garden is also a memorial to her son, James, a British soldier who was killed in combat in Afghanistan. This is where the links between Hofer's original military definition of nostalgia, the garden's military origins – marked in the 'Red Garden' in which the play is set – and Audrey's and Anna's (James' partner) present grief for James are made visible, as Bartlett mobilises a number of military iconographies through this rural setting. Such connections are marked in Audrey's decision to scatter James' ashes in the garden, a decision that she makes without consulting her family or Anna. Audrey explains that in scattering James' ashes under the oak tree in the 'Red Garden', she aimed to align his legacy with Captain Weatherbury's fallen colleagues:

> So to cut a long story short, yesterday evening, I was here in the garden, I'd had a couple of glasses of wine over dinner, and I was making plans, and I got quite sad. I read about the fact that this garden was a tribute from Weatherbury to his fallen colleagues who never made it

[34] Audrey's stress on the importance of 'truth' and evidence throughout the play chimes with contemporary debates on 'fake news'. This marks a paradox in which populist politics – which are often, in Boym's terms, restoratively nostalgic in their style – eschew 'facts' and 'experts'.

> home from the First World War […] This garden was a tribute to those soldiers who were devoted to their country but weren't so lucky to come back to it. James is one of those soldiers […] as the plants grow, as this garden blooms every year, we can remember (p.43 – p.44).

As Audrey emphasises the garden's original purpose as a private memorial for the fallen soldiers of the First World War, her gesture evidences an attempt to give James' legacy longevity, with her reference to James' ashes embedded in the earth chiming with the play's wider narrative arc of cycles, rebirth, and renewal.

After this revelation of Audrey scattering James' ashes in the garden at the close of Act One, we learn in the subsequent act that Anna visits the garden every Saturday in order to feel closer to her late partner. This connectivity between the garden, James' ashes, and Anna's memory of him is pushed to the extreme at the close of Act Two when Anna reaches breaking point. When Audrey leaves her alone in the garden, she begins to dance to the song 'Blood Hands' by Royal Blood, with the stage directions making her increasingly frenzied distress clear:

> *She moves more, as the rain comes down.*
>
> *She's crying, mouthing the words to herself. But trying to dance through it.*
>
> *She dances through the plants – getting more and more frenzied.*
>
> *It's really raining now.*
>
> *As it gets to the chorus, and the guitars kick in, she goes to the tree.*
>
> *Hugs it.*
>
> *She kisses it.*
>
> *She starts...fucking it.*
>
> *Still crying. Screaming* (p.75).

Although Anna's visceral and embodied expression of grief chimes with Weatherbury's memorial to the blood that gives the 'Red Garden' its name, her actions breach the decorum that Audrey has instilled in her re-creation of the garden. While Audrey internalises her grief – she earlier said to Katherine that 'grief isn't really something you share […] you go through it on your own […] in the nights' – Anna

demonstrates her suffering and longing with her body (p.69). Through this sexual act, Anna claims her right to grieve for James, which she argues has been repeatedly taken from her by Audrey:

> You're right. I suppose he's in everything here now. The trees, the grass, the plants, whatever they are […] But nowhere else. You wanted to claim him and put him in your house. Your garden. Under your protection. Well now he's in the ground this has become my ground. My garden. My plants and my place (p.74).

As Anna takes handfuls of soil and puts it on her body, she marks an alternative contact with the land from the opening scene where Weatherbury gestures at the soil and lets it run through his fingers. Anna's stress on the personal pronouns – shifting from 'your' to 'my' – signifies her claim to ownership of the garden, and by extension, over James. In interacting with the plants and trees in this way, she tries to connect with James (who is now part of the earth from which the foliage grows) and relieve her longing. Although Anna is clearly grieving, there is also a note of desperate nostalgia as she clings to the tree, willing her late boyfriend to appear, evidencing precisely the kind of 'deep mourning' that Boym associates with 'reflective' nostalgia. Where 'restorative' nostalgia is focused on product and seeks to recreate the past authentically by suspending time, 'reflective' nostalgia is predicated on the process of grieving and looks forwards to the future. Anna's actions exhibit the depth of Boym's 'reflective' nostalgia which she defines as 'a labour of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future'.[35] In working through her grief in such an embodied and demonstrative way, it is clear that Anna 'ponders pain' with her body – a body that we soon learn is pregnant with James' child.

Bartlett stresses that this act is cathartic for Anna in the scene's ending. As water soaks the set and 'Blood Hands' is played deafeningly loud, James sprints on to the stage in his full military uniform looking frantic – as if he were fleeing for his life, before being knocked off his feet by an apparent explosion, reliving the memory of the IED that caused his death. While the play-text indicates that Anna and James should dance, the production at the Almeida ended with Anna scooping up James' motionless

[35] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.55.

body – his corpse – and leaving the stage.[36] Audiences are therefore voyeurs to Anna's intimate mourning practice which appears to conjure up her late partner; they witness her trauma which is displayed and worked through the soil of the garden. Bartlett continues to push at the realms of possibility in Anna's declaration that she is pregnant. Although audiences later find out that this is through the means of artificial insemination, the eerie aspect to this event is realised in Bartlett's manipulation of natural cycles and rhythms – a concept which is integral to the processes of birth, decay, and rebirth that coagulate in the site of the garden. Such cyclical rhythms are further captured at the end of the play when Audrey's grandson, Stanley – named after her uncle, who previously owned Albion – appears dressed in military uniform, seemingly carrying on his father's legacy.

Both Audrey and Anna find a place in Albion to grieve for James and the garden becomes a site in which memory work takes place. However, as I have shown, Bartlett's emphasis on cycles and repetitions extends beyond the personal grief of Audrey and Anna as James' story is refracted through those of the fallen colleagues of the garden's creator, Captain Weatherbury. In repeatedly aligning James' legacy with that of Weatherbury's comrades a century earlier, Audrey taps into broader historical narratives on the relationship between the military, nation, and rural England. The remainder of this chapter will thus consider the historical reach of Audrey's restoration project: first, examining how the military subtext in the play evokes pertinent iconographies of the First World War and second, detailing how the return to an imagined and reconstituted 1920s English country garden enables the exploration of present anxieties around a specifically English culture and history.

In order to explore these connections between the personal nostalgia and grief of the characters and wider historical narratives, I argue here for a reading of the garden as a memory store. The site holds Audrey's private recollections of Albion from her childhood, Audrey and Anna's memories of James, the legacy of the fallen soldiers from the First World War – with which James is aligned – and the garden itself functions as a relic of an old, rural England. The garden is thus a space which is layered

[36] Throughout the play, Bartlett expresses an anti-war sentiment through the character of Anna. When Audrey declares that James' death meant something because he 'he *adored* his country and believed in it', Anna argues the contrary, stating 'he didn't believe in it. What we were doing. Over there. He thought it was a folly. He died for nothing' (p.118). Anna's reduction to British military presence in Afghanistan to 'a folly' chimes with the anti-government discourse on Western interventionism which has circulated since the Iraq War (2003 – 2011).

with different types of memories – personal, cultural, and historical – and its function and effect as a site of memory can be further explored through Pierre Nora's work on *lieux de mémoire*.[37] Nora's expansive theories on the intersection of place, memory, and national identity can be condensed into two key frames: *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire.* He defines *lieux de mémoire* as 'external props or necessary reminders' of particular moments in history and *milieux de mémoire* as the wider environment – or the thick context – in which such historical moments are located. [38] *Lieux de mémoire* or 'external props' are thus places or objects which are associated with or are used to signify a particular historical memory: they are produced in the processes of creating archives, marking anniversaries, and organising celebrations.[39] An example of a *lieu de mémoire* in an English context is Stonehenge; it is a prehistoric monument which is widely regarded as a national icon and each year at Summer and Winter Solstice, Pagan and neo-Druid communities flock to the site to celebrate its history.

It is worth noting here that Nora has since revised his concept of *lieux de mémoire* to incorporate non-material as well as material signifiers of memorial heritage into his definition, including national symbols and mythologies. [40] *Lieux de mémoire* are therefore either material (places or objects) or immaterial (symbols or mythologies) entities which are the product of memory work. The conditions for this memory work to take place are key. Nora argues that *lieux de mémoire* are created when collective memories begin to fade from everyday life, from the fuller environments of memory, *milieux de mémoire*. *Lieux de mémoire* therefore become ways of dealing with the cultural processes of forgetting: they offer a space – either physical or figurative – through which collective memories can be stored. My analysis that follows draws strength from the synergies between Boym's idea of 'reflective' nostalgia and *lieux de mémoire*, with the accent that Boym places on performing, labour, and play being integral to the formation and maintenance of a *lieu de mémoire*: both are embodied acts that are central to the undertaking of this memory work.

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[37] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
[38] Nora, *Realms of Memory,* p.8.
[39] Nora, *Realms of Memory*, p.7.
[40] An example of an immaterial *lieu de mémoire* is the hymn of 'Jerusalem'. The hymn – which takes its verse from William Blake – is widely regarded as England's unofficial national anthem and continues to play a part in the processes of nation-making – for example, it was used in the London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony as well as framing the prologue of Butterworth's J*erusalem*.

The garden can be read as a material *lieu de mémoire* for the way in which it effectively becomes a site of commemoration for fallen soldiers of two British wars: the First World War and the most recent war in Afghanistan. As Audrey folds James' story into those of Weatherbury's fallen colleagues through scattering his ashes in the garden, the histories of these two British wars are brought into dialogue with each other. The play therefore responds to the military contexts in which the play was written: *Albion* was staged during the centenary of the First World War (2014 – 2018) and in the complex aftermath of both the Iraq war (2003 – 2011) and the war in Afghanistan (2001 – 2014). Yet despite Audrey's repeated claims to the garden's national importance through its military history, it is worth remembering that Albion is ultimately a private memorial site. Audrey does not intend to share the garden with the public and Edward observes that her insistence on privacy reflects her Uncle's principles decades earlier:

> Mrs Walters, your Uncle, Mr Upthorne, kept the garden meticulously, having bought it directly from Weatherbury himself in his later years, and keeping it thus he insisted on privacy. He felt too many visitors would trammel and trample the work. When he sold it on, the new owner, Cartwright, didn't have the same means, so he turfed a lot of it, but it meant the village fête could be held here, parties, weddings (p.19).

Following her predecessors, Captain Weatherbury and her uncle, Stanley Upthorne's approaches, Audrey intends to keep the garden exclusively for herself and her family. The garden is therefore a private space which holds personal memories; it is not a public memorial to fallen soldiers.[41]

Although Albion is a private site, Bartlett draws on familiar national iconographies in his representation of the garden. For example, the image of the unity between the soldier and soil of the homeland – which is captured in the striking moment in the prologue where Weatherbury cups a handful

[41] Bartlett's representation of this memorial garden chimes with contemporary debates on the way in which military events are commemorated. Such debates are captured in the politics of poppy-wearing which has become increasingly contested in recent years. While the poppy continues to be used in official displays – such as the Tower of London's art installation *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* to commemorate the First World War centenary in 2014 – many people now refuse to wear a poppy because they believe that it no longer represents the fallen soldiers of this conflict. The poppy has been used to affirm British military intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ireland, and is also a symbol which has been mobilised by the far-right in English nationalist discourse. One example of this appropriation is the use of the poppy in recent 'All Lives Matter' propaganda, headed by far-right organisations in 2020.

of Albion's earth and allows it to run through his fingers – is returned to throughout the play. This gesture of the soldier's contact with the English earth can be read as a *lieu de mémoire*: in Nora's terms, the image has, over time, 'become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage' of the First World War.[42] Twentieth-century literature scholar, Christine Berberich, highlights this mobilisation – in the militaristic sense of the word – of the English soil during wartime: she argues that 'the English countryside has been used as the most effective evocation of Englishness: in times of war and peace alike it has been used […] to express both nostalgia and hope, a sense of belonging.'[43] Berberich notes that the idea of the English countryside was used as a nostalgic reminder (in Hofer's and Boym's sense of the term) of the homeland during wartime, reaffirming a sense of place and by extension, a sense of national belonging. This enduring motif has been widely disseminated in literary works of the period, such as in the poetry of Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen, who were both killed in the First World War.[44] The synonymy between soldiers and the English soil is a theme which extends beyond the initial framing of Weatherbury in the prologue. When Audrey explains that the reason that the 'Red Garden' was labelled 'red' by Weatherbury is because of the mass bloodshed of the First World War, the image of the soldier's body and the land is again mobilised. The embeddedness of the soldier's body in the land is also brought out in her account of Weatherbury's survival: 'Weatherbury was shot at Ypres, put on a pile of the dead, and it was only because a passing private happened to see his body move that he was pulled out, and brought back to life. And that's why it's called the Red Garden, because it's about blood. It's what he saw on the battlefield' (p.43). This image of Weatherbury's wounded body lying among the dead in Belgian earth at Ypres offers an alternative contact with the soil where the sacrificed body of the soldier is laid to rest. Weatherbury's maimed body at Ypres resonates with the opening lines of Rupert Brooke's famous poem, 'The Soldier': 'If I should die, think only this of me: that there is

[42] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*, xvii.
[43] Christine Berberich, 'This Green and Pleasant Land: Cultural Constructions of Englishness' in *Landscape and Englishness (Spatial Practices)* ed. Robert Burden and Stephan Kohl, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p.207.
[44] Although Thomas' 'Adlestrop' is not strictly a war poem, it conjures up a rich image of the English rural landscape as a comfort during wartime. Adlestrop is also set in the South of England in Wiltshire, the neighbouring county to Oxfordshire where Bartlett's play is set. See: Edward Thomas, 'Adlestrop' in *Adlestrop Remembered: A Poetry Anthology from the Centenary Competition* (ed. Victoria Huxley) (Gloucester: Windrush Publishing, 2014)

some corner of a field that is for ever England'.[45] As Brooke's verse stresses the vital connection between the soldiers' bodies and the English soil, Weatherbury's actions can be seen as an attempted reconciliation of the spatial rupture dealt by the war where English soldiers perished on foreign terrain. Such an impetus to reinstate the body back into the English soil is highlighted when Audrey explains Weatherbury's rationale for building the garden:

> This garden was a tribute from Weatherbury to his fallen colleagues who never made it home from the First World War. Who made the ultimate sacrifice for England […] This garden was a tribute to those soldiers who were devoted to their country but weren't so lucky to come back to it (p.43).

When Audrey scatters James' ashes in Albion, then, she follows the garden's original purpose of returning soldiers who died overseas back to the homeland, bringing her son back to English soil.

Grieving *for* Albion

While Albion is in part a memorial site for British military history, I close this chapter with the argument that the garden also generates a wider discussion of English culture connecting back to the debates that underlay the Brexit vote and its aftermath. As the previous section read Albion as a *lieu de mémoire* for the way in which it functioned as a memorial to fallen English soldiers, this section considers the cultural weight of the site itself: the English country garden. This is where Bartlett toggles between two connected – but distinct – rural imaginaries: wartime rural England and the country house. Here, I retain the idea that Albion is a *lieu de mémoire* because we watch the processes of its creation – or rather, restoration – on the stage. At the same time, Boym's theorising of nostalgia remains useful for exploring the way that Audrey attempts to memorialise the culture and demographic that the English country garden represents. Although Audrey's aim to return to the garden's former 1920s glory might seem to be driven by 'restorative' nostalgia – it is, of course, literally a *restoration* – I develop my view set out above that the memory work that takes place in the garden places emphasis on the process and labour associated with 'reflective' nostalgia. As I will show, Audrey does not only use the garden to create a

[45] Rupert Brooke, 'The Soldier' in *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke* (Gloucester: Echo Library, 2006).

legacy for James, she also attempts to memorialise landed culture for future generations, a look to the future which is central to Boym's 'reflective' paradigm. The garden is thus a site to mourn and memorialise personal *and* national histories: Audrey does not merely grieve *in* Albion, she also grieves *for* Albion – for a vanishing or perhaps vanished Old England.

It is here that I want to come back to my reading of Albion as a representation of 'Deep England'. As I noted earlier and in the previous chapter, while 'Deep England' is now widely accepted as a symbolic image of rural England, Wright originally used the term to define 'essential experiences' of Englishness. Wright's experiential aspect of 'Deep England' is evident in the play, with Bartlett using the restoration of the garden as a wider metaphor for a re-examination of national values and concerns. This constructedness is captured in the scenographic composition of Buether's set design. As Albion is gradually restored over the course of the play, Buether's set appeared to blossom in real time and the audience witnessed the labour taken to transform the garden.

Further adding to the liveness of this *lieu de mémoire* of the country house is the way in which the characters act out remembered cultural practices from the 1920s. The language that Audrey uses to describe the house and garden is the first indicator of her fostering of these old English values, and this is mocked by her husband when he dryly remarks that 'this is new, by the way, drawing room rather than living room, terrace rather than patio' (p.21). The reference to the 'drawing room' conjures up images of old, decadent country houses seen in the 'Deep Englands' of *Brideshead Revisited* and *Downton Abbey* that I identified earlier, a vision to which Audrey repeatedly turns for inspiration throughout the play. Yet *Albion* is also replete with performances of this old English landed culture. For example, in the first act, Audrey insists on having a tea party in the garden despite it being a cold day in late February, while in Act Two, she hosts a themed party in her recently renovated 'drawing room' with guests instructed to arrive in 1920s attire. As these performances illustrate, the house and garden are not merely fixed symbolic sites that activate historical narratives of the culture of the landed gentry in the early twentieth century: this rural space is brought into being through the re-enactment of social practices during the play. Audrey's insistence on the acting out of such social practices – the tea party in February and the 1920s cocktail party – is in itself staged; she orchestrates a *performance* of

what she perceives to be the English culture of the landed gentry, and this theatricality points to the live, experiential aspect of Wright's original definition of 'Deep England'.[46]

However, as Albion is brought to life by flapper dresses, cocktails, and jazz music, Audrey's behaviour meets criticism from Anna, her son's bereaved partner, who, emboldened by alcohol at the party, expresses her distaste for the heady nostalgia of this re-enactment to Paul and Katherine. This is where Bartlett opens up a space for opposition to the rural English imaginary that is represented on stage: a self-reflexive manoeuvre which I argue is necessary in any approach to questions of England and Englishness. Indeed, Audrey's performances of landed culture fall under sharp critique from Anna. She argues:

> ANNA: It's obscene.
>
> PAUL: What?
>
> ANNA: To dress up like this. The 1920s were awful. War across the world, women having to fight for the vote, racism, rape, murder, child abuse […] Most people poor and suffering, no proper health care. If we wanted a real 1920s-themed evening we should all come as corpses […] Things have changed for the better. But all these people, descending on the old house – they can't wait to dress up as masters and servants, as if that was fun (p.62).

Anna questions the ethics of harping back to the 'golden years' of the 1920s by highlighting the social deprivation and inequality that characterised the period. In doing so, she exposes the pretence of this performance of 'Deep England' and argues that 'things have changed for the better'. Despite Audrey's valiant attempts to position the house and gardens as a hub of high culture, a place that she describes 'of national importance', Anna reveals the social realities and inequalities of this English rural imaginary. In this sense, Bartlett points to some of the unacknowledged histories of this English

[46] Audrey does seem to replicate the social structures of Weatherbury's time, leading Katherine to joke that 'you really are living out your fantasy aren't you? A landowner with difficult staff. You'll be getting the croquet out next' (p.33). Indeed, by Act Three, Audrey has a full set of staff from the village, including Matthew (the gardener), Cheryl (the original cleaner), Krystyna (the new cleaner), and Gabriel, who helps Matthew in the garden and cleans the windows.

narrative, this 'Deep England', making clear that this rural national imaginary is not benign, but instead carries an uncomfortable social history.[47]

By the end of the play, it is evident that Albion was, in part, a naïve and ignorant dream. Anna refers to the garden as an 'indulgent waste of time' and even Audrey's husband, Paul, who supports the restoration for most of the play asks 'The only thing is… it's not real is it? It's a choice to live in the past' (p.119 and p.92). After a series of planting scenes, the garden is left to ruin and Buether's set begins to rot and decay, with the foliage of the garden signifying the ultimate failure of Audrey's vision for Albion. Yet despite the apparent naivety in Audrey's claim to the garden's national importance, the play does raise urgent questions over English national heritage: which cultures and histories are selected to be remembered and who is able to participate in these processes of remembering? Early in the play, Audrey addresses these issues directly, stating 'it's easy to mock but there was a culture there. Most other countries preserve their past. The embarrassed and insecure English discard it. And then complain when the replacement isn't any good' (p.37). Here, Bartlett confronts the awkwardness – highlighted in the many studies of Englishness discussed in Chapter One – that exists in relation to discussing an Englishness detached from Britishness through Audrey's bold assertion that the English 'discard' their national history and culture. Even at the end of the play, when Audrey admits defeat with the restoration project, she still maintains that while her attempted resurrection of aristocratic culture proved deeply unpopular, the act of revisiting the past was important:

> AUDREY: Even with death most things carry on. Plants seed, children are born. Inheritance. One generation after another. But there is a time when that stops. When for one reason or another a species dies. A culture expires. That particular line of history comes to an end. I know

[47] However, the complex colonial history of country houses is not acknowledged in *Albion*. As I will show in Chapter Five, the English rural is often represented as a white space. This is a xenophobic reading of the rural that Wright warns against in his theorising of 'Deep England' where such an embodied national experience places dangerous emphasis on roots and origins. In recent years, there has been an active move to expose and challenge the colonial connections of the English country house. See, for example, The Colonial Countryside project, a youth-led initiative between schoolchildren, artists and historians, which is led by Corinne Fowler from the University of Leicester. See: <https://colonialcountryside.wordpress.com/about-colonial-countryside/> [date accessed: 27/08/2020]. A similar project is Madge Dresser's and Andrew Hann's *Slavery and the English Country House*, which was published by English Heritage in 2013. See: Dresser and Hann, *Slavery and the English Country House*, <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/slavery-and-british-country-house> [date accessed: 30/11/2020].

you, and your friends, and Katherine, you all laughed at me for wanting to do this, but don't you think there was something, in all this, that was worth preserving? That some part of it, just some little part of it, might be *good*?

ZARA: You wanted it to be what you remembered –

AUDREY: This wasn't about me, really, Zara, it was so the world you, and your children were going to live in had some sense of its past, its roots. So you weren't just living in the next email. The next…trend (p.116).

In claiming to protect this 'particular line of history', Audrey might be compared to Rooster at the close of *Jerusalem,* the tragic hero that I identified in Chapter One, who featured in one of the most popular contemporary rural plays to date. At the end of each play, both Audrey and Rooster are characterised as a last bastion for the different versions of deep old England that they explore, and they also meet the same 'modern' challenge: the encroaching new housing estate. Further parallels might be drawn in that both protagonists appeal to the spirits of the 'Deep England' that they conjure up: while Rooster calls on the giants, *Albion* closes with the appearance of Audrey's grandson, Stanley, dressed in military uniform, seemingly carrying on his father's legacy.[48] In contrast to *Jerusalem*'s seductive ending which positions Rooster's place in the rural landscape as essential and innate, and in doing so, leaves little space for a critical counterpoint, *Albion* closes on a more ambiguous note: Audrey remains an unpopular figure in the local community, her restoration project has divided opinion in her family, and despite her wishes to reverse the sale of the once again decaying house and gardens in the play's final moments, her future in Albion seems uncertain.

Conclusion

Despite the dominant critical reception of *Albion* as a Brexit play, Bartlett situates these questions about national identity within a much longer rural national tradition. His representation of this English country garden effectively brings together two rural imaginaries which continue to dominate England's cultural

[48] Bartlett sets up a symmetry between Audrey and Weatherbury in this final scene: the play closes with her cupping the soil, just as Weatherbury did in the prologue a century earlier in the world of the play. This re-activation of the play's military subtext is also signalled by the sound of Elgar's music – the very same note on which it began.

imagination: the rural England of the First World War and the English country house. Through this loaded setting, Bartlett engages with a number of national symbolic geographies of the English rural, including Elgar in the play's opening moments; the First World War poets, Edward Thomas and Rupert Brooke; and popular references to country house culture, such as Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and recent ITV serials such as *Downton Abbey* (2010 – 2015), *Sanditon* (2019), and *Gentleman Jack* (2019). Yet by staging the restoration of the garden across the duration of his play, Bartlett takes these established rural imaginaries and reveals the processes through which they are constructed. As I have argued here, while Audrey's desire to rebuild a microcosm of 1920s rural England might at first seem reactionary, the garden becomes a site in which complex memory work takes place. By showing this memory work, Bartlett prompts critical reflection on what these rural symbols represent and the ways in which they are used to serve a national purpose.

This re-examination of wartime rural England and the country house – as two rural imaginaries which are distinctly national in their register – is timely. As I noted in Chapter One, since the Brexit vote in 2016, a number of political theorists and cultural commentators have called for a critical study of England and Englishness. Such approaches – led by thinkers such as Denham and Barnett – build on existing work which seeks to develop an understanding of an English heritage, culture, and history, independent of Britain, including that of Kingsnorth and Kenny, which I discussed in detail in the previous chapter. *Albion* evidences precisely the kind of 'recuperative potential' of Englishness that Kenny describes, with the restoration project being a literal attempt to recuperate a particular type of national rural narrative.[49] The next chapter looks back further to an older version of rural England, turning to the pre-industrial rural landscapes represented in D.C. Moore's *Common* and E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group*. While I move away from overt national readings of the rural, I continue to work with the idea that this 'look back' to the rural past is more than an exercise of uncritical nostalgia. Indeed, I argue that the staging of pre-industrial rural environments involves complex temporal and conceptual work, which asks audiences to reflect on how the English rural past is used to present political effect.

[49] Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, p.14.

Chapter Three: Simpler Times:

Exploring the Rural Past in D.C. Moore's *Common* and E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group*

Introduction

This chapter turns to the representation of a different type of old English rural imaginary and explores the pre-industrial rural pasts that are depicted in E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group* (Royal Court Upstairs, November 2016) and D.C. Moore's *Common* (Olivier: The National, May 2017). In doing so, I move away from the idea of nostalgia and 'Deep England' discussed in my previous chapter on Bartlett's *Albion*, but retain a sharp focus on the theatrical representation of the English rural past. Both productions considered here premiered on London stages within six months of each other, alongside a number of other plays which also staged pre-industrial rural environments, including Ella Hickson's *Oil* (Almeida Theatre, 2016), a revival of David Harrower's 1995 *Knives in Hens* (Donmar Warehouse, 2017) and more recently, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Welkin* (Lyttleton: The National, 2020). In detailing this resurgent interest in the rural past on the London stage, I argue that the development of these narratives about historical rural England in Crowe's and Moore's plays is far from what some reviewers have termed theatrical escapism. While Dominic Cavendish takes this view, proposing in his review of *The Sewing Group* that the play's pre-industrial rural setting simply speaks to 'our yearning to be taken out of ourselves, to escape into immersive environments, to stop the corporate clock, to find the communal spirit that industrialisation unravelled', I instead suggest that the play's staging of pre-industrial rural England involves complex conceptual and temporal work.[1] This chapter examines such complexities in both *The Sewing Group* and *Common*, exploring the ways in which Crowe and Moore use the pre-industrial rural past in order to construct a political commentary about contemporary England.

Staging the Rural Past

[1] Dominic Cavendish, 'The Royal Court's *The Sewing Group* is Lamentably Threadbare', *The Telegraph*, 17 November 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/the-royal-courts-sewing-group-is-lamentably-threadbare---review/> [date accessed: 12/04/2019].

While discussion of the pre-industrial rural – more usually figured as 'premodern' – is a rich seam in modern and contemporary Irish drama and criticism, there is little in the way of an equivalent body of work, either theatrical or critical, in relation to England. Indeed, as I noted in Chapter One, the landscape of the West of Ireland has been instrumental to the processes of nation-making in the context of Irish drama, with the work of the playwrights of the Celtic Revival – a movement led by W.B Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge at the turn of the twentieth century – mythologising and demythologising ideas of the Irish West, a largely rural area which was already potent in national iconography.[2] This theatrical focus on the premodern West is also evidenced in contemporary Irish drama and performance. For example, the Anglo-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh wrote two trilogies set in the West of Ireland: Leenane, County Galway is the setting for *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (Druid Theatre Company, Galway, 1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 1997) and *The Lonesome West* (Druid Theatre Company, Galway, 1997) and his second trilogy – made up of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (Cottesloe: The National, 1996), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2001) and his unproduced play *The Banshees of Inisheer* – is set on the Aran Islands. Other contemporary plays set in rural Ireland include Tom Murphy's *The House* (Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 2000) which is set in Galway and Marina Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* (Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 2000) which is set in the rural Irish Midlands. Both Murphy's and Carr's plays have subsequently been revived at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 2012 and 2018 respectively, highlighting the continued interest in this rural environment on the Irish stage.

However, in the English context, the pre-industrial rural does very different work. The interest in the modern English pageant play – popular at the turn of the twentieth century – might be viewed as a parallel to the Celtic Revival in Ireland for the way in which this genre also deals with the rural past. The historian Paul Readman focuses on the popularity of the English pageant play in his article 'The

[2] As I noted in Chapter One, Scottish and Welsh theatre also use their respective rural landscapes as a marker of national difference from Britain. In the Scottish context, a similar theatrical attention to pre-industrial rural environments is seen in Glover's *The Straw Chair* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 1988) which is set on the Hebrides in the early eighteenth century. However, my focus here rests on Ireland: the premodern Irish rural is not only a dominant theatrical mode, it is also an extensively researched spatial imaginary in theatre studies.

Place of the Past in English Culture c.1890-1914'.[3] Drawing on the work of the key dramatist Louis Parker – who staged the 1905 Sherborne Pageant and 1906 Warwick Pageant which each involved around 800 to 900 participants – he notes that the pageant is a dramatic genre which captures the clear cultural interest in what he terms 'pre-industrial "Merrie England" of the "Olden Time"' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[4] Citing the pageant play and the rise of heritage tourism, Readman attests to the presence of the past in English culture, despite the dominant view that nineteenth and early twentieth-century English culture is characterised by future temporal optics due to the acceleration of Britain's imperial project and the Industrial Revolution. In fact, he argues that this mobilisation of a 'Merrie England of the 'Olden Time'' was an inward turn from the expansionary movements of industry and Empire which characterised the period.

In contrast to the radicalism of the Celtic Revival – which was evident, for example, in Synge's staging of pagan cultural residue in modern Catholic Ireland – English pageant plays were thus inherently conservative. This conservatism is highlighted by Joshua D. Esty who writes that the English pageant play was a 'neotraditional' genre which was predicated on 'rural, antiquarian ideals of Englishness'.[5] Esty points out the way in which these ideals conjured up images of a cohesive and whole English rural past, claiming that:

> Pageants were the putative vessels of folk consciousness, of a knowable community's midsummer day-dreams. Moreover, the pageant-play was perfectly suited to the tenets of English civic nationalism: it seemed likely to promote and express just enough collective spirit to bind people together, but not so much as to trip over into the frightening power of totalitarian group ritual.[6]

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[3] Paul Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture c. 1890 – 1914', *Past and Present*, 186 (2005), 147 – 201.
[4] Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture c. 1890 – 1914', p.147.
[5] Joshua D. Esty, 'Amnesia in the Fields: Late Modernism, Late Imperialism and the English Pageant-Play', *ELH*, 69:1(2002), 245 – 276, p.246. The pageant play's emphasis on rural ideals is captured in E.M. Forster's *England's Pleasant Land: A Pageant Play*. The play was first performed at Milton Court in Westcott, Surrey in 1938 and focuses on the changing nature of the English countryside. Covering a span of one thousand years, *England's Pleasant Land* details seismic changes to England's rural landscape, including the processes of enclosure which I examine in relation to Moore's play in this chapter.
[6] Esty, 'Amnesia in the Fields: Late Modernism, Late Imperialism and the English Pageant-Play', p.247.

In this sense, then, the pageant play turned to a bounded rural past which captured English national virtues; and while such plays invested in folkloric customs, these were knowable and ultimately, hegemonic. Such plays would be mocked by Virginia Woolf in her 1941 novel *Between the Acts* where she satirised the genre: her novel is set in an English country house where a pageant play is being staged just before the outbreak of World War Two.[7]

In this chapter, I suggest that one reason for the lack of critical interest in pre-industrial rural England on the stage is due to the colonial dialectic between Ireland and Britain. In Ireland, the call back to a premodern rural past was used to signify national cultural difference and in doing so, counter narratives of modern British imperialism. This counter-hegemonic utility of the Irish premodern is captured, for example, in Synge's one-act tragedy, *Riders to the Sea,* in which he staged pagan cultural practices, including a *caoine* (keen) performed by a chorus of women at the play's close.[8] However, as the hegemonic centre of Britain, there was no need for England to carve out a distinctive national identity. England remains inextricably implicated in the structures of what David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe term 'global neo-colonial capitalism' and I argue that it is due to this central positionality that theatrical explorations into pre-industrial rural England are less common.[9] It is worth noting that I do not intend to simply transpose this framing of premodern cultural residue on to the contemporary English plays discussed here; this would be a reductive endeavour, abstracting the premodern Irish West from its complex socio-economic context. One of the ways that I have aimed to distinguish between these nations is to adapt the terminology used by Irish theatre scholars, terming the English rural 'pre-industrial' rather than 'premodern'. While the term 'premodern' collocates with other critically loaded

[7] One English playwright who did stage pre-industrial England was John Drinkwater. Drinkwater was a popular poet and playwright in the inter-war period: his most famous play *Abraham Lincoln* premiered at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1918 and subsequently transferred to London to the Lyric Hammersmith in the same year, before its US debut at the Cort Theatre on Broadway in 1919. His other plays *Mary Stuart* (Ritz Theatre, New York, 1921) and *Oliver Cromwell* (Theatre Royal, Brighton, 1923) experienced similar commercial acclaim. Although set in a pre-industrial environment, these plays did not draw upon counter-hegemonic cultural residue like Synge in his oeuvre and have not received the same degree of scholarly attention.

[8] J.M. Synge, *Riders to the Sea* in *The Complete Plays of J.M. Synge* (Oxford: Benediction Press, 2015).

[9] David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe, 'Introduction' in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Late Capital* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp.1 – 32. This critique of England's position of constitutional and colonial centrality was discussed in Chapter One, where I explored the way in which Gilroy, Nairn, and Gardiner frame England.

terms such as primitivism in the Irish context, the term 'pre-industrial' is perhaps more neutral, indicating an economic formation.

However, this chapter does suggest that this kind of excavatory work of understanding pre-industrial rural England – on the stage and off – is productive given the present anxiety over definitions of Englishness. Although I am not equating Ireland's self-mythologisation and identity construction in a postcolonial context to England's national anxiety in 2020, I argue that this recovery of pre-industrial rural narratives is timely in that it returns to a specifically English history. This theatrical interest in pre-industrial rural England might evidence an attempt to find what Kenny terms the 'recuperative potential' in English cultural formations.[10] As I noted earlier in Chapter One, this imperative to approach England independently from Britain is also proposed – albeit from different political standpoints – by Gardiner, Kingnorth, and Gilroy.[11] Here, I argue that *Common* and *The Sewing Group* represent attempts to do so.

While this chapter is mostly concerned with the use of the rural past rather than historical minutiae, I want to fully define my choice of the term 'pre-industrial' here. Indeed, I use the term relatively loosely due to the differences between the two rural settings: Crowe notes in her stage directions that the rural scene is '*suggestive of 1700s rural England*', while Moore is more precise, locating his play in 1809.[12] As I detail below, Crowe depicts an environment in which the work is 'craft' and where the women work together in harmony: there is no industrial threat to this bounded rural enclave. In contrast, *Common* is set during a period of seismic socio-economic change: the protagonist, Mary, makes clear that the Industrial Revolution is in full swing in England's cities in her reference to 'the youngnewcentury' and the 'Revolutions [that] rise eachevery horizon' (p.7). However, despite the fact that England was industrialising at this time, *Common*'s setting is emphatically *pre*-industrial. The village in the middle of 'the English countryside' is far from any town and is not yet enclosed; it is this process of enclosure which Moore explores over the course of his play (p.5). Although both plays depict

[10] Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, p.14.
[11] Nairn also makes an argument with a similar post-British impetus in *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Granta Books, 2000).
[12] E.V. Crowe, *The Sewing Group* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), p.15; D.C. Moore, *Common* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.5.

pre-industrial socio-economic formations, then, two very different rural imaginaries are brought into question and these are mobilised in different ways: where *The Sewing Group* depicts a domestic rural environment in which the women quietly carry out embroidery work, *Common* offers a carnivalesque representation of a village in the final throes of enclosure.

Following an introduction to both *Common* and *The Sewing Group*, I frame each play through Paola Botham's definition of the 'twenty-first century history play' in order to explore the way in which the rural past is used to articulate current tensions in England's contemporary socio-political milieu.[13] I then theorise pre-industrial rural temporality in relation to capitalist (urban) modernity, drawing out the complexities of rural temporalities, which, as I have already noted in Chapter One and Chapter Two, are so often elided in cultural discourse. The remainder of this chapter then applies these frameworks to my analysis of Moore's and Crowe's plays, exploring how these playwrights represent collective social and economic formations in the pre-industrial rural landscapes depicted on stage. This discussion highlights how the rural past is used with present political charge and in doing so, emphasises the complexity of rural temporalities, with the aim of critiquing the dominant view that the English rural is a stable, 'past' spatial imaginary.

Common was marketed on the National's website as 'an epic tale of England's lost land…As the factory smoke of the industrial revolution belches out from the cities, Mary [Moore's protagonist] is swept up in the battle for her former home. The common land, belonging to all, is disappearing'.[14] Through this advertisement, the audience are given a historical frame for reading Moore's play: both the Industrial Revolution and the Enclosure Acts are referenced in this introductory material, prompting audiences to expect a history play centred on these events.[15] This historical framing was also evidenced

[13] Paola Botham, 'The Twenty-first Century History Play' in *in Twenty-first Century Drama: What Happens Now?*, pp.85 – 115.
[14] *Common* marketing material, National Theatre website: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/common> [date accessed: 16/04/2019].
[15] The programme also featured John Clare's anti-enclosure poem 'The Mores' and an extract from Sir Richard Phillips's *A Morning's Walk from London to Kew*, which detailed the 'the smoke of nearly a million coalfires, issuing from the two hundred thousand houses which compose London and its vicinity'. Through this pre-production material, the National Theatre indexes the economic, social, and physical changes dealt to England's rural spaces after enclosure, the mass migration out of the country to the city that followed, and the prevalence of superstition and myth in the rural communities that were left behind in this process. See: *Common* Production Programme held at the National Theatre Archives, London (archive reference number: RNT/E/6/5/44).

in the production programme, which featured essays by two prominent historians: Peter Linebaugh's 'Whose land is this?' explored the trauma effected by the Enclosure Acts and Ronald Hutton's 'The Problems of Enchantment' highlighted the centrality of superstition and the supernatural to English rural communities at this time. Yet Moore is playful in his engagement with this historical moment in his play. This is best captured by a line in the prologue to the play-text, which is repeated by his protagonist, Mary, in the main body of the play as she directly addresses the audience with a rhetorical question: 'But we are not here for reasons of dry historical accuracy. Are we, sir? Nah' (p.60). From the outset of the play, then, Moore's treatment of this pre-industrial historical moment is deliberately slippery.

This reluctance to adopt a theatrical mode of authenticity – or, as Mary puts it, 'dry historical accuracy'– is also evidenced in Moore's representation of rural space in his play. The geographic location of the village in which the play is set is not revealed in the play-text or to the audiences watching the production: Moore simply states in his stage directions that the play is located in '*the English countryside*' (p.5). As such, he engages with rural space in an even more generic way to Bartlett in *Albion* where audiences are located in an unspecified part of rural Oxfordshire. In a pre-show talk staged at the National, he explained that – like Bartlett – his setting was informed by a real rural location: a visit to the Kent village, Stelling Mennis, where animals are grazed on the commons which remain predominantly unenclosed. Where Bartlett uses his references to Hidcote – a real country house in Oxfordshire – as a way to engage with the cultural history of that particular region, Moore strays further from located place and draws on what I would suggest is the generic, national conceptual space of '*the English countryside*'.

However, this patch of the English countryside is no green or pleasant land. In contrast to *Albion*'s opening notes of Elgar, *Common*'s prologue opened to the sound of an irregular drumbeat as a horde of villagers, clad in animal masks, made communal noise with makeshift percussion instruments. In his stage directions, Moore refers to this discordant demonstration as a performance of '*rough music*', which calls on the folk custom of charivari (p.5). Rough music is the term for the English variation on the French *charivari*, Italian *scampanate,* and the German *haberfeldtreiben, thierjagen* and *katzenmusik*, which were popular 'justice' festivals that were practiced at the end of the seventeenth

century. As E.P. Thompson points out, rough music was as a form of communal discipline: he defines the term as 'a rude cacophony, with or without more elaborate ritual, which usually directed mockery or hostility against individuals who offended against certain community'.[16] Such cacophonies were practiced in multiple forms: Thompson notes that these customs included placing the victim on a pole or donkey, masking and dancing, elaborate recitatives, the miming of a ritual hunt, and the burning of effigies.[17]



FIGURE 2: Production image of D.C. Moore's *Common*. Directed by Jeremy Herrin (2017). Image copyright: Johan Petersson.

These practices are all evidenced in the opening scene to Moore's play. The villagers appear as a masked collective entity who dance wildly to this discordant rhythm and at the end of the prologue, they burn an effigy: a Wicker Man (see Figure 2). This staging of rough music is also shown in the smaller details of the production. Moore highlights in his stage directions that the villagers were using '*pots and pans'* which chimes with Thompson's citation of the Lincolnshire dialect glossary's definition of the form of rough music as 'Clashing of pots and pans. Sometimes played when any very unpopular person is leaving the village or being sent to prison'.[18] The practice of rough music identifies an alternative structure to modern law and order: the villagers decide upon social codes for their own

[16] E.P. Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', *Folklore,* 103:1 (1992), 3 – 26, p.3.
[17] Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', p.3 – 4.
[18] The Lincolnshire Dialect Glossary cited in E.P. Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', p.4.

community and then mete out their definition of 'justice' accordingly. At the very outset of his play, then, Moore introduces a pre-industrial social structure which is predicated on the collective: the villagers act independently of any state formation and it is made clear that folkloric customs govern this common land.

As the villagers dispersed from their tight collective formation, they revealed a stack of fence posts burning centre-stage – a symbol of their resistance to the Enclosure Act and the processes that follow it. In this opening scene, the stage was dimly lit by the naked flames of lanterns carried by the villagers, leading reviewers to comment on the carnal tone of this mise-en-scène: Ian Shuttleworth noted in the *Financial Times* that lighting director Paule Constable's choices created 'wild rural menace', while Andrzej Lukowski wrote in his review for *Time Out* that the production worked with 'elemental intensity'.[19] The bareness of Richard Hudson's set design further highlights this elemental quality. The expansive Olivier stage was almost empty, except for the soil scattered across the bare stage floor and a scenic backdrop of a village-scape, which featured a cluster of cottages and a church spire. Despite the play being set during harvest time – which we come to know through Mary's ironic declaration – through the run-together words that are a distinctive feature of Moore's dialogue – that the land is 'harvestpregnant' – the empty, soil-strewn stage makes clear that this rural community are suffering from a poor crop yield (p.12). Moore marks the desperation of the villagers in this barren landscape by representing them as territorial animals: he notes in his stage directions that they should appear as '*animaltypes or devilfolk or somepartboth, on edge of their vast Common*' (p.5). The villagers do not embody the calm and civility that I have earlier suggested is so often associated with the English countryside; they operate as a collective body on this common land, making noise and articulating their protest through their bodies.

While audiences at the National were positioned to view the villagers from a perspective of marked separation in this spectacular prologue, the first main scene creates a different type of actor-audience relationship. As soon as the protagonist, Mary, enters, she directly addresses the audience:

[19] Ian Shutterworth, '*Common* Review', *Financial Times*, 7 June 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/333229e2-4b6e-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43>, [date accessed: 07/04/19]; Andrzej Lukowski, '*Common* Review', *Time Out*, 7 June 2017, <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/common>, [date accessed 07/04/19].

‘Ladies. Gentlemen. Madam. Listen. Now is a dark hour. We stand, runt-small, at the edge of a vast sunless-abyss, as our youngnewcentury dawns & we eye The Coming Storm’ (p.7). The protagonist’s opening address reveals that the rural community depicted on stage are in crisis: her reference to the ‘dark hour’ alludes to the poor harvest, while the ‘The Coming Storm’ and the ‘youngnewcentury’ references the completion of enclosure and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

This juxtaposition between the innocence of the country and the ‘troubled’ city environment is of course a familiar narrative arc in English literature that Williams identified in *The Country and the City* – and one which Bartlett explored in *Albion*. Here, Moore uses his protagonist Mary to set up this familiar dichotomy in the play. The dominant binaries of country innocence and the troubled city structure Mary’s speech: she notes that she was born ‘innocent and free right here on this jagged-roundplot of quietcountryfields’ but was forced to ‘whore, thieve and lie’ her way to survive in the ‘troubled capital’, leading her to eventually scheme and cheat a rich aristocrat into making a living (p.7 and p.8). In the description of Mary’s life in London, Moore draws on the country/city dyad of innocence and experience: she claims that London has soiled her, making her, in her terms, a ‘sindrowned, hollowempty, morallyvacant product’ of this urban environment (p.8). This transformation from country innocence to dangerous, urban wisdom is a notion which also engages with the Blakean dichotomy of the purity of the countryside and the sin of city as seen in his book of poetry *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.[20] Such binary oppositions identified in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* would be contemporary to the historical moment depicted in Moore’s play: Blake’s collection was published in 1789, twenty years before the date that *Common* is set.

The protagonist’s asides and direct address work to position Mary as a guide, who helps the audience to navigate this unfamiliar rural enclave. Indeed, Mary is a liminal figure who repeatedly crosses between the fictional world represented on stage and the audience. She grew up in this rural community but no longer belongs to it, so her subject positioning is more closely aligned with that of the audience situated in the auditorium of the Olivier theatre on the South Bank of the Thames. Mary’s

[20] This contrast between the unspoilt country and the sin of the city is evident in the juxtaposition between ‘Laughing Song’ and ‘London’. See William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

otherness to the villagers is marked in the first scene when she first returns to the land and meets crow-scarer, EggyTom. Confused by her decadent language and dress, EggyTom refers to Mary as 'Madam Niceclothes' and his disbelief that she grew up on the land is played out in the following exchange between them:

> MARY: […] I am no stranger.
>
> EGGYTOM: You are mate.
>
> MARY: To you perhaps. But not the Earth here. She has better memory than any person or ledger & she knows me still.
>
> EGGYTOM: Well if you're no stranger, why do you dress & talk so strangeforeigndifferent & wear such richfine other-cloth?
>
> MARY: I have been a long time away, in hell.
>
> EGGYTOM: Oh what you mean London?
>
> MARY: You know it (p.10 – 11).

EggyTom highlights the way in which Mary's alterity is signified by her linguistic difference and her dress.[21] Where the villagers are clad in animal masks and neutral rags, Mary enters wearing a corseted, red, floor-length gown which chimes with her lusty characterisation as a femme fatale, a label that she wears with pride: she declares 'if I were man you'd call me rogue; let us do with whore, liar, thief, cunt. The best though such brilliant bitch this septic isle ever knew or will' (p.7). As her proud declaration makes clear, Mary comes to embody the social ills found in the capital, or as EggyTom understands it, 'hell': she lies compulsively and schemes her way to the top in pursuit of a future with Laura, her childhood love.

It is worth noting here that *Common* is a richly complex play which is at times difficult to follow, not just because of the many run-together word phrases that punctuate the dialogue. Many critics took this view, arguing that Moore simply takes on too much: Fergus Morgan wrote in *Exeunt* that it is 'a classic case of biting off more than one can chew'.[22] Shuttling between scenes of spectacular violence

[21] This idea that EggyTom can tell that Mary is from London by her physical appearance alone chimes with Gabriel's initial reaction to Zara in *Albion*.
[22] Fergus Morgan, 'Review: *Common* at the National Theatre, *Exeunt*, 7 June 2017, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-common-national-theatre/> [date accessed: 21/09/2020].

and multiple plot twists, *Common* is indeed ambitious in its scope. For example, audiences learn early on that Mary was expelled from this rural community by the Harvest King due to her relationship with his sister, Laura. Yet the Harvest King later reveals that he beat her and left her dying in a ditch, and her return to the village is represented as a return from the dead. Mary's ability to seemingly rise from the dead is later *shown* to audiences after Laura stabs her in the back and she is buried by the villagers at the close of Act Two. Act Three then begins with a thunderstorm, a talking crow, and Mary rising from the grave, making clear Moore's supernatural characterisation of his protagonist. Alongside this doomed love story, Mary strikes up a relationship with the Lord of the estate in an attempt to reverse the processes of enclosure. The Lord's story is again a complex one which is only briefly explored: we later learn that he gave his wife syphilis which sent her into a fit of madness, causing her to kill her own son. The play then ends with a violent uprising where the villagers attack the Lord's estate, another fight scene in which Mary kills Laura, and in the play's final moments, Mary declares that she is moving back to London, claiming that 'there is a City to Run. A Century to Forge' (p.118). Such leaps in plot and tone certainly make the play difficult to follow, and it seems that Moore struggles to hold the many strands of his narrative together.[23] My analysis that follows in this chapter thus focuses on Moore's playful take on a rural history play and in particular, his staging of pre-industrial rural practices.

As with *Common*, E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group* is set for the most part in a pre-industrial rural landscape which again functions as a conceptual space rather than a located place. This generic aspect to Crowe's play is highlighted in her stage directions in the play-text in which she does not specify the setting of her play. Instead, she simply states that the two women who we meet in the first scene are '*suggestive of 1700s rural England*' (p.15). By locating the play through the appearance of the characters, Crowe elides any direct reference to the place in which her play is set; *The Sewing Group* is thus even more generic in its spatiality than *Common.* In contrast to Herrin's spectacular set design

[23] Another reason attributed to the play's incoherence is Moore's use of language, with Susannah Clapp arguing in her review of the play that Mary's lexical excess offers up 'bawdy challenges to the audience' that 'mean nothing'. However, I argue that Moore's idiomatic language is central to his aesthetic project. Moore's protagonist uses these neologistic compounds to articulate Mary's quick wit and power; she deploys these unwieldy linguistic utterances to dominate, subvert, and control the other characters. See: Susannah Clapp, '*Common*: A Land-Locked Drama that Fluffs All Its Lines', *The Guardian*, 11 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/11/common-olivier-anne-marie-duff-theatre-national-review>, [date accessed: 10/04/2019].

for Moore's play in the Olivier's 1150 seat auditorium, audiences watching *The Sewing Group* in the Jerwood Upstairs at the Royal Court – which has a maximum capacity of 90 people – found themselves amid the action, which took place in a windowless, boxed structure of untreated planks of wood. Crowe's play was directed and designed by Stewart Laing, who transformed the Jerwood Upstairs into this hermetically-sealed rural domestic environment, leading reviewers such as Susannah Clapp to highlight the 'Shaker-like simplicity' of his set design.[24] Laing's modest set placed accent on functionality and the props used in the production did emulate the style of Shaker furniture: the set was comprised of only four, low wooden stools and four embroidery frames, each stretching a piece of lace. As Clapp points out, Laing's set design also had a spiritual optic. The lighting designer Mike Brookes used candlelight to light the space which indexed the pre-industrial time in which the play is apparently set and brought quietly menacing undertones to the production. Brookes did not use electric lighting; this enabled total blackout during the frequent scene changes, creating a disorientating effect for both the actors and audience, who had to negotiate the space in complete darkness.

The play's first scene opened with two women sitting on wooden stools, embroidering what we come to learn later in the play are lace undergarments (see Figure 3). All of the women were wearing similar black dresses and this costume was specified by Crowe in her stage directions: '*A and B in long, black dresses, suggestive of 1700s rural England. They look like a picture ripped out of a history book'* (p.15). This reference to the women looking like '*a picture ripped out of a history book*' both indexes the play's pre-industrial historical referent and frames the form of Crowe's play. In contrast to *Common* which sweeps across five acts, *The Sewing Group* is comprised of thirty-three short, sharp scenes which create a montaged effect, with some of the scenes eliding dialogue altogether. While the villagers in *Common* make communal, carnal noise at the outset of that play, the women in *The Sewing Group* do not speak in the opening scene; they simply pause, look at each other and continue sewing. In the second scene, a man (titled F in the stage directions) enters and introduces a third woman (C) to A and B, simply asserting that 'she's come from the next village. To live with her aunt and uncle' (p.15). The

[24] Susannah Clapp, '*The Sewing Group* Review – Stitches in Time', *The Guardian*, 20 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/20/sewing-group-ev-crowe-royal-court-review>, [date accessed: 12/04/2019].

audience then follow the protagonist C in her negotiation of this new rural environment as she learns to embroider with the rural women. Audiences thus follow Crowe's protagonist in a similar way to Mary in *Common*: both protagonists are represented as 'other' to the rural communities that are shown on stage.



FIGURE 3: Production image of E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group*. Directed by Stewart Laing (2016).

Image copyright: Stephen Cummiskey.

C begins to ask questions of A and B, and I suggest that her reactions mirror those of the audience members sitting in the auditorium. First, C tries to locate this rural space as she asks, 'what kind of crops do you farm? What county is it?' (p.15). Here, C tries to orient herself in this generic rural setting in a similar way to the audience watching the production. Yet A and B do not answer C's questions, they simply direct her attention back to her embroidery frame as A warns 'the stitches, they catch if they get too big' (p.16). Although it becomes apparent that sewing is a language of its own in Crowe's production – with the stage directions to the first fifteen scenes indicating that '*they sew*' – C asks 'what do you do *while* you're sewing' to which A replies 'sew' (p.16). This comic exchange evidences C's exasperation with the lack of action in this rural community, a critique which is also highlighted by several reviewers of Crowe's play, with Dominic Cavendish dubbing the play

'lamentably threadbare' in his review, stating 'not a lot happens – a lot'.[25] In this sense, then, C tries to find answers to these 'where', 'why', and 'how' questions in a similar way to the members of the audience watching the production that is set in this unlocated, apparently pre-industrial rural space.

As the scenes unfold, Crowe makes clear the shifting power dynamic playing out between the women in this insular rural community as C gradually moves from an 'outsider' to a central, leading figure. C's new-found authority is marked in the juxtaposition between her behaviour in scenes 12 and 13. In scene 12, she is reluctant to choose the colour of the stitch and exclaims 'don't put me in charge!' (p.19). However, immediately following this in scene 13, we learn that this exclamation was in fact a warning: she orders A and B to use red stitch, simply using 'red' as an imperative, and later asserts via a rhetorical question that 'We're doing it my way though. Aren't we?' (p.21). C then begins to manage the other women by controlling their work; she demands the women increase their output, speed up the processes of production demanding 'big, double the size', and later leads a community project to make a patchwork blanket for a grieving widow which is made out of her husband's old clothes (p.20).

Through C's gradual takeover of the situation, Crowe introduces a corporate language which is anachronistic to the pre-industrial rural milieu that is depicted on stage. It is here that Crowe eventually reveals the twist to her play: we learn that the pre-industrial rural environment that is shown on stage is in fact a performance of rurality acted out by a company called 'Simpler Times', which works with businesses as a 'screen-break' initiative to counteract the damaging effects of electronic data. Crowe's play thus operates on a meta-dramatic axis: the rural scene shown on stage is revealed to be a black-box theatre within the studio space of the Jerwood Upstairs, the women A, B and D are actors playing actors in this scheme, and C is revealed to be Maggie, the participant in this screen-break initiative who is a high-profile 'computer engineer', who works to interpret terrorist threats (p.52). This rupture was literally realised in the production where the ceiling of Laing's boxed set design fell through as the reveal was made.

The use of the rural past as a conceptual space – which is the focus of this chapter – is therefore clearly staged in Crowe's play. In this performance of pre-industrial rurality by the 'Simpler Times

[25] Cavendish, 'The Royal Court's *The Sewing Group* is Lamentably Threadbare'.

company, Crowe pits contrasting spatialities and temporalities against each other: the pre-industrial rural is offered as an antidote to the speed and excess of the contemporary urban environment. The pre-industrial rural is used by 'Simpler Times' as a site of escapism and recuperation; the bare set, the quiet, and the simple narrative 'arc' that Maggie follows is designed to offer a temporary release from the constant over-stimulation of new technologies in everyday life, particularly in the context of Maggie's position of responsibility as a data analyst in a terrorism prevention unit. Crucially, Crowe does not simply delineate between the rural past and urban present: these spatialities and temporalities intersect and create productive tension over the course of the play.

Reading the Rural Past

My theoretical approach to reading the rural past in this chapter is informed by poststructuralist thinking on history and temporality. Such approaches are integral to studies on the representation of the premodern rural in Irish drama where pre-industrial social and economic structures are read as always in dialogue with urban modernity.[26] Before exploring the ways in which I conceptualise the pre-industrial rural in my analysis of Moore's and Crowe's plays, I want to first draw attention to the way that the rural is broadly framed, in temporal terms, as past. It is here that I want to return to Williams' reading of the rural past that I introduced in Chapter One, where he suggests that 'the apparent resting places, the successive Old Englands to which we are confidently returned but which move and recede, have some actual significance, when they are looked at in their own terms.[27] Williams' reading of the English rural in English literature as 'apparent resting places' captures the way in which the rural – in contrast to the change and speed that characterises the urban environment – is celebrated precisely for its stasis. Furthermore, in his observation that we are 'confidently returned' to these Old Englands, Williams identifies the discursive utility of the rural past. In doing so, Williams suggests that the rural past is used as an antidote to the urban present, a concept that is pertinent to my analysis of both plays in this chapter but especially to *The Sewing Group* as this bringing together of these two contrasting

[26] As I noted earlier, Lloyd examines myth and ruins in *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity*, while Collins explores the radical potential of premodern cultural residue in J.M. Synge's oeuvre in *Theatre and Residual Culture: J.M. Synge and Pre-Christian Ireland*.
[27] Williams, *The Country and the City,* p.17.

spatialities and temporalities is central to the dramaturgical structure and thematic content of Crowe's play.

It is clear that Williams advocates a nuanced approach to the rural past. By insisting that these 'apparent resting places' move and recede, Williams points out that the stability and continuity of the rural idyll is a myth. As such, he proposes that although the mobilisation of these 'resting places' is potentially unsettling, it is a productive process. This call for a more advanced understanding of the rural past is further highlighted by Williams in the following passage, cited earlier:

> Against sentimentalised and intellectualised accounts of an unfocalized 'Old England', we need, evidently, the sharpest criticism…What we have to inquire into is not, in these cases, historical error, but historical perspective […] what seemed a single escalator, a perpetual recession into history, turns out, on reflection, to be a more complicated movement: Old England, settlement, the rural virtues – all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being called into question.[28]

This analogy of 'a single escalator' that simply recedes captures the way in which the rural is typically viewed as 'past' in England's cultural imagination. Warning against the limitations of conceiving of rural England through these parameters, Williams proposes that the rural is instead located in a web of competing temporalities.

First, as Williams notes, while the content of the rural idyll might be 'a resting place', an unambiguous past, its usage is dynamic as we are returned *to* it; it is brought to bear commentary on the present. Second, as explored in the previous chapter on the mechanisms of nostalgia and grief in the English garden in Bartlett's *Albion* – and as I will show in the next chapter on farm work – this nostalgic perspective can be either conservative or radical. As Boym's insights into the respective 'restorative' and 'reflective' forms of nostalgia make clear, the complex memory work taking place in the garden of Albion generates alternative rhythms and tempos that are located in this spatial imaginary. Third, as I show later in relation to my reading of pagan ritual in *Common*, such mythic practices allude to a deeper, more subversive conception of rural time. As such, while the rural may be conceptualised in broad

[28] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.17.

temporal terms as the 'past', I develop and extend Williams' view here, arguing that rural temporality is complex and requires careful definition. Responding to Williams' call to consider the 'complicated movement' of the relationship between the rural and the past, this chapter draws on post-structuralist historiographical approaches to read the pre-industrial rural environments presented by Moore and Crowe. My analysis of the pre-industrial rural in both plays thus attends to the representation of these 'Old Englands' as Williams suggests, in their own terms: I demonstrate that the pre-industrial rural pasts represented in each play are distinct from one another, exploring how they have each become overlaid with different cultural histories.

The Twenty-first Century *Rural* History Play

Given that both *Common* and *The Sewing Group* take 'Old England' as their setting and theme, I argue that they can both be loosely defined as 'rural history plays'. Indeed, Moore's and Crowe's plays operate within a wider body of work emerging in the 2010s that examines British history, a trend which theatre scholar Paola Botham identifies as marking the birth of the 'twenty-first century history play'.[29] In her scoping discussion of contemporary British theatre, Botham highlights a resurgent interest in examining national histories on stage, including Rona Munro's *The James Plays* trilogy (National Theatre of Scotland, UK and international tour, 2016) which explored the reigns of James I, II and III; Mike Poulton's adaptations of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2013) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2013), which were based on the life of Thomas Cromwell; and the future-history play *King Charles III* (Almeida Theatre, 2014) by Mike Bartlett which satirised the future reign of Prince Charles. In addition to this theatrical interest in historical narratives, Botham also identifies a renewed critical engagement with the history play, citing the theme of the Contemporary Drama in English society's annual conference in 2014 'Theatre and History: Cultural Transformations', the National Theatre's workshop titled 'Writing the History Play' in the same year, and the historical focus in the Political Performances Working Group at the International Federation of Theatre Research annual conference in 2015.

[29] Botham, 'The Twenty-first Century History Play'.

Drawing on *The History Manifesto* which was published in 2014 by historians Jo Guldi and David Armitage, Botham explores their view that this reinvigoration of historical narratives is a product of the perpetual postmodern present. In doing so, she identifies a renewed engagement with macro historical approaches in the public sphere, a movement which Guldi and Armitage claim is 'a symptom of a new cultural appetite for historicity after the dominance of postmodern theory'.[30] While the postmodern takes on an unbounded, limitless character, then, contemporary historical frameworks reinstate temporal boundaries. However, crucially, the imposition of this historical frame has been developed through postmodern conceptualisations of time and historicity. Botham notes that the term 'history' in her definition of the twenty-first century history play is deliberately loose, writing that 'the twenty-first century history play as political theatre does not renege on historical knowledge. On the contrary, it builds from it, drawing strength from contemporary historiography beyond postmodernism'.[31] In emphasising the form's connection to postmodern historiographical approaches, Botham highlights the way in which the form itself explores questions of how the past is used to speak to the present.[32] As such, she proposes that the twenty-first century play responds to this post-postmodern moment by working to renew the triadic connections between the past, present, and future.

This relationship between past and present is applied to her readings of Howard Brenton's *Anne Boleyn* (Shakespeare's Globe, 2010), David Greig's *Dunsinane* (Hampstead Theatre, 2010), and James Graham's *This House* (Cottesloe: The National, 2012) where she suggests that 'the three plays under analysis reveal a shared mechanism of 'historicization' in the Brechtian sense of revisiting the past in order to scrutinize the present'.[33] This chapter takes a similar Brechtian approach to historicisation, considering the ways in which the pre-industrial environments represented in Moore's and Crowe's plays speak to their contemporary production contexts. The critical potential of the twenty-first century

[30] Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.x.
[31] Botham, 'The Twenty-first Century History Play', p.87.
[32] Approaches to the premodern rural in Irish theatre studies – including Lloyd's *Irish Times* and Collins' *Theatre and Residual Culture* – are underpinned by the same critical field as Botham's theorisation of the twenty-first century history play.
[33] Botham, 'The Twenty-first Century History Play', p.83 – 84.

history play is situated in its development of this dialogue between the past and the present: as Botham notes, it allows the playwright to 'activate critical readings of the past with a (present) political grip'.[34]

This activation of a critical reading of the past with 'a present political grip' is central to my analysis of the pre-industrial rural environments in *Common* and *The Sewing Group.* Taking Botham's approach, I first identify the different historical imaginaries that are offered up to the audiences watching Moore's and Crowe's plays, before detailing the contemporary configuration of these imaginaries in cultural discourse, making clear the 'present political grip' of the rural pasts that are represented on stage. In this way, I examine these 'Old Englands' as Williams suggests, 'in their own terms', with a focus on the way in which these old rural English imaginaries are mobilised in their contemporary production contexts. This chapter then closes with close analysis of the pre-industrial social and economic formations represented in each play, exploring the ways in which these collective rural structures offer alternative ways of living and working to the neoliberal, hyper-capitalist present inhabited by the audience.

Common: Staging Enclosure

As the play's title implies, *Common* is set on common land which is in the process of being enclosed. The protagonist, Mary, acts as a guide for the audience, describing how this rural community is on the cusp of change through repeated reference to 'the Coming Storm' (p.7). The audience soon learn that this 'Coming Storm' refers to the displacement of the villagers from their land, a process which was initiated by the enclosure acts and realised by the subsequent migration of rural inhabitants from the country to the city at the height of the Industrial Revolution. Mary explains that this is a time in which 'Old Certainties fall madflaccid & spent', which makes clear to *Common*'s audiences that this rural space is undergoing significant social and economic change, a notion which disrupts the dominant view of the rural as stable and continuous, or in Williams' terms, 'a resting place' for these 'Old Certainties' (p.7).

[34] Botham, 'The Twenty-first Century History Play', p.85.

Despite the villagers' attempts to resist this change and to cleave to such 'Old Certainties', Moore does not construct a wholly positive depiction of life in common. The historian Derek Wall problematises utopic readings of the commons by stressing that common culture operated on a clear hierarchy. Wall argues that although the commons now figure in contemporary political discourse as a radical alternative to privatised, neoliberal systems, 'their creation and maintenance has often involved conflict between individuals, social classes, communities, and even species.'[35] Indeed, Moore avoids such readings of the commons as an entirely utopic socialist idyll and instead presents a siloed rural society which is riven by class divisions and ideological conflicts. This division is marked in the contrast between the villagers – who, as noted in my opening description to the play, operate as a quasi-animalistic body and practice pagan ritual – and the affluent landed gentry, who enforce the enclosure movement. Moore also introduces a third social group into this rural community in the Irish labourers, who are brought into the village as a temporary workforce when the villagers withdraw their labour during the unrest. [36] As the series of spectacular fight scenes that punctuate the play make clear, these three groups – the nobility, the English villagers, and the Irish labourers – are nearly always in conflict. Contrary to the mythologising of the commons as a socialist idyll, then, the social hierarchy represented in the village of Moore's play is divided and unstable.

However, the process of enclosure itself is repeatedly represented in negative terms in Moore's play. When Mary meets the Lord in the first act, her scepticism over enclosure is captured in her aside to the audience: 'Enclosure. A dry word with a sharp end. Land now worked in the Old English, Open Way, all higgle-piggle, with commonflock, commontools, on their sprawling common-fields. Now to be squared off, fenced in, thieved' (p.21). Mary draws attention to the way that enclosure signified a move from open land and communal working practices to enclosed, commodified spaces, referring to this process as a 'theft' of the land – and way of life – from the villagers. When meeting Laura again

[35] Derek Wall, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict, and Ecology* (History for a Sustainable Future) (Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press, 2014), p.3.

[36] The play is set in 1809, when Ireland was under British rule. Moore – problematically – draws on reductive colonial stereotypes of the Irish: Connor and Graham are depicted as typical Stage Irishmen, characterised by violence, humour, their supposed lack of intelligence, and tendency to be inebriated in the village pub. Such stereotyped representations of the Irish also call back to the stasis of the Irish rural cultural imaginary, which, as I noted earlier, is famously critiqued by Hughes in his essay 'Who the hell do we think we still are?'.

for the first time, Mary also describes enclosure in abject terms, describing it as 'a spreadingout canker' (p.41). It is worth pointing out here that enclosure is predominantly associated with rural change in England and Wales rather than Britain as a whole. While similar processes of enclosure took place in Scotland, the Highland Clearances – which involved the eviction of entire Highland communities from the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland during the same time period – are more dominant in Scotland's cultural imagination. Notably, the Enclosure Acts only applied to land in England and Wales.[37] Not only is the play set in the '*English*' countryside, then, it also deals with a historical event – and indeed, legislation – which focused mainly on English land.

In his return to this seismic historical moment, Moore asks questions which are equally pertinent to England's contemporary socio-political and material landscape, prompting audiences to think about the land that we live on now: who owns it and how do we use it? Indeed, as we have seen, it is the renewing of this connection between the past and present which Botham defines as one of the main ways through which the twenty-first century history play articulates its political commentary. While the analysis of Bartlett's rural in the previous chapter examined the cultural history of the English country house – which has, I argued there, garnered socially-conservative associations – here I explore how Moore's play engages with the cultural politics of the commons, a rural imaginary which is predominantly Marxist in its orientation.

The commons have become a cornerstone of political thought for the left. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels identified the acts of enclosure as a pivotal point in the transition to a market-based socio-economic structure. The commons are also central to Marx's theorising of the processes of primitive accumulation in *Das Kapital*, particularly in Chapter 28, 'Bloody Legislation Against the Expropriated'.[38] In his discussion of the 'expropriated', Marx makes reference to both the Highland Clearances and the number of Enclosure Acts in England and Wales, citing the effects of this legislation as the 'forcible expropriation of the people from the soil'.[39] Marx suggests that the state apparatus

[37] This focus on England and Wales is evidenced in the Inclosure Act of 1773 and the number of Inclosure Acts from 1845 to 1882. For example, see: 'Inclosure Act 1845', <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/8-9/118/contents> [date accessed: 22/09/2020].
[38] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Volume 1)* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887).
[39] Marx, *Capital*, p.896.

orchestrated this rupture between the peasants and the land, claiming that their subsequent forced migration to cities renders them a 'rightless proletariat' primed for exploitation.[40] In his analysis of the state's treatment of the dispossessed, Marx details the psychic shock of this move from the country to the city: 'thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labour'.[41] Here, Marx highlights the way in which Enclosure and the Industrial Revolution together triggered mass migration from rural peripheries to an urban nucleus in which the newly formed proletariat could be tightly controlled by wage labour and regulated by the state.

David Harvey and Michael Hardt pick up on this theme in their contemporary work. This resurgent critical interest in the commons peaked around 2011 at the time of the Occupy Movement – which took place in over 951 cities across 82 countries around the world – and was centred on the reclamation of corporatised public space. Both Harvey and Hardt drew on the idea of the commons in their analysis of Occupy, highlighting that a parallel trend of enclosure was taking place in twenty-first century metropolitan environments, but this time via the patterns of global capital. In a 2011 article in the *Radical History Review* titled 'The Future of the Commons', Harvey critiqued work on the commons by ecologist and philosopher, Garrett Hardin, and political economist, Elinor Ostrom, calling for 'creative ways to use the powers of collective labour for the common good'.[42] Similarly, in a 2011 piece for *The Guardian*, Hardt made the commons his central critical focus in his discussion of the Occupy Movement and presented it as a valid alternative social and economic structure to the capitalist/socialist binary, stating that 'Capitalism and socialism present the world as private or public property. Shared, immaterial creations offer an alternative'.[43] In his play which stages this historical battle between public and private property, Moore taps into the relatively recent socio-political memory of the Occupy Movement by addressing this idea of spatial hegemony, asking who owns the land and by what means.

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[40] Marx, *Capital*, p.896.
[41] Marx, *Capital*, p.899.
[42] David Harvey, 'The Future of the Commons', *Radical History Review,* 109 (2011), 101 – 107, p.107.
[43] Michael Hardt, 'Reclaim the Common in Communism', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/feb/03/communism-capitalism-socialism-property> [date accessed: 02/01/2020].

The Sewing Group: Performing the Rural Past

Due to the thematic, formal, and dramaturgical differences between *Common* and *The Sewing Group* highlighted in my introduction to both plays above, rural history is handled differently in Crowe's play. While the world of the play in *Common* is entirely located in early nineteenth century rural England, *The Sewing Group* moves from a fabricated pre-industrial rural set at the beginning of the play to the contemporary moment in the 'Simpler Times' studio in London at the close. In this sense, then, Crowe's play works even more explicitly, in Botham's terms, to renew the connection between the past and the present. Her play shows the way in which the communal rural customs – which are represented in *Common* – are used as a screen-break initiative by Simpler Times, a metropolitan business who ultimately profit from this re-enactment of rural life. Due to this distinction, the representation of the rural in Crowe's play demands a slightly different mode of analysis: where the themes of the pre-industrial rural are the central focus of my analysis of *Common*, the effects of these themes lead my analysis of *The Sewing Group*.

Crowe's use of the pre-industrial rural as 'scenario' is not a new concept. While such explorations are limited on the English stage, performances of pre-industrial rural England are commonplace in the heritage sector. For example, performances of rural work are staged at country fairs, agricultural shows, and ploughing matches across England, making clear that the pre-industrial rural past is a touristic resource.[44] The Museum of English Rural Life in Reading also runs re-enactment events throughout the year which are specifically centred on England's pre-industrial rural history.[45] Although these representations of the pre-industrial rural are not strictly 'theatre', they stage pre-industrial rural practices before an audience for money and can therefore be read as *performances*.

The performance theorist Richard Schechner develops a similarly fluid definition of performance in *Between Theater and Anthropology* where he analyses re-enactments at the Plimoth

[44] For example, Southwell Ploughing Match is an annual country show in Nottinghamshire which has been running since 1855. Despite the inclusion of 'modern' attractions – such as 'dancing' diggers – there remains an emphasis on pre-industrial modes of production, which is evidenced in the traditional horse ploughing competitions. For more information, see: <https://www.southwellploughingmatch.co.uk> [date accessed: 22/09/2020].
[45] See the 'Digging Deeper' gallery at the Museum of English Rural Life, <https://merl.reading.ac.uk> [date accessed: 22/09/2020].

Plantations museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts.[46] In his chapter 'Restored Behaviour', Schechner identifies a number of sites that he defines as 'large environmental theatres' which include: restored villages, theme parks such as Disney World, and safari parks.[47] While Schechner defines restorative behaviour as 'common, popular and money making', he also highlights how these practices can be productive ways of dealing with cultural memory. Schechner notes that 'restorations need not be exploitations. Sometimes they are arranged with such care that after a while the restored behaviour heals into its presumptive past and its present cultural context like well-grafted skin'.[48] The idea that these performances have the potential to form connective tissue between the past and present like 'well-grafted skin' is central to my reading of the performance of pre-industrial rurality in *The Sewing Group*. Although the audience members are eventually made aware that they are watching a scripted performance of pre-industrial rural life, it is the link between this rural narrative and the present which is the focus of Crowe's play.

While the previous section explored the connectivity of the rural imaginary as a whole to the present, the remainder of this chapter turns to the representation of pre-industrial rural practices in *Common* and *The Sewing Group*. Both playwrights depict pre-industrial rural environments which are predicated on collective social structures and this is highlighted in the titles of each play: *Common* indexes the communal mode of living preceding the Enclosure Acts and *The Sewing Group* foregrounds the importance of the group formation to Crowe's play. In my analysis here I consider the way in which Moore's and Crowe's staging of communal living and working signifies the kind of excavatory approach to the idea of England which I identified earlier in this chapter, and potentially offers the 'recuperative potential' that Kenny describes in relation to cultural representations of Englishness.

Staging Collectives

The group identities in *Common* and *The Sewing Group* do different kinds of work and ultimately serve different purposes. While the villagers in Moore's play operate as a violent body in their protest against

[46] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
[47] Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology,* p.79.
[48] Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology,* p.65.

the processes of enclosure, the women in Crowe's play are not threatening and work together, for the most part, in harmony. Moore's representation of the villagers as a violent collective body is one that speaks to cultural histories on the Enclosure Acts. Thompson gives several examples of violent uprisings against enclosure, citing a protest in Sheffield in 1791 which he claims had a Jacobin aspect wherein 'enclosure commissioners were mobbed; the debtors' gaol was broken open and the prisoners released; there were cries of "No King!" and "No Taxes!"'.[49] This kind of militant collective action is represented in Moore's play. The villagers' unrelenting resistance is highlighted at the beginning of the play when the Irish labourer, Graham, explains to Mary that he is employed by the Lord to build fences to enclose the land:

> Aye making fence for that Lord's neverhad Enclosure-bollocks. Never a finertask. Cut 'em down, whack 'em up, locals burn it gone within a week. Tis then done allover. Most pointless coin I evertook. If I were to venture Philosophick, does it not say something on the spirit of fucking your man Johnny Sisyphus?' (p.48).

In his comic deployment of the Greek myth of Sisyphus that likens his attempts of repairing the fences destroyed in the protests to that of Sisyphus continually trying – and failing – to push his boulder up the hill, Graham's comment registers the persistence of the villagers' collective action and the futility in trying to contain it. The villagers' disregard for the Lord's authority can be read through the lens of what Irish cultural theorist, David Lloyd, terms the 'primordial drives' in archaic, premodern social structures.[50] The villagers – as a collective body – ignore the Lord's multiple attempts to isolate and control the protests and continue to respond impulsively to the injustice of enclosure. There is of course no modern state apparatus to enforce law and order in this rural enclave. Instead, the villagers practice 'rough music' and in so doing, establish social norms laterally among themselves.

Moore's Dionysian representation of the villagers is brought out fully in the play's final act where they set fire to the Lord's property and attack the Irish labourers. When Young Hannah – Mary's new maid – asks where the smoke is coming from, Heron explains that it is part of the villagers' protest, claiming that the 'Village gone to Riot as you danceDevil. They set on the Irish first. Half a dozen slain.

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[49] E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 2010), p.125.
[50] Lloyd, *Irish Times*, p.16.

Now they burn Lord's kennels & surrounding orchard' (p.100). Moore's use of the singular nominal 'Village' emphasises that the villagers are acting as a unified collective body, while the verb 'set on' has predatory connotations which further buttresses their animalistic characterisation. The burning of the Lord's kennels and surrounding orchard is also reminiscent of Thompson's account of the uprising in Sheffield in which the commissioners were attacked and their property was torched. Finally, in killing six Irish labourers, the villagers seem to use the Irish as scapegoats for their own suffering. The act of scapegoating is ritualistic in its origin and calls upon ancient religious narratives of animal sacrifice. This type of ritualistic activity is contingent on the collective for the way in which the mass determines the terms of inclusion and exclusion by 'othering' a minority group. The villagers in *Common* rapidly change their allegiances and standing towards the Irish community; they attack the labourers that they previously worked alongside, exhibiting a violent reflex at a time of crisis.

Such 'othering' also takes place in *The Sewing Group*, but this is shown more subtly in Laing's minimalistic production. When C is introduced into the sewing room – or indeed, on to the set in the Simpler Times studio – A and B express a quiet hostility:

> F: She's come from the next village. To live with her aunt and uncle.
>
> *A and B look at C.*
>
> *F goes, leaves C.*
>
> *C stands adrift, unsure where to put herself* (p.15).

The women's silence is marked in this exchange and they make no effort to respond to F's introduction. As such, the non-linguistic cues encoded in the actors' bodies take on more weight. Crowe's use of the adjective '*adrift*' highlights that C is lost in the room as A and B do not make space for her. Yet while A and B are initially reluctant to welcome C, they eventually accept her and her assimilation into the group is marked by similarly subtle paralinguistic cues. The women sew in unison and as they seem to work as one body, their collective identity is made clear.

While the women are not violent in any way, I suggest that this group formation in *The Sewing Group* is driven by a similar embodied mode of being to that of the villagers in *Common.* As language is stripped back to minimal, transactional utterances in this rural scene, the body takes precedence. The women's bodies work together as they sew on to their embroidery frames and the bare scenography and

quiet seems to accentuate the smallest acts, even their breathing. This emphasis on the materiality of the body is brought to the fore in Scene 11:

> *They sew.*
>
> *A fart.*
>
> *Unmistakably another.*
>
> *F comes in and leaves immediately.*
>
> *C covers her mouth with her sleeve, trying not to inhale.*
>
> *A and B suppress laughter. Their bodies shake.*
>
> *C laughs so hard a tear runs down her cheek* (p.19).

This scene has garnered significant critical attention from theatre reviewers, with Aleks Sierz claiming that 'it's a lifestyle where a single fart is an event in itself. Indeed, the atmosphere is oppressive — it feels as claustrophobic as the *Big Brother* house'.[51] While Sierz is critical of the starkness of this scene, his note that flatulence is 'an event in itself' buttresses the view taken here that the body is the primary optic through which to read these rural women. His view that that the rural environment resembles the Big Brother House also captures the voyeuristic quality to Laing's production: the audience are in close proximity to the actors in the Jerwood Upstairs and given the bareness of the scenography, their every move is scrutinised. Yet this scene also reveals the rapport between the women: the scene opens with them sewing together and closes with repressed laughter as their bodies shudder in unison. Discourse is thus physical in *The Sewing Group*: bodies are the means through which emotions and power are articulated in this collective social formation.

This pre-industrial social formation is central to realising the effect of Crowe's theatrical sleight of hand. In ruling out speech, shutting down questions, and encouraging the body to lead, A and B as the actors in this scenario try to present an alternative world to that inhabited by C, the participant. Through the sudden withdrawal of stimuli in this pre-industrial rural scenario, time slows down and Maggie's [C] participation in this communal social structure produces a cathartic effect. Despite her

[51] Aleks Sierz, '*The Sewing Group* Review', <http://www.sierz.co.uk/reviews/the-sewing-group-royal-court/> [date accessed: 22/05/2019].

initial calmness, Maggie suddenly becomes hostile at the end of the play and the scenario is brought to a close:

> *He (F) accidentally gets tangled up with her as she tries to get away.*
>
> *She struggles […]*
>
> *C pushes F to the ground.*
>
> *He clings to her dress.*
>
> *C panics and punches him. Then falls on to him.*
>
> F: END! END! You fucking-nutjob-bitch-motherfucker. That's it.
>
> *The others (except D) pull C off F.*
>
> *F raises his hand. Gives a signal.*
>
> *'End of journey' orchestral music plays* (p.50).

This manifestation of latent emotion reveals the way in which C gives in to her body; her behaviour is socially unacceptable as she seemingly goes into 'flight mode', responding to what Lloyd terms 'primordial drives'.[52] This receptivity to Dionysian impulses is a stark contrast to her earlier corporate discourse, which suggests that this rural scenario begins to disturb the logic and rationality inscribed on to the neoliberal subject. Yet the initiative does not merely prompt a release, it also inspires a clear line of action. Maggie's quiet work with these rural women illuminates her loneliness, prompting her to call her children – who she claims that she has repeatedly sidelined in favour of her job – at the play's close.

Collective Work

Yet the collective in Moore's and Crowe's plays is an economic structure as well as a social one. Although it might seem antithetical to turn to the representation of work in pre-industrial environments, the type of labour discussed here takes on a different configuration. As outlined at the outset of this chapter, both plays are situated – at least ostensibly – in a period before the Industrial Revolution has taken its full hold on England. The rural scene depicted in *The Sewing Group* is 'set' in '1700s rural England' and *Common* is set in 1809 in the midst of this period of socio-economic change. As such, the

[52] Lloyd, *Irish Times*, p.16.

work depicted in both plays can be read as pre-capitalist: labour is carried out by the collective and for the good of the community in each play, or at least represented as such in *The Sewing Group.*

The demonstration of collective labour is central to the spectacular quality to Herrin's production of *Common* and this is shown clearly in Act Two Scene One, 'We Sow'. In this scene, the villagers work the soil on the stage: they till the ground and begin planting in unison, evidencing a similar contact with the English soil to Weatherbury and Audrey in *Albion*. The group's slow, synchronised movements and repeated chant of 'we sow, we mow, then lo, what grow' is staged as a carefully choreographed dance routine (p.43). This lyricism is indicated in Moore's stage directions in which he suggests that this performance of labour should resemble a '*longslow sacred dance*' (p.43). Indeed, I would argue that this staging of collective labour is focused on the spectacle of shared action, rather than offering an insight into the realities of pre-industrial work in England in the early-nineteenth century. [53] After all, the named villager Mower Thomas reminds us that this communal work is futile in this scene due to histories of poor harvests in the village, referring to the soil as 'blackgrowingshite' (p.43).

Where pre-industrial communal work took on a spectacular quality with choric elements in *Common*, the women in *The Sewing Group* perform their labour together, for the most part, in silence. Yet collective work in Crowe's play holds a similar affective power and its effects on the audience are a key component of its dramaturgy. Although the audience are apparently located in a pre-industrial, pre-capitalist environment – literally surrounded by the bare boards of the shared workroom – work is central to the microcosm of rural society that is represented on stage. As noted at the outset of this chapter, sewing is a stage language of its own in Laing's production; it functions as a bassline to the production, as is made clear in Crowe's simple stage direction '*they sew*' which frames the first 15

[53] Such an aestheticisation of collective work is not uncommon in the theatre. For example, a similar performance of rural labour is also evidenced in Caryl Churchill's *Fen* (The Public Theater, New York, 1983) in the field scene, in which the group of women work the soil together. Further, Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (Edinburgh Drill Hall, 2006) and Beth Steel's *Wonderland* (Hampstead Theatre, 2014; Nottingham Playhouse, 2018 and 2019) stage collective, masculine work in a similar way. Burke's production included choreographed dance scenes which captured the history of Scotland's Black Watch regiment through a costume-changing sequence, while the miners represented in *Wonderland* performed a similarly structured routine of manual work to the villagers in *Common*. In each of these plays, the combination of collective labour and performances of hegemonic masculinity produces highly stylised and spectacular scenes.

scenes of the play. In contrast to Moore's play where the actors mime their work on the stage and use tools as props in a highly choreographed routine, the women in *The Sewing Group* practice this labour live in the theatre.[54] Laing's choice to stage 'real' work is highlighted by Liz Hoggard in her guest review for *Selvedge*, a textile magazine:

> You're dazzled by the quiet choreography of stitching. And the play's director took it very seriously. He and the actors spent 90 minutes each day sewing before rehearsals, learning how to pace their lines around the 'pop' sounds of the stitching. The Royal Court even employed a sewing consultant, Ruth de Courcy, and the actors now have favourite stitches, including 'whipping' during the quilting scenes.[55]

Hoggard's note that Laing spent ninety minutes each day before rehearsals with the actors to practice pacing their lines around the sound of the stitching thus reinforces my point above that sewing can be read as a type of dialogue in Crowe's play.

Sewing is an art form which also takes on a quiet radicalism. For example, Rozsika Parker explores the relationship between women and sewing in *The Subversive Stitch*, which was originally published in 1984.[56] In the introduction to the 2009 edition, she notes that women artists such as Tracey Emin continue to use embroidery in provocative ways in their art. Parker's study marks a move in which sewing – traditionally seen as an activity that takes place in private, in the domestic sphere – can be conceptualised as a disruptive, political, and public art form. This view also chimes with current activist movements in the arts and crafts, which is captured in the recent coinage of the term, 'Craftivism'. Such movements address a range of social and environmental issues through art. For example, the organisation, The Craftivist Collective, have recently published their manifesto, *How To Be a Craftivist: The Art of Gentle Protest*, which focuses on embracing slowness, smallness, and gentleness as a means

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[54] This performance of live craft is not new. For example, Michael Hasting's 1973 play *The Cutting of the Cloth* was revived in 2015 at Southwark Playhouse where the actors on stage played tailors, making suits during the production.

[55] Liz Hoggard, 'E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group* at the Royal Court', *Selvedge Magazine*, 30 November 2016 <https://www.selvedge.org/blogs/selvedge/e-v-crowe-s-the-sewing-group-at-the-royal-court>, [date accessed: 10/07/2019].

[56] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

of social justice.[57] In this way, Crowe's play – which stages this collective slow labour – can be seen to engage in a similar quiet radicalism.

However, this decision to stage real work was a contentious one. Reviewers of Crowe's play commented on its slowness, with Sarah Crompton writing in her review for *WhatsOnStage* that 'Crowe plays an interesting theatrical variation on the theme of watching paint dry'.[58] This marks a contrast between the performance of collective labour in Moore's and Crowe's plays: where communal work in *Common* is spectacular, work in *The Sewing Group* is almost anti-theatrical. As Crompton notes above, the performance of sewing on stage slows the pace of the play and draws the audience into a slower temporality. Sewing is a type of work which encodes within it the key features of Crowe's rural scenario: simplicity, care, and a slower pace of working and living; it is also community-making in that C's ability to stitch – as the newcomer to this unnamed rural location – determines her inclusion to this community. Indeed, sewing is central to this rural world and is even naturalised to a comic extent: when asked by C what the purpose of their work is, the women give gnomic responses: A claims that sewing is a 'craft' and B states comically that it is 'to make ends meet' (p.17).

Yet as C becomes assimilated into the fold, she quickly changes the dynamic of this collective work. Communal labour is central to the narrative arc that C must follow as part of the Simpler Times project and she is ultimately unable to carry out this task. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, her gradual takeover of the space and the activity within it is accompanied by the introduction of a corporate discourse to the play: she talks in terms of timescales and outputs that are anachronistic to the pre-industrial rural scene in which she is supposed to be immersed. This capitalist discourse of producing things faster, bigger, and better is marked when C uses imperatives to order A and B to alter

[57] See: <https://craftivist-collective.com/How-To-Be-A-Craftivist-the-art-of-gentle-protest>, [date accessed: 22/10/2020]. Rural landscapes are often used as a setting for this kind of quiet, radical activity, particularly as far as the arts and crafts are concerned. As I detailed in the previous chapter, Oxfordshire was the home of the arts and crafts movement, with figures such as William Morris exploring a progressive ruralism. In the next chapter, I develop this idea that rural labour can offer a quiet political commentary, discussing farm work through the lens of Alastair Bonnett's theorising of radical nostalgia.

[58] Sarah Crompton, 'Review: The Sewing Group', *WhatsOnStage*, 17 November 2016, <https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/reviews/the-sewing-group-royal-court_42279.html.> [date accessed: 26/10/2020].

the pattern ‘It needs to be a stronger design too. Double the detail […] Big. Double the size!’, while B protests against her demands and exclaims ‘our arms will fall off!’ (p.20).

Notably, C’s gradual takeover is marked by a shift in emphasis from the collective to the individual. Where the women previously worked together in a quiet harmony, C shifts the focus on to herself:

C: I came up with it.

A: Sewing?

C: Doing it my way, my new way.

B: It’s the same.

C: We’re doing it my way though. Aren’t we?

A and B look at each other, unsure (p.21).

The repetition of ‘my way’ in this scene highlight C’s insistence that she is leading the group and in declaring that her way is ‘new’, she defines herself as an entrepreneur in this rural environment. Yet this individualistic, neoliberal discourse is resisted by the women as they comment upon the changes that C has made to the group’s working dynamic. As C becomes increasingly interventionist, A and B stop sewing for the first time in Scene 15 and this is a marked action ‘*A, B and F sit in silence thinking*’. Their stasis is further explored in Scene 17 where the women begin to explain why they have stopped sewing:

A and B not sewing. C watches them.

A: Hard to start.

B: Where to start.

A: Idle hands.

B: She’s so particular.

A: Before we knew what we were doing.

B: We just did it.

A: Same as before.

B: Oh dear.

A: Oh dear.

B: We've lost our thread.

A: Ha ha.

B: Ho hum.

A: Only sewing.

B: We're here.

A: We're waiting (p.23).

Despite the rapid succession of montages in the first sixteen scenes, the regular and rhythmic clip of the sewing needles provided an ambient background track to this otherwise silent rural scenario. It is thus apparent when the women stop sewing and A draws attention to this stasis in her dialogue when she states 'we're waiting' – and crucially, not sewing, having literally, punningly, 'lost [their] thread'. As the women wait for their next orders from C, it is clear that the discourses of profit and efficiency that C has brought into this hermetically-sealed rural world have upset the order of things. Given the metatheatrical dimension to Crowe's play, her exploration of collective work articulates more about the present than it does of this unlocated pre-industrial rural past. C's readiness to deploy a neoliberal discourse which places emphasis on individual agency marks a deviation from the 'script' which insists on getting back to a time of quiet communal work and living. As soon as C takes the role of a project manager, the other women become less cooperative and she subsequently receives a low score for her 'performance' and ultimately fails the 'test'.

Conclusion

Common and *The Sewing Group* offer two very different pre-industrial rural Englands to their audiences which each, in turn, use the rural past in different ways. In contrast to Moore's epic play which staged spectacular scenes of collective work and ritual on the Olivier stage, *The Sewing Group* is intimate in its representation of a domestic rural world. The plays also draw on very different rural pasts: while *Common* is set in a specific historical moment in 1809 – in the final throes of enclosure and the early years of the Industrial Revolution – *The Sewing Group* evidences a more conceptual engagement with rurality. Although Crowe stages a pre-industrial rural environment, she reveals in the play's

metatheatrical axis that the rural environment depicted on stage is in fact a scene in a studio *within* the studio space of the Jerwood Upstairs at the Royal Court.[59]

As I have shown, while the premodern rural West is a dominant setting for Irish drama – one which Hughes argues in his seminal essay 'Who the Hell Do We Think We Still Are?' has exerted a stranglehold over Ireland's cultural imagination – there has been little in the way of an equivalent tradition in English theatre and performance, until now.[60] Such national differences are not coincidental but are, I have argued, due to the colonial dialectic between Ireland and England: the premodern West was a vital marker of cultural difference which was used to forge a culturally and constitutionally independent Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the centre of Britain, England has not needed to re-imagine itself in cultural or constitutional terms due to its historic position of centrality, both in the British Empire and the Union itself. The current interest in England in politics and across the arts identified in Chapter One is indicative of the weakening of this central position, marking a self-reflexive move in which artists and scholars are reflecting on England, Englishness, and the English.[61] As such, the recent theatrical interest in pre-industrial rural England – captured in *Common* and *The Sewing Group*, but also Kirkwood's *The Welkin* (Lyttleton: The National, 2020), Hickson's *Oil* (Almeida, 2016), and a revival of Churchill's *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (Lyttleton: The National, 2015) – might be viewed in line with this present moment of reflection, marking a move, in Walter Benjamin's terms, to 'brush history against the grain' in search of old English histories that might tell us something about England today.[62]

Yet this comparison between pre-industrial rural England and the premodern West of Ireland does more than articulate the colonial and constitutional politics between the two nations. A brief reflection on the scholarship on the staging of premodern rural Ireland has enabled the development

[59] Of course, the irony here is that the pre-industrial rural is effectively staged (and commodified) twice.
[60] Hughes, 'Who the hell do we think we still are?'.
[61] This inward look parallels the nineteenth-century cultural interest in 'Merrie Albion' that I identified at the outset of this chapter, one which Readman explores in detail in his article, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture'.
[62] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' in *Selected Writings: Volume Four (1938 – 1940)* (eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.4. Benjamin's work on temporality underpins critical approaches to premodern rural Ireland and Botham's definition of the twenty-first century history play.

here of a way into thinking about English rural temporality in more complex terms, making clear, in Williams' terms, that the rural is not merely a 'resting place'. Building on the memory work that takes place in *Albion*, then, this chapter has shown that the pre-industrial rural is equally temporally complex: it is an imaginary that not only takes you out of place, but also out of time. In their staging of collective social and economic formations, Moore and Crowe present pre-industrial rural worlds which offer alternative ways of living and working to the individualist, hyper-capitalist present. Indeed, in both *Common* and *The Sewing Group*, the collective triumphs over the individual and work is not for profit, but for the common good, which is captured in the harvest scenes in *Common* where the villagers till the soil on their shared land, together. This idea that rural work involves essential contact between humans, animals, and the land is still a resonant one today, and I turn to theatrical representations of rural work in my next chapter.

Chapter Four: Muck, Cattle and Pigs:
Representing Farming in Nell Leyshon's *The Farm*, Richard Bean's *Harvest*, and Bea Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars*

Introduction

In this chapter, I build on my reading of pre-industrial rural work in *Common* and *The Sewing Group*, now turning to theatrical representations of working rural environments. Here, I depart from viewing the rural in symbolic terms, and specifically, through the lens of 'Old England', and instead explore the ways in which contemporary farming has been represented on the stage since 2000. In doing so, this chapter also marks a turning point in this thesis in which I move away from national, conceptual readings of the rural past and towards representations of a lived and worked contemporary rural England. Such a shift in focus – from the rural as a monument in *Albion*, spectacle in *Common*, and scenario in *The Sewing Group* – engenders a change in the type of setting and demographic shown in these plays, in addition to the theatrical form that is used to stage working rural experience. Each of the four plays considered here – Simon Longman's *Gundog* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2018), Nell Leyshon's *The Farm* (Southwark Playhouse, 2002), Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005), and Bea Roberts's *And Then Come the Nightjars* (Theatre503, 2015) – are all set on small family farms in rural England and represent the experience of agricultural work largely through the mode of kitchen-sink realism. Although the word 'pastoral' alone might mobilise images of a green and timeless rural England captured, for example, in Audrey Walters' vision for Albion that I discussed in Chapter Two, *pastoral farming* – used here to define the process of producing livestock – is shown to be hard work and crucially, always changing.

This shift in setting, demographic, and tone from the 1920s-themed cocktail parties taking place in Audrey's garden in *Albion* is immediately visible in the opening to Longman's *Gundog*, which premiered at the Royal Court Upstairs in February 2018, three months after *Albion* closed at the Almeida. Far from Miriam Buether's blooming garden in *Albion*, *Gundog*'s set (designed by Chloe Lamford) was – like *Common* and *The Sewing Group* – bare, and the play certainly took on a darker tone: audiences were met with two large mounds of soil either side of the stage and a mass of furs and skins, which we later learn represents a dying ewe and its dead lamb. As Lyn Gardner notes in her

review in *The Guardian* 'there is not a gambolling lamb in sight' in Longman's play.[1] In the first scene, we meet sisters – Anna and Becky – standing over the ewe and its lamb while they decide what to do with them. As the sisters discuss how they are going to skin the dead lamb to make a coat for other potential orphans – a practice which ensures that in Becky's terms 'nothing is wasted' – Longman shows that there is no room for sentimentality when working with the sheep on this farm.[2] Loss clings to the sisters for the play's duration: they not only routinely deal with and dispose of sick sheep as part of their working day, but they also reveal in this first scene that they live alone having lost both parents and their grandfather and that their brother, Ben, is missing.

In contrast to the lyrical performance of rural labour in *Common* and the ambient clip of the sewing needles in *The Sewing Group*, it is clear that work in this rural enclave is hard. Days, months, and years bleed into each other across the timespan of *Gundog* and the play is ironically driven by both cycles and stasis: the promise of spring – of fresh grass and in the sisters' grandfather's words 'new life' – is dangled as an incentive to get through the winter, but never comes to fruition (p.63). Years pass in moments and this is shown at the end of the play when Guy Tree – the wanderer who comes on to the sisters' land, speaking with a thick accent, which Longman states in his stage directions establishes that he '*is from somewhere else […] another country*' at the beginning of the play – reveals that he has lived and worked on the farm for four years at the play's close (p.2). Although *Gundog* is divided into four parts, then, there is no sense of any linear progression in the narrative. Despite the analeptic interludes which flashback to life on the farm when Anna and Becky's father, grandfather, and brother were still around, the sisters are seemingly stuck in a viscous present where work on the farm is unchanging and their desperate economic situation remains. Pastoral farming is by no means shown as idyllic in *Gundog.* A Beckettian tragic stasis governs the play: this is a rural where lambs are born dead, crops do not grow, and the family scratch about trying to make a living – or, in Ben's terms, 'fucking walk about after [the sheep] making piss-all money' (p.53).

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[1] Lyn Gardner, '*Gundog* review – a family fights for survival in mud-splattered drama', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/feb/07/gundog-review-royal-court-london-vicky-featherstone-simon-longman> [date accessed: 30/01/2020].
[2] Simon Longman, *Gundog* (London: Methuen Drama, 2018), p.15.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, *Gundog* is one of several rural plays that premiered on London stages after the EU Referendum in 2016, plays which marked, in theatre critic Matt Trueman's words, 'a kind of catch-up, maybe even an attempt to make amends' for the continued privileging of pressing urban concerns on London stages and in wider political discourse.[3] While this interest in staging rural environments, practices, and lives after the Brexit vote has been much commented on, here I situate *Gundog* in a longer tradition of plays about farming which preceded the Referendum in 2016. In the early 2000s, several major London theatres put on plays that were set on farms, including Peter Gill's *The York Realist* (Royal Court Theatre, 2002), Nell Leyshon's *The Farm* (Southwark Playhouse, 2002), Richard Bean's *Harvest* (Royal Court Theatre, 2005), and Nell Leyshon's *Comfort Me with Apples* (Hampstead Theatre, 2005). More recently, Bea Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars* (Theatre503, 2015) and Barney Norris' *Nightfall* (The Bridge Theatre, 2018) were both set on farms in rural England and took farming life as major subject matter.[4] These plays demonstrate that there was already an interest in sharing rural stories that were focused on working with livestock and the land on city stages, long before Brexit. Indeed, I want to highlight that these earlier plays – particularly Leyshon's, Bean's, and Roberts' plays that I examine in detail in this chapter – respond to a different socio-economic and political moment altogether where the rural was at the heart of public discourse: the Countryside Alliance Marches in 1997, 1998, and 2002 and the Foot and Mouth crisis in 2001.[5]

While *Gundog* is not the primary focus of this chapter, I use the play here to frame a broader theatrical tension between London performance sites and the farming environments represented on

[3] Trueman, 'Why rural life is theatreland's hot topic and how Brexit played a part'.
[4] This interest in farming life on metropolitan stages is also seen in other national contexts: both Jez Butterworth's *The Ferryman* (The Royal Court Theatre, 2017) and Michel Marc Bouchard's *Tom à la Ferme* (Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, Montreal, 2011) are plays that are set on farms in the Irish and Canadian rural respectively. In addition to the plays considered in this chapter, such a theatrical interest in farming is also captured in Bethan Marlow's podcast series *From Land to Mouth* which was produced by rural-touring company, Pentabus, in 2016. The podcasts are verbatim pieces which draw on Marlow's interviews with farmers across the UK. Topics in the 11 podcasts, include: food and fair prices, diversification and change, and the farmers' fears for the future. These were streamed online but were also performed at agricultural shows across the UK in 2016.
[5] Although I am writing about two distinct socio-political moments that are some twenty years apart, I highlight the connections between them in this chapter. For example, I later turn to O'Toole's analysis of the BSE crisis in *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* where he suggests that the Euro-scepticism that emerged in response to the EU's ban on British beef during the BSE outbreak in the 1990s evidences an anticipatory set of anti-European ideas that emerged fully in the Brexit vote in 2016.

stage. Leyshon's *The Farm*, Bean's *Harvest*, and Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars* were all performed in a London theatre, in addition to a regional or in the case of *Harvest*, rural tour. Longman's play also explores several themes which guide my analysis of Leyshon's *The Farm*, Bean's *Harvest*, and Roberts' *And Then Come the Nightjars*. These include: a close – often visceral – contact between farmers and animals; the decline of small family farms and the motif of grief in theatrical farming narratives; and what each play shows as these farming families' stubborn resistance to wider structural change.

After introducing each play, I turn to a discussion of form, exploring how these plays stage agricultural work in a conventional realist mode for their London audiences. I then place this attempted dialogue between the city and country in the theatre within its wider socio-political context of the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001 and the Countryside Alliance Marches in 2002, which brought pastoral farming and rural life in general into public discourse, and, in the case of the marches, literally into metropolitan spaces. In doing so, I suggest that *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* aim to share the challenges of farming life with their London audiences and focus on three main themes that are central to their narratives: the shifting socio-economic landscape of rural England and the changing nature of farm work, nostalgic accounts of what pastoral farming used to be, and the resilience of these families to remain living and working on their farms, despite such changes.

The Farm, Harvest, and *And Then Come the Nightjars*

The first of these plays to premiere was Nell Leyshon's *The Farm*, which toured to theatres around the West Country with Strode Theatre Company in 2001, before its London premiere at Southwark Playhouse in May 2002. The play is set in the kitchen of a small family farm in Somerset where Vic and Rose, their adult son, Gavin, and Vic's father, Edmond, are struggling to make a living from farming pigs. Much of Leyshon's work evidences a commitment to pastoral farming, including her 2002 radio play *Milk* (produced as part of Radio 4's *Double Acts*) and her 2013 novel *The Colour of Milk*, which were both centred on dairy farms.[6] Her writing for the stage also evidences an interest in farming life:

[6] Nell Leyshon, *The Colour of Milk* (London: Penguin, 2013).

following *The Farm*, Leyshon's second play *Comfort Me with Apples* (Hampstead Theatre, 2005; regional tour) was set on a cider apple farm in Somerset and is similar to *The Farm* in its themes; both families are tied to an unprofitable farm and each charts the way in which the landscape of rural Somerset is changing. [7]

In an interview with Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph* in 2007, Leyshon highlights that the aim to share agricultural narratives stems from her own experiences of growing up in a farming village on the Somerset Levels. She notes:

> Just after the war, there were 21 farms in the village. When I was living there as a child there were 14. Now there are one and a half, and it has become a dormitory village. It seems shocking that no one noticed. Everyone noticed the shipyards going, everyone noticed the coal mines going. Nobody noticed what happened to farming.[8]

The Farm asks its audiences to 'take notice' of the changing farming industry. Leyshon dedicates the play to '*all the lost farms in central Somerset'* and her narrative details the ways in which this fictional family farm – which is symbolic of *real* Somerset farms – is at breaking point.[9] In Spencer's review of the play, he noted its timely premiere and claimed that it was 'a powerful response to the countryside crisis': *The Farm* premiered at Southwark Playhouse in the year of the Countryside Alliance Marches in 2002 and in the aftermath of Foot and Mouth (2001) and the BSE outbreak in the 1990s.[10] In contrast to Moore's epic play which was also set during a period of seismic change, Leyshon's play is small in scale: she adopts a micro approach to rural politics by exploring themes of national reach through the personal lives of the family represented on the stage. The play thus offers an intimate insight into what it means to live and work on a farm where both the material and socio-economic landscape is shifting.

As audiences first encounter the family in the naturalistic farmhouse kitchen depicted on stage, it is evident that each member has a conventional role to play on the farm. While Vic and Gavin work

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[7] Leyshon, *Comfort Me with Apples* (London: Oberon, 2005).
[8] Leyshon in interview with Charles Spencer, 'Playwright Who Ploughs her Own Furrow', *The Telegraph*, 13 January 2007, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3662496/Playwright-who-ploughs-her-own-furrow.html> [date accessed: 19/03/2020].
[9] Leyshon, *The Farm* (London: Oberon Books, 2002), p.2.
[10] Charles Spencer, '*The Farm* – review', *The Telegraph*, <https://www.nellleyshon.com/plays/the-farm/> [date accessed: 04/02/2020].

together outside with the pigs and tend to the remaining arable, Rose undertakes much of the domestic and emotional labour, assuming the role of cook and carer for Edmond, who is riddled with arthritis and appears to be suffering from the early onset of dementia. External pressures and tensions within the family are indexed in the stage directions of this opening scene, with the piles of documents stacked on the kitchen table making clear the increasingly bureaucratic nature of contemporary farming and Gavin's new uniform highlighting that he has had to find work at the local supermarket to support the farm (p.7). The supermarket also comes into the narrative and on to the farm through Rose's friend, Sue, who visits the farm to conduct market research into products sold in supermarkets. In a series of conversations between Sue and the family, Leyshon plays with a set of binaries that influence the way that we think about the food that we eat: the mass-produced versus the homegrown, unlimited consumer choice versus only eating produce that is in season, artificial versus organic, processed versus fresh, and new versus old. These binaries shape Leyshon's play: she draws attention to the challenges for the small family farm at a time when consumer tastes – and the regulations that farmers are required to adhere to – are changing.

Richard Bean's *Harvest* addresses similar themes to *The Farm* in that it also concerned with the processes of production involved in the food that we eat and the effect of wider structural changes on small family farms. However, where *The Farm* is a lament for changing practices spanning only a critical period of a few days, *Harvest* is a comic-epic which covers around one hundred years of life and work on Kilham Wold Farm in Driffield, Yorkshire.[11] Given its epic timeframe, *Harvest* might be viewed in similar terms to *Common* as a rural history play. Yet in his focus on the Harrison family alone and the play's setting in the farmhouse kitchen, Bean's play takes on a similar shape to *The Farm,* offering audiences a glimpse into working family life across the long twentieth century. Where *The Farm* toured before its London premiere, *Harvest* – and as I detail later, *And Then Come the Nightjars* – premiered in London before two touring productions. The play premiered at the Royal Court in 2005

[11] While Bean does not usually examine rural life in his work, his plays tend to be ambitious in their scope: for example, *The English Game* (Yvonne Artaud Theatre, Guildford, 2008), *England People Very Nice* (Olivier Theatre: The National Theatre, 2009) and *Great Britain* (Lyttleton Theatre: The National Theatre, 2014) were all marketed as state-of-the-nation pieces. In this sense, then, *Harvest* can be viewed through a similar lens as a state-of-the-*rural* piece in its epic timeframe and expansive themes.

and has since toured twice; it was performed in theatres in Hull and York in 2009 and in 2017, New Perspectives, the rural-touring company for the East Midlands produced its first rural premiere where the play toured to twenty-three rural and urban locations.

Sweeping from 1918 to 2008, Bean's play is episodic in its structure; it is comprised of seven parts which are set at key moments of change for the Harrison family. As with Leyshon's play, a combination of changing consumer habits and economic regulations determine the crops that the family grow and the types of animals that they produce: the Harrisons shift from mixed farming methods and dairy herds in the first two episodes to a pig unit in the 1950s. This transition initially brings relative prosperity to the family: the Harrisons' kitchen is furnished with a telephone and white goods in the third episode, 'Muck Day', where we also hear of a new Austin A90 that is parked on the drive. However, the decision to shift from mixed farming methods to a pig unit also results in the farm's eventual decline by making the family dependent on feed companies and bringing them under the control of the supermarkets to which they are contracted. External threats to the farm change over time: in the first episode, it is Sergeant Parker who takes the family's horses to use in the First World War; in the third, which is set in 1944, the War Agricultural Committee come on to the farm to order the Harrisons to plough up Spittle Garth Meadow, the grassland that they use to feed the cows through the winter; and in the penultimate episode, it is the vet who cannot give the farm its accreditation stamp due to the stalls complying with EU but not British welfare standards.

However, despite the number of changes that alter the work on the farm, the care for the farm animals remains central in *Harvest*, as is the case with *The Farm*. The importance of this close working relationship between the animal and the farmer is evidenced across each of the play's episodes: Albert is distraught when his horses are taken in the first scene and, as I detail later, ultimately dies for his dairy herd in the third episode; in the fourth, Laura is in the farrowing hut with the sows up until the day that she gives birth; while in the sixth, the pigman Titch takes offence when the vet refuses to give the Harrisons their accreditation stamp, horrified at the idea that she thinks he is 'mistreating [his] girls' (p.73). This close, tactile relationship between the animal and farmer is one thing that does not change on the Harrison farm: although the livestock are recognised as a resource with market value, they continue to be cared for individually.

Such close proximity between the farmers and their livestock is also seen in *And Then Come the Nightjars.* This contact between the human and the animal is marked from the outset of the play where, in the opening scene, Michael, the owner of the farm, and his vet, Jeff, are waiting for a cow to calve in the early hours of the morning. While *The Farm* and *Harvest* are set in farmhouse kitchens, the action takes place in the cowshed for the duration of Roberts' play, highlighting the shared space between the farmer and livestock. *And Then Come the Nightjars* premiered at Theatre503 in London in 2015 before two regional tours across England in 2016 and 2017 with Bristol Old Vic Theatre and Perth Theatre respectively. The play is set on Michael's farm, which we discover is located in South Devon through conversations between him and Jeff in the first scene. While the first act is set during the Foot and Mouth Crisis in 2001, the second and third acts examine the immediate aftermath and later implications of the crisis seven months and then eight years later. Although Roberts' play premiered a decade after *Harvest*, then, it is predominantly located in the same socio-political moment as it returns to this specific event which brought the management and care of livestock into the public domain.

The play is centred on the friendship between Michael and Jeff and examines the way in which the Foot and Mouth Crisis affects both their work and personal lives. Despite the light-hearted opening to the play – the easy rapport between the men is shown as they share a bottle of whisky and smoke roll-ups while they wait for the cow to calve – it is clear that they each bring their own set of challenges to the barn, with Michael still grieving for his late wife and Jeff suffering from a drink problem.[12] Already in this opening scene, there is a sense of the crisis that will follow as Jeff informs Michael that the Ministry for Agriculture Farm and Fisheries (MAFF) (which became DEFRA in 2001) have closed the nearby moor to try and prevent the spread of the disease. This prompts Michael to ask Jeff to swear an oath to say that he will look out for his herd: a promise that Jeff cannot make. The remainder of the play focuses on the way that Michael copes after the MAFF is forced to slaughter his herd, before Roberts details the attempts by him and other farmers in the local area to rebuild their businesses in the long term through diversification. However, crucially, Michael *remains* on his farm – just like the

[12] Bea Roberts, *And Then Come the Nightjars* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2015), p.5.

Harrisons in *Harvest* and Vic and Rose in *The Farm* – and this resilience to survive despite such change is a key feature of all three plays.

A New Rural Politics?

The Farm, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* are about work with livestock and the prominence of the animal is central to this chapter. Here, I suggest that the centrality of livestock to these plays points to a wider historical trajectory in which debates around livestock farming were brought into public discourse. As Woods highlights in *Contesting Rurality: Politics in the British Countryside*, the three decades after the Second World War saw a boom in productivism after an injection of government spending into the agricultural sector, especially into machinery and agrichemicals.[13] Such new technologies changed the identity of British farming: intensive factory farming methods – which were designed to maximise profit and minimise cost – would later lead to the development of mega farms where the animal became a product to be manufactured as quickly as possible, rather than reared via traditional husbandry practices.[14]

Despite the initial success of state-sponsored agricultural practices, Woods is quick to note that these methods came under scrutiny in the 1960s and 1970s. He cites their environmental impact, including pollution and poisoning of livestock via agrichemicals – such as the 1963 Smarden Affair where livestock in Kent died after drinking from a river contaminated with a fluoroacetamide-based pesticide – and the ethical concerns relating to factory farms as two key, interrelated problems. This growing concern for livestock welfare can be traced in the spike in animal rights activism in the 1970s and 1980s: Animal Aid was founded in the UK in 1977 and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) was founded in 1980, while publications such as Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* and Ruth

[13] Woods, *Contesting Rurality*, p.135.
[14] In a 2017 article for *The Guardian*, Andrew Wasley, Fiona Harvey, Madlen Davies and David Child published the findings of their investigation into megafarms in the UK. Wasley et al. claim that there are close to 800 megafarms that are currently in operation in the UK and note a 26% rise in factory farming from 2011 – 2017. See: Andrew Wasley, Fiona Harvey, Madlen Davies and David Child, 'UK has nearly 800 livestock mega farms, investigation reveals', *The Guardian*, 11 July 2017, < https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/17/uk-has-nearly-800-livestock-mega-farms-investigation-reveals> [date accessed: 11/02/2020].

Harrison's 1964 *Animal Machines* further contributed to the development of a welfare language around the ethics of factory farming.

However, despite continued debates over the ethics of intensive livestock farming – and as John Berger puts it in his 1977 essay 'Why Look at Animals', the 'rupture' that these methods dealt to working animal-human relationships – it was not until the 1990s and early 2000s that livestock, and by extension, the rural, was pushed into the wider public consciousness via a number of rural crises and demonstrations that came in quick succession.[15] As I detailed in the introduction to this chapter, the BSE crisis in the 1990s, the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001, and the Countryside Alliance's three marches in 1997, 1998, and 2002 received significant coverage on television, online, and in newspapers, bringing the rural to the fore of media discourse. Indeed, I argue that these events were inherently performative and – through that performativity – demonstrated to urban populations that the rural is an important and politicised space. *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* are all located in and respond to this socio-political moment, albeit to varying degrees. Leyshon's play mentions BSE explicitly and the play toured around the West Country with Strode Theatre Company during the year of Foot and Mouth; *Harvest* premiered in 2005, only a few years after the epidemics and the Countryside Alliance marches; and although *And Then Come the Nightjars* premiered a decade after *Harvest,* the play looks back on the Foot and Mouth crisis with a critical distance and is entirely focused on the lasting trauma of the epidemic.

The BSE crisis in the 1990s resulted in the slaughter of over four million cattle and led to the EU banning the export of British beef for a decade between 1996 and 2006. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or commonly known as mad cow disease) is a neurodegenerative disorder which, if spread to humans, was thought to result in a variant of Creuzefeldt-Jakob disease (zCJD). In *Contesting Rurality: Politics in the British Countryside,* Woods identifies the BSE crisis as one of several events in the late 1990s and early 2000s which led to what he terms the 'strange awakening of rural Britain' in the title of the introduction to his book.[16] Citing the fuel protests in 2000 and the

[15] John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?' in *Why Look at Animals* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp.12 – 37, p.12.
[16] This 'awakening' was not exclusive to Britain. As Woods points out, the Family Farm Defenders in the US and Conféderation Paysanne in France were similar organisations that were active at the time (p.108).

parliamentary time taken up by debates on hunting, public access to the countryside, rural housing, and the Foot and Mouth disease, Woods highlights the emergence of rural issues in the national political arena during these years. In his analysis of the UK outbreak of BSE, Woods notes that the government's handling of the crisis generated much hostility among farmers and identifies three main branches to this anti-government sentiment: first, he suggests that that farmers felt 'betrayed' that the government failed to highlight the lack of evidence in the link between BSE and vCJD; second, he claims that farmers were cynical over the EU ban on British beef; and third, that the government 'unnecessarily intensified' the crisis by insisting on the slaughter of healthy livestock for prevention purposes.[17] This tension between farmers and the government is a theme to which I return several times in this section, with the aim of highlighting a developing hostility among farmers towards Westminster.

Notably, the debate surrounding the European beef ban became loaded with a particular Euro-sceptic, xenophobic sentiment where farmers – represented as the heart of rural England – were shown to be at war with Europe in the British press. O'Toole discusses the BSE crisis in *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* where he maps the far-reaching roots of the anti-European discourse that underpinned the 2016 Leave campaign. O'Toole isolates BSE and the media coverage of the beef ban as one example of an anti-European rhetoric which was at work long before the Brexit vote. He highlights the way in which the media recycled narratives of English exceptionalism and anti-German sentiment that have circulated since World War Two, citing the *Daily Express*' headline 'Kohl's beef blitzkrieg' in May 1996 as a prime example.[18] As a theatre critic, O'Toole views the media discourse that surrounded the BSE crisis as a series of performances.[19] He notes that, almost absurdly, the crisis was represented by the right-wing press in the same tones of a militarised, English exceptionalism that had been evidenced at the start of the Tories' long spell in government in support for the Falklands War a decade earlier. The right-wing press characterised Britain as the tragic hero at the time of the beef ban, with many tabloids evoking Dunkirk and the Blitz in their titles. O'Toole notes that the *Daily Mail*

[17] Woods, *Contesting Rurality,* p.139.
[18] O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*, p.49.
[19] O'Toole is an Irish theatre critic which of course shapes his analysis of British culture. His most recent work, in particular, offers a sharp critique on the development of English nationalism. See: *The Politics of Pain: Postwar England and the Rise of Nationalism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2019) and *Three Years in Hell: The Brexit Chronicles* (New York: Apollo, 2020).

even offered a list of German products for consumers to boycott in the supermarket, with the boycott itself being an inherently performative action.[20] Similarly, when the then Minister of Agriculture John Gummer notoriously tried to feed his daughter a British beef burger on television in 1990, this was also a staged act which aimed to prove to the public that British beef was safe to eat. Farmers also marked their own resistance to the beef ban, most prominently in December 1997 at Holyhead docks, where 400 Welsh farmers halted lorries carrying imports of Irish beef, an action that inspired further blockades in Fishguard, Swansea, Heysham, Stranraer, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Dover, and at the Channel Tunnel in Folkestone the following week. The BSE crisis thus did more than bring farming into public discourse: it was an event which also activated a set of Euro-sceptic ideas that had been latent for some time and would come out fully in the Brexit vote in 2016 – and more vividly still in the Brexit street parties in 2020.

The Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001 would again bring livestock to the centre of national public debate. In an effort to contain the outbreaks, around ten million sheep and cattle were slaughtered and it is estimated that the cost of the epidemic exceeded eight billion pounds, causing lasting damage to British farmers.[21] Woods highlights that, as with BSE, many farmers were dissatisfied with the way that the government dealt with the crisis and this dissatisfaction was marked in the activity of pressure groups such as the Cumbrian Crisis Alliance, who picketed ministers upon arrival to infected areas, holding placards reading 'Tony Blair Don't Care'.[22] The media also pointed to a lack of care in the way in which the government handled the crisis. Due to the volume of livestock being slaughtered, slaughterhouses could not safely dispose of the animal corpses at the same rate, and, as a consequence, the sight of masses of burning animal bodies was commonplace in some rural areas. Footage of this was then shown in the media, and images of dead cattle, sheep, and pigs stacked in piles resembling medieval pyres were aired on television screens worldwide.

The following year, rural England would remain at the centre of the political arena, but in very different circumstances. This time, this was due to the activity of the Countryside Alliance in the three

[20] O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain,* p.50.
[21] Claire Bates, 'When Foot and Mouth disease stopped the UK in its tracks', *BBC News Magazine*, 17 February 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-35581830> [date accessed: 11/02/2020].
[22] Woods, *Contesting Rurality,* p.153.

pro-hunting marches in 1997, 1998, and 2002. The growth of the Countryside Alliance Marches is clear: in 1997, 120,000 protesters gathered in Hyde Park at the Countryside Rally; in 1998, 250,000 marched through central London from Embankment station to Hyde Park at the Countryside March; and at the Liberty and Livelihood March in 2002, 400,000 protesters gathered at Hyde Park Corner and Tower Hill, before converging on Whitehall and Parliament Square. As the streets of London filled with members of Britain's rural population, the ideological chasm between the metropolitan elite and those living in rural areas was publicly staged. The protesters marched to the accompaniment of hunt horns and whistles, and some, despite requests to leave live animals at home, brought dogs and horses to the march. The marchers thus deployed a theatrical language of protest which was oriented in the very rural practices that the government wanted to ban in the 2004 Hunting Act. While the Countryside Alliance was depicted in the media as an organisation that represents the *English* countryside, the presence of Scottish, Welsh, and Cornish flags at the marches attest to national and regional differences, despite the shared purpose to protect rural practices. There is also of course a class question at the heart of the Countryside Alliance marches: the rural working class were under-represented by the organisation, despite repeated attempts to enrol them.

The emergence of other rural pressure groups is indicative of this class difference, with such groups protesting against different rural issues and calling for more militant political action. For example, in response to rising fuel prices, the Farmers for Action group joined forces with hauliers in September 2000 and almost brought the country to a halt by blockading fuel refineries and depots. Other groups that were active at this time include the Countryside Action Network and the Real Countryside Alliance, who deliberately invoked the dissident Irish Republican parliamentary group, the Real IRA, in their name to stress that they were a militant breakaway group from the Countryside Alliance. While the Countryside Action Network blockaded motorways in 2002, the Real Countryside Alliance threatened to disrupt railways, cut telephone lines, and pull plugs on a reservoir in Birmingham, but their efforts amounted to little more than plastering posters on road signs and placing a giant paper-mache huntsman

on the Angel of the North.[23] The connecting thread between each of these rural events – BSE, Foot and Mouth, the Countryside Alliance marches, and the activity of rural pressure groups – was the lack of understanding between Blair's metropolitan-focused government and agricultural communities. At the same time, the frequent and extensive media coverage of rural England also highlighted that rural concerns were usually sidelined from the national news.

To this day, the Countryside Alliance continues to be active in addressing this distance between rural affairs and the metropolitan steer of contemporary politics. While the Liberty and Livelihood march in 2002 had the largest turnout out of all of the Countryside Alliance's activities to date, the organisation has showed a commitment to rural issues since it was founded in 1997 and defines itself in its slogan as 'the voice of the countryside'.[24] Their campaigns can be broken down into five key areas: pro-hunting and pro-shooting activities; campaigns to tackle rural crime; food and farming; developing digital communications in rural areas; and an emphasis on rural communities, with the aim of improving local amenities, especially for ageing rural populations.[25] At the core of these campaigns is the insistence that this organised activity is necessary due to the metropolitan bias of contemporary politics, with the website reading 'we will ensure that the countryside, its economies and communities are *heard* in the media and in Parliament', while the section on rural crime claims that 'the Countryside Alliance is giving rural communities *voice* to ensure that rural crime is taken seriously by the Government and the police' [my italics].[26] The Countryside Alliance thus point to a lack of communication and understanding between the country and the city, namely between the metropolitan-oriented state – the government, the police, and the media – and rural communities. As my italics show,

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[23] See Paul Vallely, 'Countryside Commandos', *The Independent*, 5 September 2003, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/commandos-of-the-countryside-85584.html> [date accessed: 13/03/2020].

[24] See: Countryside Alliance webpage, < https://web.archive.org/web/20150215150432/http://www.countryside-alliance.org/ca/article/about-the-countryside-alliance> [date accessed: 12/02/2020].

[25] See: Countryside Alliance website, <https://www.countryside-alliance.org/our-work/campaigns> [date accessed: 12/02/2020]. A very different organisation but one that also stresses the importance of 'speaking up' for rural communities is the Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). ACRE predates the Countryside Alliance and is England's largest rural network: it is made up of 38 member organisations and reaches 52,000 grassroots organisations in 11,000 rural communities. According to ACRE's slogan, the organisation is dedicated to 'speaking up for rural communities' and addresses the same social and economic concerns in rural England as the Countryside Alliance. See: Action with Communities in Rural England website, <https://acre.org.uk/> [date accessed: 20/03/2020].

[26] The Countryside Alliance website, <https://www.countryside-alliance.org/our-work/campaigns> [date accessed: 12/02/2020].

there is emphasis placed on verbal modes of communication, on the importance of 'giving voice' to rural communities and placing pressure on the government, the police, and the media to listen.

The Countryside Alliance's attention to the metropolitan perspective of the media brings the question of representation to the fore. According to DEFRA in their Statistical Digest of Rural England in 2018, only 17% of England's population lived in rural areas (categorised by the Rural-Urban Classification) in 2016.[27]As the number of people living and working in rural areas has decreased since England has become more urban, fewer people have a working knowledge of the rural, and as I argue for the purposes of this chapter, agricultural practices. The way that the majority of British people experience agriculture is through the media: on television screens, online, and via newspapers – and the media clearly shape the rural stories that they share. I thus want to draw a parallel here between the media and the theatre, highlighting the way in which both are institutions that are predominantly located in metropolitan environments. Indeed, *The Farm, Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* were about livestock farming but were produced for stages in the capital city, identifying the very same tension between the rural and the urban that was staged in the Countryside Alliance marches. The hands that are shaping these theatrical narratives – whether it be theatre-makers and producers at the Southwark Playhouse, the Royal Court Theatre or Theatre503 – are, like the media, metropolitan and this will affect the way that farming life is represented, for which, I now turn to the question of theatrical form.

Kitchen-Sink *Rural* Realism

As *The Farm, Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* were staged in London theatres in addition to regional theatres and rural village halls, I want to draw attention to the way in which the performance context determines how the rural is conceived by theatre-makers and received by theatre audiences. While audiences of regional and particularly rural tours of these productions might have knowledge or even experience of the agricultural work being represented on stage, it is less likely that audiences

[27] DEFRA, 'Statistical Digest of Rural England', 6 November 2018, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/760065/06_Statistical_Digest_of_Rural_England_2018_November_edition.pdf> [date accessed: 02/01/2020].

watching the London productions would be able to draw on lived experience when watching the plays. Given *The Farm* and *Harvest* premiered soon after BSE, Foot and Mouth, and the Countryside Alliance marches and *And Then Come the Nightjars* is centred on the Foot and Mouth crisis, the media coverage of these events would be a recent cultural memory for audiences, serving as the primary reference point for reading the livestock farms represented on stage.[28] Leyshon, Bean, Roberts, and their respective production teams were working with a distance between the landscapes that they were representing and the London theatres – the cityscapes – in which their plays were staged. It is therefore worth asking questions about the way in which this dialogue between the country and the city was created in the theatre building.[29] How were these rural environments shown on stage and what form did the plays take to tell these rural stories?

The London productions of *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* adopted a realist mode with extensively detailed sets, and I argue that this imperative to show the rural environments on stage as fully as possible is due to the distance between the rural landscapes in the world of the plays and the metropolitan location of the theatres. This distance is marked in the reviewer discourse of *The Farm*, with Charles Spencer writing in his review of the play at the Regal Theatre, Minehead in 2001 that

> It will strike a chord with local audiences, but really cries out to be seen by those metropolitan politicians, bureaucrats and opinion formers who seem to regard the country as, well, another country. … [a] moving, timely and deeply felt play, and it would be good to see an enterprising London fringe theatre snapping it up, at a time when the divide between city and country has never seemed to be greater.[30]

[28] The regional and rural touring productions of these plays are beyond the scope of this chapter: my focus here is on the London performances.
[29] However, despite the fact that these productions were located in London, it is worth noting that none of the playwrights are from London. Leyshon was writing at this time about a landscape that she knew: she spent half of her childhood living in a small farming village on the edge of the Somerset Levels. While Bean does not claim to have a lived knowledge of the rural, he is from Kingston Upon Hull – the closest city to the Harrisons' farm in Driffield, showing a regional connection to the place in which his play is set. Roberts shows a similar regional connection to her play: she is from the West Country, the region in which *And Then Come the Nightjars* is located.
[30] Spencer, '*The Farm* – review'.

A London theatre did, as Spencer hoped, 'snap it up' the following year: the play had its London premiere at the Southwark Playhouse in 2002. In his review, Spencer foregrounds the political discourse of the time, addressing the same rift between the urban and the rural that I explored in the previous section. In noting that the rural is regarded as 'another country' by metropolitan politicians, bureaucrats, and opinion formers, Spencer points to a lack of understanding between these two contrasting geographies and suggests that *The Farm* has something to offer to London audiences. Indeed, I suggest that *Harvest* and *And Then Come the Nightjars* hold the same potential, arguing that these plays about livestock farms could share important insights about what it means to live and work in rural environments that are mainly shown on TV screens.

The level of detail in these plays might – from such a perspective – be viewed as a necessary provision for London audiences to enable them to negotiate the rural worlds represented on stage. Indeed, each of the sets evidence a similar naturalistic scenography. Audiences watching *The Farm* at the Southwark Playhouse saw every inch of Vic and Rose's kitchen, including bills stored away in a shoebox, the freshly picked lettuce in the colander, and the number of foodstuffs that Sue brings on to the farm from the supermarket. Those watching *Harvest* at the Royal Court were also met with a similar level of scenographic detail, with hens bundled in buckets, skinned rabbits, and artificial insemination equipment drying out over the sink. This naturalistic set was repeatedly noted by theatre reviewers, with Gerald Berkowitz taking a critical view of Dick Bird's set design in claiming that 'one is likely to search in vain for a point to the play beyond the milieu itself' in this 'kitchen-sink equipped kitchen'.[31] As with *The Farm* and *Harvest*, *And Then Come the Nightjars* adopts a realist mode, although the play is set in a barn instead of a kitchen. The black-box theatre at Theatre503 in London was transformed into a cowshed and the set designer Max Dorey's attention to detail was clear in the sacks of corn, baling twine, and hay strewn across the floor, leading Gardner to write in her review for *The Guardian* that 'in Max Dorey's lovingly detailed design, complete with cobwebs, you can almost smell the animals'.[32]

[31] Gerald Berkowitz, '*Harvest* review at the Royal Court', *The Stage*, 9 September 2005, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2005/harvest-review-at-royal-court-london/> [date accessed: 16/02/2020].
[32] Lyn Gardner, '*And Then Come the Nightjars* review – touching tale of love and loss on the farm', *The Guardian*, 8 September 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/sep/08/and-then-come-the-nightjars-review-touching-tale-of-love-and-loss-on-the-farm> [date accessed: 17/02/2020].

Gardner's note that 'you can almost smell the animals' highlights the way in which the set design attempts to replicate the farm environment as closely and as accurately as possible for its audience sitting in Theatre503 in Battersea (see Figure 4).[33]



FIGURE 4: Bea Roberts' And Then Come the Nightjars. Directed by Paul Robinson (2015).

Image copyright: Jack Sain.

[33] Such naturalistic rural sets were also seen in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (Royal Court Theatre, 2009) and *The Ferryman* (Royal Court Theatre, 2017). Butterworth made use of live working animals in both productions, a scenographic choice which received considerable critical attention. While Alan Rickson's production of *Jerusalem* included live chickens, a tortoise, and a goldfish on stage and Ultz's set was framed by real beach trees, Sam Mendes' production of *The Ferryman* included live geese and rabbits. The rural animals constitute the finishing touches to the hyperreal scenography in each play (Rickson's production of *Jerusalem* even used sensaround to diffuse wafts of garlic through the theatre building), and ultimately aim to transport the predominantly urban audiences to the fictional rural landscapes of the plays. In this sense, then, the placing of live animals on the stage not only shows a strong commitment to the mimetic codes of realism as the directors strive to replicate the kind of rural spaces in which the plays are set, but also an investment in the hyperreal as they directors aim to recreate an 'authentic' rural experience on stage for their London audiences.

Live animals were not used in any of the plays considered in this chapter. This is due to the type of animals that feature in these plays. Although Vic, Rose and Edmond in *The Farm* used to farm cattle, they now only farm pigs, Kilham Wold Farm in *Harvest* is a dairy farm with several draught horses in the first two episodes before becoming a pig unit for the remainder of the play, and Michael has a dairy herd in *And Then Come the Nightjars*. It is clear that the animals that are central to these plays are too large to be brought on to the stage, irrespective of the ethical questions that come with staging live animals. In each of these cases, the 'presence' of the animal is thus indexed in different ways: an audio clip of horses' footfalls are played offstage in *Harvest*, props which allude to the presence of the animal such as the cows' halters are draped across the set in *And Then Come the Nightjars* and in all of the plays, the animals are brought to the centre of the narrative via conversations between the characters.

While *Albion*'s country house garden setting called on Chekhov's tragic comedies, and I have argued that *Common* and *The Sewing Group* might be viewed as 'history' plays for their different takes on old rural England, the three main plays in this chapter utilise a different theatrical form: the kitchen-sink realism of the 1960s. Although Roberts' play is not set in a farmhouse kitchen, it shares many of the key characteristics of this mode. The farmhouse kitchen is a familiar setting for the rural play: beyond *The Farm* and *Harvest*, Gill's *The York Realist* (Lowry, Manchester, 2001; Royal Court Theatre, 2002; Donmar Warehouse, 2018) and Butterworth's *The Ferryman* (Royal Court Theatre, 2017) were both set on farms where the action takes place in the family kitchen.[34] Although the farmhouse kitchen is in itself a domestic space, it is also represented in each of the above plays as the hub of working farm life. The kitchen registers as a practical space of nourishment – a place to refuel after a long, hard day at work on the land. In terms of form, then, this kind of rural play which is driven by labour and which takes place in the heart of the home can be annexed to the kitchen-sink realism of the 1960s. Here, I term these theatrical narratives that record the life of working families living in rural areas examples of kitchen-sink *rural* realism – a genre that is representative of a working-class demographic and calls back on the social realism of the 1950s and 1960s, namely Arnold Wesker's *Roots* (Belgrade Theatre, Coventry 1959) and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (Royal Court, London 1960).

However, *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* depart from Wesker in one key way: the work that is shown is centred on animals, while Wesker's plays focus on rural village life. The prominence of the animal alters the setting of the play as it is brought to the centre. This centring is most clear in *And Then Come the Nightjars* when Michael moves out of his house and into the cowshed – into the animal's home – to protect them from the Foot and Mouth cull. The animal also comes into the Harrisons' kitchen in *Harvest*: in the first scene, Mam plucks a hen and Maudie later skins a rabbit, both of which will be eaten later by the family. While Audrey and her party guests drank cocktails on the meticulously groomed lawn in *Albion*, Michael and Jeff eat in the barn with the cows

[34] In more practical terms, the kitchen is a usefully bounded space to represent working rural life on stage. This points to the wider limitations of theatre and performance as live media: while a film or a painting could easily depict a rural landscape, it is difficult for theatre spaces to represent outdoor rural settings, at least in a mimetic mode.

in *And Then Come the Nightjars* and the families in *Harvest* and *The Farm* gather together in the farmhouse kitchen to share the vegetables that they have grown and the meat that they have reared.

Each play depicts working-class rural families through this kitchen-sink realist mode, and as set out in the introduction to this chapter, three main themes cut across the three plays, which I now explore in detail. The first of these themes is the changing nature of work with animals. Leyshon, Bean, and Roberts address both the external influences on the family farms – which are a result of wider socio-economic, structural change – and the internal tensions that bring about change from within the family. Second, I identify a tendency in each of these plays to turn away from this shifting landscape and look back to the past where pastoral farming was stable and the relationship between farmers, livestock, and the land was freer from outside influence. The final theme that guides my analysis is the notion of remaining. Despite the number of changes that threaten the land and the place of the livestock within it, the characters remain living and working on their farms, evidencing a stubborn resistance to these changes.

Changing Landscapes, Changing Lives

The first theme identified – the changing nature of work with animals – is one which is central to *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars*. As with *Common* and *The Sewing Group*, rural labour in each of these plays is represented as collective, but this structure is familial, with Leyshon, Bean, and Roberts all staging small family farms where work is central to the life on the farm. Each play deals with the way in which the technologisation and bureaucratisation of the agricultural sector has influenced how farmers work with their livestock. This is not a new idea: the sense that we are losing touch with the land and the animals that we eat is discussed by Berger in his 1977 essay 'Why Look at Animals', which I referenced earlier in this chapter. Berger details how large-scale socio-economic changes have altered human-animal relationships and the way in which people think about food, arguing that:

> The nineteenth century, in Western Europe and Northern America, saw the beginning of a process, being completed by 20th century capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated man and nature was broken. They were at the centre of his world. Before

> this rupture, animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded man […] such centrality was of course economic and productive. Whatever the changes in productive means and social organisation, man depended upon animals for food, work, transport, and clothing.[35]

Berger's observation that humans are less dependent on animals as a vital source of labour, food, and transport explains how the marginalisation of the animal was due to a host of technological advances that have transformed the social and economic landscape of Western societies in the twentieth century. He also argues that in a post-industrial context, the mechanics of factory farms cause animals to be 'treated as raw material and are processed like manufactured commodities'.[36] Berger's note that the animal is 'processed' outlines that animals which are bred for meat cease to be treated as sentient beings; they are objectified and managed like machines.

More recently, Hannah Velten has also explored the way in which the processes of late capitalism have changed how the animal is reared for production, noting that

> Our huge urban societies demand a steady supply of lean meat, wholesome milk and leather, of a uniform quality at a reasonable price. To meet these demands, the cow has been turned into an object – one that is bred, reared and grown to specification, as cheaply as possible, which means essentially that economies of scale dictate the means of production […] If there are fewer people looking after cattle, it is obvious that the majority of beef-and-veal-eaters, milk-drinkers and leather-wearers have not the slightest link with cattle. As a consequence, most cattle production, transportation and slaughter goes on 'behind closed doors'.[37]

Although Velten writes exclusively on cattle, this analysis of the changing relationship between humans and animals that are bred for consumption can be applied to most livestock. Here, Velten makes two important and interrelated observations. First, she suggests that the demand for meat has and continues to alter the ways in which it is produced. Due to increasing consumer demands, the animal is treated as an object to be manufactured. As a consequence of this shift to thinking about cattle as objects whose production fluctuates in relation to 'economies of scale', she highlights that technologies have replaced

[35] Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?', p.12.
[36] Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?', p.24.
[37] Hannah Velten, *Cow* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p.8

workers to maximise productivity. This brings Velten to her second observation: the growing dislocation between humans and cattle. Velten identifies the way in which the production, transportation, and slaughter of animals is systematically hidden from the public, claiming that these processes go on 'behind closed doors'. Annie Potts makes similar observations in *Meat Culture* and discusses the implications of these industrial production processes for the small family farm, arguing that 'smaller family farms have been replaced by massive Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs or factory farms)'.[38]

While Leyshon's play focuses on just one family farm in Somerset, she attributes the failure of this farm to the wider socio-economic shifts noted above. Referencing the convenience foods that are available to buy in supermarkets, Vic claims

> People don't want what I can grow anymore […] they want potatoes in boxes, all washed, all the same size. They don't care that they pay £1.99 for a box this big, that they could buy a whole sack off me for under three quid. They want their meat cheap, never mind how it's raised how it's killed. They want to eat things their grandparents never knew existed, and they don't want to wait until they're in season. They know nothing about food. (p.41)

In this speech, Vic highlights the distance that Berger and Velten identified between the consumer and the animal that they eat. His note that consumers do not care about how animals are reared and killed also captures that the meat market is driven by price – by what Velten terms 'economies of scale'. Vic also applies a similar logic to the production of vegetables: he argues that consumer interest in appearances and out-of-season produce is also damaging for his own organic methods where the produce is not pre-washed or packaged in attractive boxes, capturing the need that Velten recognises for food to be of 'uniform quality'. However, Vic refuses to bend to consumer demands which is evident in his declaration that 'Nothing I do has changed. I'm doing what's always been done on this piece of land. What he did, (*Pointing at* EDMOND.) what his dad did' (p.41). Here, Vic highlights the longevity of his relationship with the land and in pointing to the way in which the farm has passed down the

[38] Annie Potts, *Meat Culture* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2016), p.1.

generations, he suggests that it is the wider social and political environment that is unstable, not his farm.

Changing consumer tastes and the rise of supermarkets are represented as connected challenges in *The Farm* and this is brought into the narrative by the character, Sue, a market researcher who is linked to the local supermarket. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that Sue comes to stand not only for the supermarket industry but also for those increasingly demanding consumers who ask for an extensive selection of every type of food, produce that is not in season, and above all, cheap meat. Sue does not conduct accurate market research for the supermarket; she stages meetings with Rose, who plays a different character each week to make money. Yet what is important here is the tension that Sue creates on the farm: in bringing her vast product range into the farmhouse kitchen, she places supermarket products alongside the homegrown, homemade produce on Vic and Rose's farm.

The surveys that Sue carries out highlight the consumerist excess found in supermarkets today. As Sue reels off the exhaustive product range from her list, the number of products available overwhelms Rose and her family. Sue and Rose discuss meat and vegetables: in the first act, she lists chicken products – including chicken sausages, chicken burgers and kievs – and in the second act, she turns to tomato products with her extensive list of cook-in sauces, purees, salsas, chutneys, and marinades. Notably, these chicken products are predominantly frozen and mass-produced, identifying the way in which the meat itself is heavily processed, while the cook-in sauces are designed to make cooking easier and quicker than using fresh ingredients. While Rose appears embarrassed that she is not aware of all the products (she makes reference to her 'old-fashioned ways'), Vic is defensive, declaring 'there ain't nothing wrong with our ways' (p.25). Although Vic is hostile towards Sue – he later complains to Rose that 'she's no business keep coming here' – Edmond is interested in the products that Sue lists in her surveys and draws comparisons with his experiences of growing produce. When Sue explains that sun-dried tomatoes are more expensive as 'someone's got to lay them out', he laughs and states 'you're making it up', before claiming 'we just have them [tomatoes] fresh from the greenhouse. The smell clings to your fingers' (p.54 – 56). In contrast to the convenience foods that Sue lists which are already chopped and seasoned, Edmond's note that the smell of the tomato plant clings to your fingers emphasises that he is used to growing and preparing his own food. In these meetings

between Sue and Edmond, then, Leyshon draws a contrast between the mass-produced and the homegrown, making clear the increasing distance that Berger identified between the consumer and the processes of production that underpin their food.

The implications of these structural changes for Vic's farm are marked from the opening scene.[39] As Rose shuffles through a shoebox full of bills detailing the family's debt and Gavin enters in his new uniform, ready for his first day at work at the local supermarket, it is clear that the farm is in a critical position. Despite Rose's attempts to make Vic face up to the severity of their financial situation – she repeats 'we can't go on like this, something has to happen' several times in the first scene and thrusts the shoebox of unpaid bills under his nose later in Act One – Vic is furious that his son has sought work elsewhere and declares 'you are my son, right […] so that means you work here on the farm with me' (p.16). Here, Vic appeals to traditional farming practices by claiming it is an expectation that Gavin, as his son, will work on the farm and later accuses him of thinking 'he's too fucking clever for it' and wanting 'the easy money' (p.28 – 29). Contrary to Vic's accusation that Gavin does not want to work on the farm, Gavin claims that he is 'doing it because of the farm […] [he] gave up school to farm it. [He] is doing this stupid bloody job to help save it' (p.28 – 29). Gavin's defence suggests that his decision to work in the supermarket is out of necessity rather than choice, which points to the family's desperate economic situation. It is clear that the family farm is running at a loss: Gavin claims that there are not enough jobs for him to do on the farm to work full-time, while Rose reveals at the end of Act One that 'a pig costs sixty quid to raise and we get fifty-four quid for it' (p.43). Rose's declaration that the cost of raising pigs is more than their market value highlights that the farm is not sustainable, casting doubt over its future.

[39] In addition to these structural changes, there are hints to the BSE epidemic threaded throughout the play which suggest that a specific crisis also contributed to the farm's decline. In the first scene, we learn through Edmond's confusion that the family used to farm cattle but changed to pigs and Vic's irritation is marked when his father cannot remember this: banging his fists on the table, he shouts 'THE COWS ARE ALL GONE. DEAD. Got it? They built a bonfire and heaped the cows on it' (p.15). Given that the play was first staged by Strode Theatre Company on its regional tour in 2001 – the year of the Foot and Mouth crisis – it is likely that this reference to the cows being slaughtered and their bodies burnt is the BSE epidemic of the 1990s. This is supported by Rose's conversation with Sue later in the play: when Edmond laughs at the women, calling them 'nutters', Sue jokes 'we got mad cows' disease. We're mad cows –' to which Rose claims 'you can't say that. Not down here' (p.57). Rose's cold reaction to Sue's joke and her disapproval of her making it 'down here' – on the farm – implies that BSE was the reason for the herd being slaughtered several years earlier.

Harvest similarly charts how these social, economic, and political shifts affect the small family farm but in Bean's case, this takes place across a timespan of almost one hundred years, with the play covering the period from 1914 to 2008. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, change is central to the dramaturgical structure of Bean's play: each episode details the way in which the Harrisons are required to alter their way of working on the land to the changing landscape around them. These changes are both external – coming from the government, the EU, and the wider consumer shifts discussed above – and internal, within the family, where disagreements over its working practices and future direction change the identity of the farm.

While *The Farm*'s focus on supermarkets steers the play towards a discussion of wider structural changes, *Harvest* takes on the specific external bodies which exert a direct influence on the daily work on the farm. These include the government, the EU, and large corporations, such as the feed companies that monopolise part of the agricultural production process. Although Leyshon's play gave a sense of the increasing bureaucratisation of the agricultural sector – marked in the shoebox full of documents that is swiped off the kitchen table by Vic towards the end of the play – this is brought out fully in *Harvest* where Bean explores specific moments in which the government meddle with the family's work on the farm.

The government's influence is made clear in the opening scene – set in 1918 during the First World War – when Sergeant Parker comes on the farm to take the Harrisons' horses for the war effort. As the two brothers, William and Albert, discuss who will stay on the farm and who will go to war while they wait for the Stallion Man to bring his stallion to cover the family's mare, the Sergeant comes into the farmhouse kitchen with the declaration that he needs 160,000 horses by the following week. When Albert tries to save his favourite mare, Brandy, from being taken – he claims that she is lame, unable to draw a pole wagon, and only used for breeding – his attachment to her is evident. Yet the Sergeant is wise to Albert's excuses and outlines his agency as a government official to take whatever he needs – and indeed, wants – from the family's farm:

> Look, son, it's not an easy job this. I try and do it with a smile and a laugh, but at the end of the day you're looking at the government. Your old mum, excuse me ma'am, gave me lemonade not water. She understands who I am, and what I can do. I can take whatever I like, and all I

have to do is give you a ticket. I can take your cows, your pigs, your chickens, your pole wagons, your salt and pepper pots (*Laughs*.), your doors, your wallpaper, your walls.[40]

The Sergeant's declaration that he is the government personified conveys his absolute authority to the Harrison brothers, while his list of all the things that he can take from the family – particularly his sarcastic additions of the salt and pepper pots and doors – highlights the fact that nothing that the family own is truly theirs during wartime.

This idea that the farm belongs to the government during wartime is further explored in the third episode, 'The Nazi', which is set in 1944. Despite the warm opening to the scene in which we find out that Laura is courting Stefan, a German prisoner of war who she will later marry, the government's presence in this scene causes a series of misunderstandings which quickly escalate, ending with Albert's death. The government figures in two ways here: first in the form of the War Agricultural Committee – whose members include Warcliffe and significantly, the local squire, Agar – and second, in the Women's Auxiliary Corps officers who come on to the farm at the close of the scene, after reported sightings of a German prisoner of war with a gun on the fields. Albert's agitation is outlined from the outset of this scene where he repeats that he cannot and will not plough Spittle Garth Meadow as instructed because he will not be able to feed his cows over winter. His refusal to submit to the War Agricultural Committee's demands develops through this scene:

ALBERT: […] This is Harrison land. Where's it say I've gorr an obligation to feed the whole of bloody England?

WARCLIFFE: The Ministry of –

ALBERT: Fuck the Ministry. They only want us now cos there's a war on, any other time they're happy to see us go to hell cos they know they can get their cheap imports.

[…]

WARCLIFFE: 'This directive was served on the twenty-third of March nineteen forty-four'. Last Tuesday. 'Subsequently – '

[40] Richard Bean, 'Harvest' in *Richard Bean: Plays Three* (London: Oberon Plays, 2017), p.22.

ALBERT: – worr I wanna know is, how does anyone get the right to tell a man what he can and can't do on his own land (p.46).

In this exchange, Albert protests against the War Agricultural Committee's demands that the Harrisons must plough up their grassland when that land is lived, worked, and known by the family. Albert's anger is clear: he interrupts Warcliffe when he tries to issue the directive and his disregard for government authority is revealed in his quick retort 'fuck the Ministry'. Despite Albert's resistance, William is careful to remind him that the government is able to take control of the family's farm and its assets, stating that 'they took our 'osses last time. Knocked on the door, drank me mam's lemonade, and walked off with the hosses' (p.43). This sense of inevitability prevails until the arrival of the Women's Auxiliary Corps officers at the close of the scene, which causes a sudden twist of events. When Miss Collins arrives on to the farm to investigate a prisoner of war who has been sighted with a gun (who is in fact Stefan shooting rabbits on the fields), Albert takes her rifle off of her, shouting 'you've got no rights on this land!' (p.47). As Albert aims the rifle at the imposters on his farm – Warcliffe, Lord Agar, and Miss Collins – before firing several shots at the window, he is shot dead by Mrs Dunn, the other Women's Auxiliary Officer who was waiting outside. We later learn – through the stories that are threaded across the episodes and shared between the different generations in the Harrison family – that the family saw this climactic event as a sacrifice that Albert made for the land, with Laura later telling William when Stefan wants to sell Spittle Garth Meadow that 'yer brother died for that field' (p.66).

However, the wartime governments during the First and Second World Wars are not the only external pressures on Kilham Wold Farm that are explored in the play. As with *The Farm*, Bean's play opens up questions about how agricultural practices are changing. While Leyshon concentrates on the way that supermarkets – and by extension, the factory farms that supply them – drive small family farms out of business, Bean details the way in which the Harrisons are not pushed out but adapt to this context by turning towards factory-farming methods themselves. In the fourth episode 'Muck Day', set in 1958, we find out that Albert's death meant that William could finally pursue his 'secret project' – pig farming. This scene captures that the Harrisons have profited from William's 'secret project': the kitchen is equipped with a telephone and the latest white goods; we later learn that all five of Stefan and Laura's children were able to go to university; and much to William's amusement, Lord Agar buys

muck from them each week, leading William to joke that 'No man on this earth can talk with any authority about happiness until he's sold shit to the aristocracy' (p.52).

Despite William's comic overtones, the Harrisons' prosperity does cause class anxiety for Lord Agar. While William maintains that farming pigs is 'nowt but mathematics', Agar is sceptical about how the Harrisons run their farm, claiming 'It's a little like playing God I imagine' (p.53). There is a shift evident here between the way in which the family talk about the pigs compared to the cows and the horses earlier in the play. With the exception of Laura's favourite sow, Chloe, the sows and their piglets are not named in William's colour-coded numerical system: each sow has a colour and the family record the number of piglets next to the colour on the card – for example, when Laura comes in from the farrowing hut she lists 'Red 4. Green 2. Indigo 15…' (p.49). William explains to Agar that he has changed his farming practices from a mixed dairy farm to a concentrated pig unit in order to maximise his outputs and to meet changing consumer demands: he states with the dry declaration that 'It is nineteen fifty-eight. The poor want meat' (p.54). William's invention of this colour-coded numerical system supports Velten's argument above that economies of scale dictate the means of production, resulting in the objectification of the animal to a product which she claims is 'bred, reared and grown to specification'.[41] Further, when Agar complains that the farm has become 'a factory', William jokes 'part factory, part genetic laboratory, part goldmine' (p.54). William's quip highlights the acute objectification of the livestock: the pig is described, in Berger's terms as 'a raw material' that enters the 'factory' to be manufactured and is only valued as it brings in revenue. As with *The Farm*, the pigs in *Harvest* are also commodities that are measured against profit margins: the vet notes at the end of the play that the family are 'losing thirty pounds per finished pig', which chimes with Rose's claim in *The Farm* that 'a pig costs sixty quid to raise and we get fifty-four quid for it' (p.71). While the care for the animal remains and this contact is a theme to which I return in the final section of this chapter, livestock is also represented in terms of productive capital, evidencing the language of commodification that is prevalent in factory farming units.

[41] Velten, *Cow*, p.8

While Agar seems out of touch for the most part of the play – after all, he wrote a book titled *Living with the Innuit* [sic] from the comfort of the British Museum reading room – his warnings to William over the sustainability of his pig system prove to be accurate (p.45). Despite the romance embedded in Agar's lament for mixed farming methods, when he claims that there was 'poetry in it. The rhythm of life in accord with the seasons', Bean suggests that he was right to advocate these methods for the small family farm (p.54). Indeed, William's decision to sell the grassland and employ a pigman, Titch, in the fourth episode, 'Roman Road', which is set in 1979, locks the Harrisons into contracts with Fimber Feed, Agar's company, and brings them under the control of the supermarket conglomerates, resulting in their eventual decline. In the sixth episode, 'Suffragette', which is set in 1995, the Harrisons do not receive their accreditation stamp and are dropped from their supermarket scheme as they still use stalls instead of loose housing. Laura's confusion is marked in her response when she declares that 'We're in the European Community. Stalls aren't illegal in Europe' (p.72). When the vet stipulates that this is British not European Animal Health legislation, Laura claims that the British government want small family farms to go out of business and reveals that she is part of a political group that are fighting this 'war' on British farmers (p.72). While William jokes that Laura has 'gone and got hersen politicised', Laura's political action echoes that of the Countryside Action Network's activity at the time of the play's premiere: she details her participation in picketing at Hull docks, notes that she went on a bus with other farmers to Blackpool to confront the Minister of Agriculture, and makes a similar claim to the Countryside Alliance's Liberty and Livelihood slogan of the 2002 march in her declaration to the vet that 'It is not what we do. It's who we are. We're farmers' (p.71 – 72). The mobilisation of this debate between farmers and the government evidences the same tension between the rural and the urban, agricultural and metropolitan, and local and national structures which was seen in the Countryside Alliance marches and the action of other rural pressure groups in the early 2000s.

Yet the decline of the Harrisons' farm is not only a result of the external pressures; it is a consequence of internal tensions within the family. Again, Agar's observations about the farm are ironically accurate: he draws attention to the matter of inheritance as early as 1934 when he points out that Albert does not have a son, and at the end of the play, Laura and William are left alone in the dilapidated farmhouse, as Laura and the late Stefan's five children are not at all interested in running of

the farm. While Rose and Vic's son, Gavin, seeks work to help support the farm in Leyshon's play, Laura and Stefan's only son, Alan, is not interested in agricultural work and is instead working on a doctorate in psychology at the University of Surrey. This labour shortage has serious implications for the future of the farm: the family is finally forced to sell the grassland, Spittle Garth meadow, as it does not have enough hands to work it, leading Laura to lament that Kilham Wold Farm has become a 'four acre pig unit' which is dependent on Fimber Feed company (p.66).[42]

However, while the farm alters considerably across time and William does embrace a 'system' in which the animal is objectified, the Harrisons continue to care for and love their animals. In contrast to Bensons, a local finishing unit, which Titch describes as 'like the last scene in a James Bond film' where the contact between humans and animals is minimal, the Harrisons maintain a close working relationship with their animals (p.62). While they begin to experiment with new technologies – for instance, they use artificial insemination techniques – these are done manually, much to Alan's disgust when he complains about the equipment that is drying over the kitchen sink. This contact with the animal is emphasised at the very end of the play when Laura and William interrogate Blue, the burglar who broke into their home and who William – now aged 109 – holds at gunpoint, having already shot Danny, his accomplice. Despite the palpable tonal change at the end of Bean's play – which was heavily edited (and softened) by New Perspectives' Artistic Director Jack McNamara for its rural tour in 2017 – both productions ended with Laura and William listing the attributes needed to be a pig farmer. In this final speech, Laura and William reel off the challenges of pig farming and the bureaucracy that comes with it: they ask if Blue could open the post from the bank, the feed company, the ministry, the vet, Brussels, and the solicitor and still be 'fun to live with' (p.86). But central to this speech is the importance of loving the animals and tending to each of them individually, with William asking if he could 'go round your sheds and look at each and every pig, and really care' (p.86).

Through its episodic structure, then, *Harvest* shows the way in which work with livestock changed significantly in the long twentieth century. Writing against any nostalgic accounts of farming

[42] While the play does not mention migrant labour in relation to this labour shortage, Guy Tree – the nameless, 'othered' figure in *Gundog* – is represented as a migrant agricultural worker. Another play that depicts migrant agricultural workers is Julie Wilkinson's *On Saturday This Bed is Poland*, which toured with New Perspectives across the East Midlands in 2007.

life – an attitude captured vividly in a moment of the Royal Court production when William switches off the radio when the familiar theme tune of *The Archers* comes on – Bean highlights that there has always been external pressures and internal divisions on Kilham Wold Farm. In effect, he shows that the British government always exerts an influence, but that is has simply changed shape over time: Sergeant Parker becomes Warcliffe of the War Agricultural Committee, who later becomes the vet working for the British Animal Health Association (now known as the Animal and Plant Health Agency) in the 1990s. As with *The Farm*, *Harvest* represents a landscape which is inherently politicised. Kilham Wold Farm is not a finite, protected space: its edges are porous, and it is affected by national and global issues.

Roberts shows a similarly changing landscape in her play, but these changes are brought about by a specific crisis rather than the long-term social and economic shifts examined in *The Farm* and *Harvest.* As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Roberts' play spans a period from 2001 to 2013 and focuses on the immediate trauma and lasting aftershocks of the Foot and Mouth crisis for the protagonist, Michael, on his dairy farm. Despite this different lens through which to read the farm depicted on stage at Theatre503, there are clear parallels between *And Then Come the Nightjars* and *Harvest* and *The Farm*. First, as with Bean's play, the government come on to the farm and into the narrative, but this time in the form of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) – now known as DEFRA – and later, like *Harvest*, through the army. The MAFF is represented as a direct threat to the future of Michael's farm: Jeff explains that in order to contain the outbreaks, the officers were also slaughtering healthy cows within the stated radius, which includes Michael's herd.[43] As with the War Agricultural Committee and Sergeant Parker in *Harvest*, the MAFF representatives bring paperwork to support their orders and their power is described in the very same bureaucratic discourse: Jeff says that this is 'national policy, it's coming from the MAFF' and that these are 'the orders from the top' (p.22). Here, the reference to the MAFF rolling out 'national policy' highlights that there can be no exceptions: although Michael's cows are healthy, his herd must be slaughtered. Further, Jeff's note that this order comes from the 'top' points to the way in which the government is directly

[43] While Roberts' play is of course fiction, such preventative measures were taken during the crisis in 2001 and were widely reported in the media.

controlling the agricultural sector at this time of crisis. Just as Albert tried to protect his farm in *Harvest* by wielding a gun to all intruders and Vic in *The Farm* claims that he will sit in the window 'with a twelve bore aimed at them', Michael camps out in the barn and threatens to shoot anyone who tries to slaughter his herd (p.41). Like Albert and Vic, then, Michael is passionate in his defence of his livestock and shows a similar resistance towards the government. Referring to the 'fucking shitty little bit o' paper' that the MAFF representatives present to warrant slaughtering every cow within two miles, Michael highlights the same injustice as Albert (p.22). Where Albert protested 'this is Harrison land', Michael is equally indignant in his response to Jeff's claim that the team have called the army for back-up, insisting 'but this is my farm' (p.22). Yet it is clear that the MAFF officials are simply following orders and have no time for such sentimental appeals due to the severity of the outbreak. While the cattle are a commodity to Michael but also part of his life, they are stock to be routinely dispatched for the MAFF; they begin slaughtering the herd without his consent, evidencing the fact that the MAFF workers are answerable to 'orders from the top', not individual farmers.

The second and third acts of Roberts' play explore the ways in which Michael's farm – and the landscape surrounding it – has changed since the Foot and Mouth crisis. The second act is set seven months after the slaughter of Michael's herd and we find out that Michael has not spoken to Jeff since that day, viewing Jeff's complicity in the MAFF's actions as a betrayal. However, in the second act, when Jeff arrives on his farm separated from his wife and children and battling with a drink problem, Michael takes him into the house and the pair rekindle their friendship. By the third act, which is set in 2011, we learn that Michael and Jeff are now living together on the farm and in this act, Roberts shows some of the ways in which this pocket of South Devon has begun to recover, a decade after the crisis. The first scene of the third act is set at Jeff's daughter's wedding which takes place in one of the barns on Michael's farm. This act takes on a lighter tone: Jeff and Michael open the scene dancing to the music of the pop band Maroon 5, with disco lights and smoke machines livening up the stage. As many of the local farmers are at the wedding, we find out through Michael and Jeff's gossip how other locals have rebuilt their livelihoods after the Foot and Mouth outbreak. We learn that Ellacott – the neighbouring farmer whose cattle were also slaughtered during the crisis – sold his land to property developers, much to Michael's disapproval. While Jeff is understanding claiming that 'you can't fault

him', Michael is furious that he simply sold the land to the 'fucking highest bidder' and asks 'and where does that leave the rest of us? Fucking houses everywhere? Wake up one morning, go for a piss, there'll be a fucking Tescos opened up in me toilet' (p.43). Despite the comic overtones in this statement, Michael highlights the way in which the new housing estate will eventually encroach upon his land, drawing attention to the effects of urban sprawl in rural areas, a concern which is also addressed in *The Farm* where Vic jokes that property developers would put a 'whole housing estate on the home field. Another in the five acre. Nice little houses with neat little gardens […] a big supermarket to feed them all' (p.59).

While Michael is sceptical about selling his land and intends to continue rebuilding his herd, Jeff seems alert to the importance of diversification as a means of survival. Jeff is pragmatic: he notes that they are struggling to maintain the farmhouse and claims that 'Dairycrest's got us by the bollocks', highlighting the way in which they are – like the Harrisons in the final episode of *Harvest* – locked into contracts with supermarket suppliers (p.45). As such, Jeff suggests converting one of the barns for 'holiday lets or conferences', but Michael is resistant, arguing 'it's a cow barn not a spa, not a conference centre, fucking hotel, plot of land. Fucking sick of these people!' (p.45). Indeed, Michael's hostile response to any potential barn conversion highlights the very same resistance that Vic shows in *The Farm* where he claims 'I'm not turning back sheets and frying bacon' like the other local farmers who have converted their barns into Bed and Breakfasts (p.40). Like Vic, Michael is reluctant to diversify as he is adamant that as a farmer, his primary role is to feed people. He asks

> Why can't I have a farm? Why does everyone have to go messing with things, sticking their grubby little fingers into everything? People still gotta eat, don't they? Still gotta grow plants, can't do that in a test tube yet, can you? Can't just get milk out a packet? I don't understand people no more (p.45).

Here, Michael asks the same questions as Vic about the role of the farmer today and also draws attention to the connection between the farmer, the land, the animal, and the food that we eat in a world where artificial methods of mass production are more prominent. Yet this discussion extends beyond food in *And Then Come the Nightjars* as Michael points out the housing developments – including the upmarket Shepherd's Dell which sits on land that used to belong to Ellacott – and rural tourist attractions that are

created for urban consumption: '[tourists] been walking round here. I heard the lot of 'em: 'Oh how lovely. It's like an oil painting' but it's not a painting, is it? It's actually here. It's proper. Ten years ago they would've been ankle-deep in cow shit' (p.46). Through the reference to the landscape as an 'oil painting', Roberts emphasises that this rural space is seen as a spectacle to be consumed by tourists: it is the object of the touristic gaze. Further, the spatial deictic marker of 'it's here' highlights that this rural landscape generates a particular subjective sense of place for the protagonist; it is a place which is steeped in memories. Through marking the contrast between the way in which the landscape now resembles an 'oil painting' to outsiders and the scatological reference to the farm being 'ankle-deep in shit' a decade ago, Roberts points out that both the material landscape – and the way that it is used – has changed.

In each play, then, the small family farm is shown to be at risk as the landscape surrounding it is shifting. Struggling to meet the demands of external powers – including the government and the supermarket suppliers that they work for – and to adapt to changing consumer tastes, the farmers begin to explore other means of making money. Gavin works in the local supermarket in *The Farm*, Laura works in the nearby Little Chef in *Harvest*, and Jeff – as a vet – brings another source of income on to the farm in *And Then Come the Nightjars*. However, despite the precarious place of the farm – and, of course, the livestock within it – the families represented in each play show a lasting dedication to their animals and a love for farming which triumphs the challenges that they meet along the way. This care for the animals and the act of remaining on the farm are two intertwined themes, to which I now turn for the final part of this chapter.

Nostalgia and Remaining

While the overarching narrative to each play is that the small family farm is being squeezed out by large-scale social, economic, and political changes, I suggest that against this discourse of decline, each play stages a sense of defiance. Although the future of the farms is uncertain, the relationship between the farmers, their livestock, and the land is celebrated right up until the close of each of these three plays, and the families each retain their place in the landscape. Indeed, the characters' passionate defence of their animals – marked most clearly in the way in which Vic in *The Farm*, Albert in *Harvest,*

and Michael in *And Then Come the Nightjars* all wield guns when their livestock are under threat – attests to the idea that this work, this way of life, is worth protecting. This notion that the animal is part of the work but also central to life on the farm is evidenced across each of the three plays examined in this chapter. In *The Farm*, *Harvest,* and *And Then Come the Nightjars*, the duty of care to the animal is foregrounded as more important than profit margins, highlighting a point of resistance to the increasing commodification of agricultural industries. While each play acknowledges that factory-farming methods have created a distance between the farmer, the animal, and the land, Leyshon, Bean, and Roberts bring this contact back to the centre – and indeed, centre-stage – as their characters work in close proximity with animals.

Yet these moments of intimacy between farmers and livestock are mainly brought into the narrative in the past tense in each play. Edmond in *The Farm,* William in *Harvest*, and Michael in *And Then Come the Nightjars* all reflect on the way that farming *used to be* when they were younger. These close, tactile relationships between the farmer, livestock, and the land are thus contained to Edmond's and Michael's memories and are shown to audiences only in the earlier episodes of Bean's play, emphasising that these moments are largely located in the past. Here, I build on the discussion of the uses of the rural past in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, highlighting the way in which the past is the dominant temporal register for rural imaginaries – even when contemporary rural experience is brought on to the stage. In doing so, I return to the mechanisms of nostalgia discussed in relation to *Albion*, but also retain the Brechtian reading of the rural past developed in my discussion of *Common* and *The Sewing Group* in which the use of the past is mobilised with what Botham terms 'a present political grip'.[44] In the remainder of this chapter, then, I combine these two approaches: taking forward the mechanisms of nostalgia used to explore the English country garden in *Albion* and the radical potential of the rural past discussed in my analysis of *Common* and *The Sewing Group*, I suggest that the memories in *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* are radically nostalgic.

In *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*, Alastair Bonnett makes the case for what he describes as a 'radical' nostalgia, pointing out that nostalgia is often 'cast as the antithesis

[44] Botham, 'The Twenty-first Century History Play', p.85.

of radicalism'.[45] Drawing on the work of the cultural theorist Marcos Natali he highlights that the tension between radicalism and nostalgia is encoded in our political lexicon, noting that 'our ideas of left and right are mapped onto a language of past and future', with 'progressive' showing commitment to the future and 'conservative' and 'reactionary' pointing to the past.[46] Bonnett also suggests that radicalism and nostalgia are antithetical because the radical imagination is predicated on newness: he claims that it is usually focused on 'making a new world', while nostalgia effectively tries to make an old one.[47]

However, Bonnett makes a strong case for the practice of radical nostalgia. Noting the way in which the concept of nostalgia developed alongside modernity, he turns to Walter Benjamin's work on temporality – which underpinned much of my discussion on the pre-industrial in Chapter Three – and in doing so, calls for a focus on the 'revolutionary energies in the 'outmoded''.[48] I discussed such revolutionary energies in the outmoded in that chapter, with reference to the staging of pre-capitalist socio-economic formations in *Common* and *The Sewing Group*.[49] In the three plays considered here, I propose that the characters look back to 'outmoded' agricultural practices with a similar energy and in doing so, resist the change that characterises contemporary farming that I outlined above. More particularly, one tenet of Bonnett's radical nostalgia is environmentalism which he defines as 'calling for a return to earlier, more sustainable, more natural conditions and social practices'.[50] Each of the three plays are set on farms where the families are already emotionally and materially close to the land, but Edmond, William, and Michael all yearn for traditional husbandry, evidencing the look back to 'earlier, more sustainable, more natural' practices that Bonnett identifies.[51] In the conclusion to his book, Bonnett highlights the potential in this environmentalist discourse at the time of its publication,

[45] Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (London: Continuum Books, 2010), p.1.
[46] Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, p.3
[47] Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, p.22.
[48] Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, p.31. Bonnett also turns to Williams' analogy of the rural past as an 'escalator' which is key to my conceptualisation of rural temporality in this thesis.
[49] As I noted in the previous chapter, this theatrical and critical interest in the outmoded is clear in Irish theatre and performance. Such revolutionary energies guide Lloyd's theorisation of ruins in *Irish Times* and Collins' reading of pre-Christian cultural residue in Synge's oeuvre in *Theatre and Residual Culture*.
[50] Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, p.35.
[51] Bonnett also references Carson's *Silent Spring* – which I cited earlier in this chapter – as a cultural text which is radically nostalgic for the way in which it calls back on ancient husbandry against modern industrial agricultural methods.

the same decade in which *The Farm* and *Harvest* premiered. He argues that up until the financial crash of 2008 the 'social and economic life of New Labour (and New Conservative) Britain was aggressively forward-looking' and suggests that at this time in particular there was thus radical potential in a backwards look – in getting back to the root of things.[52] The three plays that I have explored here which each depict traditional livestock husbandry – the root of agricultural practices – were all of course written, produced, and staged under New Labour or the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

This desire to get back to the nub of livestock farming – to the connection between the farmer, the animal, and the land – is brought into the narrative by Vic's father, Edmond, in *The Farm*. Edmond often recounts the intimacy between himself and the cattle: 'we never needed a lot. Just got on with what we was put here to do […] Sowed the seed. Cut the grass, turned the hay. Held buckets of milk for the calves, let them suck it off our fingers' (p.36 – p.37). Here, he celebrates precisely the 'earlier, more natural' practices that Bonnett suggests guide environmentalist discourse. Edmond yearns for a simpler past: the cyclical rhythm in 'sowing the seed' and then 'turning the hay' suggests an alternative temporality where work is naturally regulated by the seasons, rather than the clock or calendar. The image of the calves drinking milk from Edmond's fingers also depicts a profound intimacy; the calves effectively suckle from the farmers which outlines the maternal image between the human and animal. What is made clear in Edmond's memory is that there *used to be* time for this kind of contact: farmers worked the land, tended to the animals, and were not governed by the tight bureaucratic controls that shape contemporary farming practices.

As Edmond deteriorates into dementia as the play unfolds, he takes his old ways and the golden years of farming with him, highlighting the way in which Leyshon sets up a symmetry between Edmond and the farm itself. In this sense, Edmond's nostalgic recollections, which depict traditional farming practices untampered with by external forces, are brought to figure in an increasingly unstable present where the future of the farm is uncertain. At first, then, Edmond's flashbacks might look like 'restorative' nostalgia as these golden years feel irretrievable: in Boym's terms, he is characterised by

[52] Indeed, Bonnett notes the etymological Latin origin of 'radical' which is '*radix*', meaning 'roots'.

nostos as his dementia means that he is often consumed by memories as he tries 'to rebuild [his] lost home'. However, I suggest that Edmond's recollections are more than an attempt to simply rebuild the past and this is for two reasons: first, the content of these memories – which are tactile and sometimes visceral in their register – can be read through Bonnett's lens of radical nostalgia; and second, that Edmond shares his acts of remembering with his family, pointing to the productivity of collective memory work.

Edmond's memories are grounded in tactile codes: he remembers what it felt like to sow the seed, turn the hay, and have calves suck milk from his fingers. Returning to Bonnett's terms, Edmond reminds audiences of the 'root' of farming – of the contact between the farmer, the animal, and the land. This memory is then juxtaposed with the present moment in the play where bills mount on the kitchen table and Gavin has to work at the supermarket to try and save the farm. Edmond's longing for the past is very much located in this uncertain present: he often compares his own experiences to Vic and Rose's handling of the farm, and through the repetition of his stories he seems, in Boym's terms, to show 'a form of deep mourning that performs a labour of grief' – a 'reflective' nostalgic practice which laments the way that farming used to be.[53]

Such endorsement of traditional animal husbandry also runs through Berger's work, which I introduced in the previous section on agricultural change. As explored there, Berger notes the way in which the processes of late capitalism have caused what he terms 'a rupture' between farmers and livestock, and more broadly, an increasing distance between individuals and the food that they eat. Berger articulates the kind of radical nostalgia that Bonnett identifies: his anti-modern political project is centred on *re*connecting individuals to the land, to their roots. This environmentalist discourse punctuates *Pig Earth,* the first part of his *Into Their Labours* trilogy, which turns to a French peasant community in the French Alps.[54] Like Edmond in *The Farm*, Berger places emphasis on touching the animal and appreciating the materiality of its body, capturing this sensation in 'A Calf Remembered':

[53] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.55.
[54] Berger lived with French peasants for sustained periods of time and would remain in rural France for the latter half of his life. As I note here, he reflects on this experience in *Pig Earth*, but the French peasantry was also the central focus of his 1994 play, *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*, which was produced by Théâtre de Complicité and premiered at Manchester Dancehouse in 1994, before touring internationally until 1997.

'Hubert stuck his finger into the milk and put it into her mouth. She sucked it. The third time he did it, her tongue came out to lick […] Powerfully, with her enormous tongue, Moselle licked the coarse brown salt from his hand'.[55] Berger's account of the way in which the farmer, Hubert, encourages the cow and her newborn calf to drink describes the same tactile work as Edmond in *The Farm*; earlier in the play, Edmond also recalls the feel of the cow licking his hand, 'she'd go and get that great big tongue out, lick my arm. Christ, felt like sandpaper taking the skin off' (p.33). As such, I suggest that these insights into tactile work with livestock are not merely uncritical nostalgia, but in fact, practice a radical localism. Indeed, Berger wrote from a Marxist standpoint, celebrating the rural French communities in *Pig Earth* for showing ways of living and working that are recalcitrant to modern socio-economic practices. To echo Bonnett's terms, Berger celebrated the simple and the natural, and, in his investment of traditional husbandry practices, he showed an attempt to make an 'old' world. More recently, Nadine Holdsworth makes a similar claim in *Theatre & the Nation*, noting that a turn to the homegrown, the homemade, and in the case of the plays considered in this chapter, the hand-reared, offers opposition to the effects of market-led globalisation. She identifies 'the forward march of the local' in everyday, alternative consumer choices and points to the radical potential in 'smaller quieter acts such as attending farmers markets and tending to allotments which undermine the brash, high-profile consumerism of McDonalds and Walmart'.[56] The content of Edmond's recollections – and as I show later, the Harrisons' handling of the livestock in *Harvest* and Michael's memories in *And Then Come the Nightjars* – is a form of constructive nostalgia: it evidences, in Holdsworth's terms, if not 'the forward march of the local', then at least its resistance against the national and global pressures that threaten the farms in which the plays are set.

Edmond's nostalgia is also constructive because he *shares* these recollections with his family and together they perform collective memory work. This shift from individual to collective remembering places emphasis on the act of being nostalgic, highlighting the attention to process which underpins Boym's 'reflective' nostalgia. In the penultimate scene, Edmond, Vic, and Gavin – the three generations of men on the farm – remember the farm together, in a kind of deep-mapping exercise,

[55] John Berger, *Pig Earth* (London: Readers and Writers Publishing, 1979), p.18.
[56] Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p.24.

which I suggest exerts a soft political power. When Edmond wakes distressed, Gavin comforts him and they 'walk through' the farm together, with Edmond claiming that he does not need to go outside because 'it's all in here [*taps head*], the whole lot of it' (p.65). Edmond then begins to memorise the shape of the farm – from the tractors on the yard to the smell of the hay in the barn, the ten-acre potato field to the cows that they used to own as he recalls the sound of their hooves in the stalls, and the feel of their muzzles on his face while he milked them (p.65 – 67). In this tender scene, Gavin – and later, Vic – participate in telling the story of the farm and it is clear that they know every inch of it. It is this intimate knowledge of the land that they call home – and the animals who have inhabited it – which Rose draws attention to at the very close of the play, and it is this knowledge which I suggest holds radical potential. When Rose set out to work her first day at the supermarket, she admits to Vic that she ended up sitting in her car and that she 'just couldn't' go in and start her first shift (p.70). Rose then explains how she drove back to the village and went for a walk on the back lanes behind the farm to watch the sun rise. As with the men in the previous scene, Rose reflects on the memories that the farm holds for her: from picking cowslips with her grandma as a child to the day of her wedding when she looked out over the farm, realising that it would be her home from then on. She then hands her supermarket uniform over to Vic and claims

> I sat on the hill this morning, like all those times, and thought even if we lose the farm, we'll have been here. We'll have looked after it, you'll have done what you did. Made your mark. And I thought as I sat there that whatever happens, wherever we end up, I've never regretted any of this. That's all. That's all I wanted to say (p.72).

Rose's assertion that the family members will have 'made a mark' highlights their contribution to the landscape: they have worked, lived, and loved the land and this *matters*, not least because they have lived locally to the beat of what Holdsworth terms 'the forward march of the local'. This act of remaining and the determination to carry on living and working as they have done for generations is quietly radical in itself.

Such stubborn resistance to change is also evidenced in *Harvest*. As I noted earlier in this chapter, despite the number of changes that alter the way that the Harrisons farm their land and tend to their livestock, care for the animal remains central to their work. However, where Edmond's nostalgia

for traditional agricultural practices is straightforward in *The Farm*, this is less clear in *Harvest* due to the black comedy in the play's final episode. In the first six episodes, Bean uses humour to depict the way in which the Harrisons adapt to meet the demands of the changing agricultural industry: Squire Agar's eccentricities, William's quick quips, and Titch's bravado all provide comic relief, without taking the audience's attention away from the dignity of the Harrisons' labour. Yet in the play's final episode, the tone is suddenly uneven: when burglars, Danny and Blue, break into the Harrisons' dilapidated farmhouse, it is implied that Danny sexually assaults Laura, before William enters – aged 109 – and shoots him dead at close range and then holds Blue at gunpoint, interrogating him to ask if he is fit to be the Harrisons' new pigman.[57] Despite the tonal inconsistencies in this final episode, there are moments in which the contact between the farmer, animal, and the land is celebrated, pointing to a similar radical nostalgia to that in Leyshon's play.

This first moment is marked at the beginning of the episode when the burglars break into the Harrisons' kitchen. When Danny comes to the conclusion that 'the country is dark' and farmers are 'filthy', Blue tries to educate him on the role that farmers continue to play in contemporary society: he claims that a bacon sandwich would cost twenty-four pounds if farmers did not develop a 'perfect bacon pig' and reveres their work, stating:

> They don't have to do it, farmers. They could get out of bed one morning and say 'fuck this for a game of soldiers, I think I'll sign on and do a bit of nicking'. We don't respect the farmer in this country. In France 'Peasant' is a term of endearment. And the mad thing is compared to our farmers the French are useless. A big French farm is three cows, two chickens and a duck (p.79).

[57] This scene carries echoes of the Tony Martin case in 1999, which received significant media coverage. In 2000, Martin was convicted of murder when he shot a burglar dead in his Norfolk home, but his charge was later reduced to manslaughter and he was released in 2003. *Harvest* is not the only theatrical allusion to the event: Laura Lomas' *Wasteland* (New Perspectives, 2009) draws parallels with the death of the burglar, Fred Barras, and is set in Newark, Nottinghamshire – Barras's hometown.

Here, Blue highlights the commitment and dignity of agricultural labour and in his dry comparison to way in which the French use the term 'paysan' as a term of endearment, he suggests that the English should celebrate the farmer in the same way.[58]

Second, while William holds Blue at gunpoint, both he and Laura – in a bizarre twist – reflect on the farm and fondly recall the fun that they have had farming pigs. They remember:

WILLIAM: It's all hard work, pigs, but it's fun.

LAURA: If one of them gets out. That's funny, in't it Dad.

WILLIAM: Always med me laugh (p.85).

Here, William acknowledges the hard work that Blue ironically identified at the beginning of the episode, but also insists that working with pigs is 'fun'. This exchange then frames a series of questions that William and Laura put to Blue: embedded in that interrogation is a seam of nostalgia for the work that they have undertaken on the farm over the years. Although the Harrisons have clearly embraced modern methods over the years, Laura and William are proud that they still work closely with the livestock. While the Harrisons use artificial insemination techniques, Laura and William also stress the importance of tending to each animal individually, highlighting a move away from the technologisation of mass livestock farming that Titch earlier reported at Benson Feeds. They ask:

LAURA: Could you collect sperm from a boar?

BLUE: Yer catch it in a flask.

LAURA: And if you have to, yer give it an helping hand.

WILLIAM: Could yer check yer sows, see if they're 'ot.

LAURA: Press her back, see if she's ready (p.86).

Although comic, William's insistence that the ideal pig man should press the backs of the sows and manually collect semen from boars during the artificial insemination process evidences a visceral engagement with the materiality of the animal body. Laura's claim that this duty of care is 'not cos yer love the pig itself, but because if yer don't yer not doin' yer job' also resonates with the 'dualism' that

[58] This reference to the French peasant also chimes with my earlier discussion of Berger's celebration of the Alpine community in *Pig Earth*.

Berger identified in *Pig Earth* for those who live and work with animals: this care for the individual animal is part of the labour (p.87).[59]

In addition to this intimate relationship with their animals, the Harrisons also evidence an attachment to their land, much like Edmond and his family in *The Farm*. While there are nostalgic moments in the play where the characters pause and reflect on the farm and their place within it, these are threaded into the narrative across the play's seven episodes, rather than being contained in flashbacks to past memory, as was the case in *The Farm*. This threading allows audiences to piece these moments together with their own knowledge of the farm, the family, and the livestock who inhabit it, as well as their stories. While Gavin and Vic take part in a shared 'reflective' nostalgia with Edmond in *The Farm*, I suggest that in *Harvest*, the audience are positioned to take part in the processes of nostalgic remembering across the scenes of the play. For example, the grassland, Spittle Garth meadow, is a place which carries nostalgic weight for the family. It is a place of courtship for two generations in the Harrison family: first for William and Maudie and then for Laura and Stefan. It is also the field that Albert died for, where Maudie liked to walk the perimeter to 'feel like the Queen' and – as we find out later in Laura's passionate defence of it in 'Roman Road' – where Maudie walked for the last time before taking to her bed (p.66). Audiences therefore come to understand Laura's reluctance to sell Spittle Garth Meadow and to downsize into a concentrated pig unit in the fifth episode: they have seen the memories embedded in that field play out in front of them on stage. In this sense, then, Bean carries out a similar deep-mapping exercise to Leyshon in *The Farm*, but here includes the audience in the process: he draws attention to the way in which the Harrison family has lived in and worked the land for generations and has made its own mark on the landscape.

Indeed, despite the palpable sense of decline in the run-down farmhouse, the Harrisons remain on the farm until the very end of the play. As Laura speaks to the Squire's son on the phone in the final scene, we learnt that she wants to wait before signing the contract to sell her Warcup sheds as she has 'been feeling lucky all day' (p.81). While the tone of this final scene is certainly uneven, it could be argued that there is a twisted note of optimism as William and Laura find a new pigman in Blue and the

[59] Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?', p.15.

family farm tentatively survives. Although the farm is at the very brink of collapse as the play comes to its absurd close, the Harrisons' farm has at least survived from 1918 until 2008. Despite the number of changes that have altered the livestock that they rear, the methods that they use and that have driven the family into poverty, the Harrisons – like Edmond and his family in *The Farm* – retain their place in the landscape. Returning to Holdworth's terms, both families continue to work to maintain – however tentatively – the 'forward march of the local' against the national and global pressures that threaten to displace their farms and their remaining can be viewed as one of the 'smaller quieter acts' that enact resistance to the changing landscape that surrounds them.

Just as the Harrisons claim that working with livestock is 'hard work but fun', Roberts' protagonist, Michael, evidences a similar resilience and commitment to his farm. In the first scene, Michael and Jeff remember all of the times that they have waited for cows to calve in the middle of the night, reflecting fondly on the way that Sheila, Michael's wife, used to cook breakfast for the two of them at four o'clock in the morning (p.13). Here, Roberts makes clear that working long hours is not only part of the work, but also part of life on the farm. As with Edmond in *The Farm*, Michael is also nostalgic about the way that farming used to be when he was younger. Like Edmond, Michael used to show his cattle, highlighting that the animals hold an additional value to the farmer; they are not simply livestock to be slaughtered. However, what is key in *And Then Come the Nightjars* is *when* Michael informs us about these competitions: he draws on these memories when the MAFF representatives descend on his farm as he appeals to Jeff to save his herd. In this sense, Michael uses this shared nostalgia for the past to try and influence Jeff to spare his cattle from slaughter, identifying its constructive properties as he mobilises the past to try and shape the future. Pulling out old certificates and rosettes, he tries to reason with Jeff and cries 'Breed and Female Champion, Devon County Show, 1994. That one's Dotty's. First. First, Best in Show' (p.28). In his appeal to Jeff at this moment of crisis, Michael stresses his personal attachment to the cattle: they are not just stock, they are prize-winners. In highlighting his connection to the individual animals, Michael suggests that the slaughter of his herd will not only result in an economic loss, but also a personal one – an idea supported by his claim that 'it's not about the fucking money is it' (p.17).

As with the families in *The Farm* and *Harvest*, Michael remains living on the farm to the very end of Roberts' play. Although the slaughter of his herd during Foot and Mouth caused lasting financial damage and significant emotional trauma, Michael manages to rebuild his herd – a feat that could be viewed as one of the 'smaller, quieter' acts of resistance to structural change that Holdsworth identifies. While we learn that Michael and Jeff are struggling to make a living, Michael stubbornly clings on to his herd – to 'being a farmer' – despite Jeff's efforts to diversify the land and convert the barns into holiday lets. As I detailed in the previous section, while the landscape around the farm changes – Ellacott's farm becomes Shepherd's Dell, a new housing estate, and tourists visit the surrounding area treating the land, in Michael's terms, 'as if it's been put [t]here for their pictures and their postcards' – Michael's farm remains working land. Indeed, this stubbornness to remain living and working as he has always done shows a refusal to bend to change, and as with the Harrisons in *Harvest* and Vic and Rose in *The Farm*, I suggest that this act of remaining can be seen as a radical one. Even in the play's final scene when we learn that Michael is dying of emphysema, he retains his place in the landscape and claims that his bedroom window offers the 'Best views in Devon here, you see down to the Tamar that way, look, that's Calstock there near them aquaducts, viaducts, whatever them ducts are. God's own country this is Jeffrey!' (p.48). As the play draws to a close, Roberts ends on a similar note of reflection to Leyshon and Bean: although Michael is almost bed-bound, he is able to get to his armchair to look out on to his land which he has managed to maintain, despite the redevelopment projects in the area that have changed the identity of the South Devonshire landscape that surrounds it. Returning to Bonnett's definition of radical nostalgia, the farming families in these plays try to find a resting place against the forward surge of contemporary society which he argues 'surround[s] us with messages that extol the future and warn of the dangers of stasis, the failure to change'.[60] In each of the three plays, the families try to resist the changes that alter the shape of their farms, they aim for stability – if not stasis – with the hope of remaining, and they look to the past where livestock farming was centred on the contact between the farmer, livestock, and the land.

[60] Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, p.3.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the way in which a focus on livestock in *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* enables an exploration of the rural as a place of production on the London stage. From the outset of each play, we know that the farms in which they are set are home to their characters but are also their place of work, a duality which guides the discussion of livestock farming in this chapter. Yet each play reveals that this small family farm structure is under threat: the families are all brought under the stranglehold of the government, suppliers, and feed companies, while the rise of supermarkets, cheap exports, and changing consumer tastes are three connected problems which affect what the families can produce and how they work their land.

At the end of this chapter, I want to return to a moment from *Gundog*, the play with which I began. Although *Gundog* is dark in its portrayal of rural life – marked most vividly in the way in which the sisters tend, kick, shoot, and drag the mass of furs and skins around the stage for the play's duration – its final scene asks a difficult question of its audiences about the future of agricultural work. As with Edmond and his family in *The Farm*, the Harrisons in *Harvest*, and Michael in *And Then Come the Nightjars*, Becky and Anna remain living on the farm and the threat of their displacement from it hangs over them in the play's final moments. But before the downpour which drenches the set in this final scene, Becky asks what she could do if they lost the farm and what she would say if she was in a job interview for a 'supermarket or behind a desk or in a pub':

> I would say I know about the soil. I know about sheep and how to bring new ones into the world. Anything else? I know about the sky. I can look out of the window in the morning and can tell you when it will rain when there aren't even any clouds. I can tell you how long the light will take to burn away in the evening. I can tell you how much orange there will be in a sunset.[61]

Here, Becky points out that her skills as a sheep farmer are not easily translated into other workplaces. In this sense, Longman – like Leyshon, Bean, and Roberts – asks his London audiences to reflect on the future for farmers, who work to the rhythm of the weather and the seasons, and whose working day

[61] Longman, *Gundog*, p.94.

bleeds beyond the limits of a timesheet. One recurring theme in this chapter has been to suggest that the farmer occupies the rightful place in the English rural landscape due to this intimate knowledge of the land. This sense of belonging has been repeatedly contested over time by different parties who see the landscape differently, including the government in *Harvest* and the property developers in *And Then Come the Nightjars*. In the next chapter, I build on this idea that there are different ways of seeing and belonging in the English rural landscape, exploring the intersections of race, rurality, and belonging in Testament's *Black Men Walking* and Pentabus and Eclipse Theatre's *White Open Spaces*.

Chapter Five: *White Open Spaces:* Staging Race in Rural England

Introduction

In this final chapter, I continue to explore representations of contemporary rural England, turning to the rural as a place of leisure. Where the previous chapter examined the rural as a lived and worked landscape, here I discuss the politics of recreational access to rural spaces, asking if rural England is really 'open' to all. Questions of ownership and access punctuate each chapter of this thesis: we have already seen, for example, the tension that *Albion*'s protagonist, Audrey, created in the community by making the country garden, previously treated as a village amenity, private; the enclosure of common land in Moore's *Common*; and the pressure that the War Agricultural Committee and later the EU exert on Kilham Wold Farm in Bean's *Harvest*. The following plays and performances register similar concerns over private and public rural space and engage with similar themes discussed in previous chapters. However, while this is a question of social class in *Albion*, *Common*, and *Harvest* – in which monied outsiders or the state wield their control over working families – race is the primary optic through which I approach access to rural landscapes in this chapter.

Here, I consider two projects: Pentabus' and Eclipse Theatre's *White Open Spaces* (2006; 2016) – which gives this chapter its title – and *Black Men Walking* (Royal Exchange Manchester, 2018) by rapper, beat-boxer, and theatre-maker, Testament, which were both part of Revolution Mix, an initiative headed by Eclipse in 2015. Eclipse is a regional theatre company, aiming to create work by, about, and for Black communities in England's regions: on their website, they define themselves as 'a beacon for Black artists and theatre makers outside of London'.[1] As Eclipse's former Artistic Director and founder of Revolution Mix, Dawn Walton claims that the aim of the programme is to do something about diversity in British theatre, rather than simply talking about it: she defines the initiative on Eclipse's website as 'a movement: placing the Black narrative at the heart of British Theatre'.[2] So far, Revolution Mix has worked with fifteen Black writers, twelve partner theatres, twelve Audience Development

[1] Eclipse Theatre website: <https://eclipsetheatre.org.uk/about/who-are-eclipse> [date accessed: 03/12/2019].
[2] As Eclipse note on their website, they use the term Black to represent 'anyone who is marginalized for their race or ethnicity'. In this chapter, I use the term Black to the same inclusive end. See: <https://eclipsetheatre.org.uk/revolution-mix> [date accessed: 17/10/2019].

Officers, and 150 Black actors, directors, designers, and musicians, with the aim of creating seven new touring productions, a podcast series, a film, and several participations programmes.[3] Central to this work is the impetus to show, in Eclipse's words, that 'the Black British story is more than just slavery, immigration and teenage gang crime' by uncovering 'Hidden Histories that exist in a landscape of more than 500 years of Black British History'.[4] *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* were the first projects of this programme. These were followed by Chinonyerem Odimba's *Princess and the Hustler* (produced by Bristol Old Vic; UK regional tour, 2019) which is centred on the civil rights movement in Bristol in the 1960s and Janice Okoh's *The Gift* (produced by Belgrade Theatre in Coventry; UK regional tour, 2019), which explores imperialism, cross-racial adoption, and cultural appropriation in Brighton in 1862 and the present day in a rural village in Cheshire. Walton also collaborated with playwrights Lorna French, Selina Thompson, and Odimba to write *The Last Flag*, a radio drama which was aired on Radio 4 in 2018. Eclipse's Revolution Mix thus evidences a strong commitment to representing Black experience – both historical and contemporary – across a number of regional stages, via a range of performance media.

White Open Spaces and *Black Men Walking*

As the first project to come from Revolution Mix, *White Open Spaces* is a series of six podcasts which were directed by the then director of Pentabus, Elizabeth Freestone, and Walton, who was then director of Eclipse. The series was released on SoundCloud via each company's website in November 2016 and remains free to access online. In each of its six episodes, *White Open Spaces* asks urgent questions about recreational access to England's rural landscapes for Black people, highlighting that the idea of the countryside as an open, safe haven is often a myth exclusively constructed for and perpetuated by white English communities. Covering a range of perspectives, the protagonists are of different ages, classes, and nationalities and are situated in different rural locations – from the North Yorkshire Moors to the Long Mynd in the Shropshire Hills. This collaboration between a rural-touring company and Black-led touring company writes against the idea that Black experience is confined to urban environments, with

[3] See: <https://eclipsetheatre.org.uk/revolution-mix> [date accessed: 17/10/2019].
[4] See: <https://eclipsetheatre.org.uk/revolution-mix> [date accessed: 17/10/2019].

one of the main imperatives behind Revolution Mix – as discussed above – being to re-imagine Black experience out of the city.

Three of the podcasts – Francesca Beard's *Completely See-Through*, Ian Marchant's *Joy's Prayer*, and Courttia Newland's *A Question of Courage* – were adaptations of short plays that were initially produced as part of Pentabus' original *White Open Spaces* project in 2006. For this project, Pentabus commissioned a number of writers to respond to the 2004 claim made by Trevor Phillips, who was then chairman of the Commission of Racial Inequality, that the low numbers of Black people in the countryside evidenced a form of 'cultural apartheid'.[5] Seven short monologues emerged from a long development period which began in November 2005, in which a number of writers and directors – including writers such as Rommi Smith and Yasmin Whittaker-Khan – worked from Pentabus' base in Ludlow alongside the local Shropshire community. Premiering at The Courtyard in Hereford in July 2006, the monologues then transferred to The Edge Arts Centre in Much Wenlock (Shropshire), before a run at the Edinburgh Fringe (Pleasance Dome, August 2006) and subsequent transfers to theatres in London (Soho Theatre, September – October 2006) and Stockholm (Riksteatern Theatre, November 2006). The following year, *White Open Spaces* then toured to a range of rural stages across England with Pentabus and the monologues were also performed on the Drama Slot on Radio 4's Woman's Hour. Over a decade later, Beard's, Marchant's, and Newland's scripts were reworked and supplemented with three additional pieces from Leah Chillery, Lorna French, and Testament, which each explore similar themes of race and racism in rural spaces. The first podcast was released on 28 November 2016 and the series was marketed on Pentabus' and Eclipse's websites as a state-of-the-nation piece. The announcement of the project asked: 'Post-Brexit and pre-Trump what is our national identity? What does it mean to belong to a place if that place might not want you to belong to it?'[6]

Such questions of belonging are core to *White Open Spaces*. The first podcast, written by Francesca Beard, is titled *Completely See-Through.* Beard's protagonist, Melanie, is a young Black woman from London, who has been visiting the countryside for the weekend with her boyfriend. As

[5] Trevor Phillips quoted in 'Country Faces 'Passive Apartheid'': <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3725524.stm> [date accessed: 17/10/2019].
[6] See: *White Open Spaces*' webpage, <http://www.pentabus.co.uk/white-open-spaces-2016> [date accessed: 17/10/19].

the monologue unfolds, she explains to the listener that she is at the side of the road, trying to get back to London to get away from her white boyfriend who has been ridiculing her for her cultural differences in front of his friends and family in the village that he grew up in. After attending a family party in a 'see-through dress' which her boyfriend deemed inappropriate, she riffs on this idea of visibility as she explains that she too feels 'see-through' – like a tourist attraction – in this rural village, claiming that 'everyone just turned around and stared like I'm from Mars or something'.[7] Here, then, contrary to the dominant dyad between the rural as place of innocence and the city as one of danger – a binary which is represented in clear terms in *Albion* and *Common* through the protagonists, Audrey and Mary, who make this move from the city to country, and back again – Beard's protagonist claims that the rural is not safe for her as a Black woman. In foregrounding her vulnerability, Melanie highlights that the myth of the rural as a safe haven is a white construction, claiming that she 'cannot wait to get back to civilisation': London.[8]

The second podcast was written by Leah Chillery and is titled *Black Peter Pan*. While *Completely See-Through* deals with recreational access to rural areas, Chillery's piece is the only podcast of the series that explores settlement: her protagonist has lived in the same village for thirty years and was the first Black person to move there. As with Melanie, the protagonist of *Black Peter Pan* notes the way in which Black people are demonised in rural environments, claiming that 'they just look on you like you gonna rob the Post Office'.[9] Despite becoming assimilated into the village, he claims that the death of his wife has now pushed him to move back to the city as he declares 'there is nothing for me here anymore'.[10]

The third and fourth podcasts turn back to the rural as a recreational space and both highlight the hostility – and indeed, overt racism – of rural populations towards Black people. Lorna French's *You Say* focuses on a middle-aged Black woman, who is on a yoga retreat in an unnamed rural location.

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[7] Francesca Beard, *Completely See-Through*, <https://soundcloud.com/pentabus-theatre/completely-see-through-by-francesca-beard?in=pentabus-theatre/sets/white-open-spaces-revisited> [date accessed: 06/11/2020] [my own transcription] (00.35 – 00.38).
[8] Beard, *Completely See-Through*, (02:34 – 02:36).
[9] Leah Chillery, *Black Peter Pan*, <https://soundcloud.com/pentabus-theatre/sets/white-open-spaces-revisited> [date accessed: 06/11/2020] [my own transcription] (03.38 – 03:40).
[10] Chillery, *Black Peter Pan*, (08.09 – 08.10).

As one of the new podcasts developed in 2016, French's monologue explicitly references the xenophobic sentiments that have been activated since the Brexit vote as the protagonist's yoga tutor singles her out and – referring to the vote – asks 'you're not really British anyway, are you?'[11] For the remainder of the monologue, French's protagonist reflects on this casual racism and details the way in which the vote to leave the EU and the prejudice that it exposed has uprooted her, claiming that her 'foundations keep shifting on this British ground' as she sees 'this green and pleasant land with new eyes in [her] old head'.[12] The rural village in the Shropshire Hills is equally hostile to Courttia Newland's protagonist in *A Question of Courage*, Courage, who is a young Black man on a walking holiday with his girlfriend. Courage is held in police custody as his girlfriend goes missing after an argument while geocaching, an orienteering game that uses GPS to track caches, which are small containers with information packs inside them. Newland soon reveals that Courage is detained by the police because his girlfriend is white, making clear the institutional racism that is rife in this rural community. In response to the police's suspicion, Courage explains that the weather turned quickly and protests against their evident prejudice, asserting that a relationship between a Black man and a white woman 'is normal, everyday' in London.[13]

Similar racist ideologies are at work in the fifth podcast, Ian Marchant's *Joy's Prayer*, where Joy – the elderly white protagonist – expresses her disgust for the vicar's views on interracial marriage. When asked to marry a white woman to a Black man from outside the village, the vicar is reluctant and claims that 'it never works does it […] when one of *ours* marries one of *them*' [my italics].[14] In her confession, Joy expresses her concern that she did not actively address the vicar's evident racism: she instead reacted passively, choosing not to attend that particular congregation. In the sixth podcast, *Jerusalem*, Testament takes on a more insidious, covert racism. The podcast is set on the North

[11] Lorna French, *You Say*, <https://soundcloud.com/pentabus-theatre/you-say-by-lorna-french?in=pentabus-theatre/sets/white-open-spaces-revisited> [date accessed: 04/11/2020] [my own transcription] (00.57 – 00.58). It is worth noting that French uses the term 'British' instead of 'English' here. While I focus on conceptualisations of the English rural and Englishness, French's podcast play shifts between British and English national markers.
[12] French, *You Say*, (04:45 – 04:46; 00.04 – 00.06).
[13] Courttia Newland, *A Question of Courage*, <https://soundcloud.com/pentabus-theatre/sets/white-open-space> [date accessed: 06/11/2020] [my own transcription] (00.43 – 00.45).
[14] Ian Marchant, *Joy's Prayer*, <https://soundcloud.com/pentabus-theatre/joys-prayer-by-ian-marchant?in=pentabus-theatre/sets/white-open-spaces-revisited> [date accessed: 06/11/2020] [my transcription] (06:16 – 06.23).

Yorkshire Moors where Testament's protagonist comes across a middle-aged white woman: although she maintains that she is not racist, she asserts that 'England isn't English anymore' due to increased immigration.[15] While *Joy's Prayer* and *You Say* reference both the hymn and the idea of 'Jerusalem' which I identified as central to understandings of the English rural in Chapter One, Testament deconstructs these ideas carefully in his podcast, highlighting the way in which both are weaponised and used to an exclusionary effect by far-right groups. In his discussion of the hymn, Testament notes that Blake's original verse has been appropriated and used as a 'monolith monoculture myth' to exclude Black people from narratives of English heritage.[16] Writing against this green and crucially, *white* mythological England, Testament traces the Black history embedded in the English rural landscape, citing John Moore, a Black Freeman of the City of York; John Blanke, a Black trumpeter for Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon; and Septimius Severus, the Black Roman emperor who died in York, as key Black historical figures.

While the 2016 version of *White Open Spaces* did not constitute a live theatrical event like the 2006 project of the same name which took to stages in Edinburgh, London, Sweden, and a number of village halls across England, I approach these podcasts through the lens of performance. The podcasts were written by playwrights, performed by actors, and made by two touring theatre companies: they were *produced* as performances, despite not taking place in real-time. However, in contrast to the scenographic detail evidenced in the farming plays discussed in the previous chapter, the listener of the podcasts is required to do much more work to imagine the rural spaces that are being described by the protagonists, marking a tension between the rural place represented in the pieces and the placeless podcast form. As with *Albion*, *Common*, and *The Sewing Group*, what is important here is the rural as a conceptual space rather than located place: the writers focus on the idea of the rural as a white space and explore the way that this conceptual version of place affects their Black characters, rather than on the geographic minutiae of the location of each podcast. It is also worth noting that this performance medium also minimised economic risk for Eclipse and Pentabus with this new collaboration: podcast

[15] Testament, *Jerusalem*, <https://soundcloud.com/pentabus-theatre/sets/white-open-spaces-revisited > [date accessed: 06/11/2020] [my own transcription] (01:04 – 01:06).
[16] Testament, *Jerusalem*, (04:01 – 04:03).

plays are a cost-effective way to commission critically acclaimed writers and actors, without carrying the additional pressures that come with filling theatre auditoriums. As a result, the project was widely accessible to a range of audiences due to it being free to stream online.[17]

When viewed as a series of monologues, *White Open Spaces* seems to engage with the current interest in the short play. The short play is an increasingly popular form which is used to respond to political events with a sense of immediacy. The development of the form is clear: one might look to Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/ Repeat: An Epic Cycle of Short Plays* (Paines Plough, 2007); Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (Royal Court Theatre, 2009) which can be performed anywhere in the world for free provided a collection is made for Medical Aid for Palestinians; Tricycle Theatre's *The Great Game: Afghanistan* (Tricycle Theatre, 2010) which featured plays by Richard Bean, Simon Stephens, and David Edgar; Tricycle Theatre's *Women, Power and Politics* (2009), with plays by Lucy Prebble and Moira Buffini; Headlong Theatre's *Brexit Shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation* (streamed online in 2017) which were produced in collaboration with *The Guardian*, featuring plays by James Graham and Maxine Peake among others; the Young Vic's *My England* monologues (streamed online in 2019); and Headlong Theatre's *Europeans: Dramas from a Divided Union* (streamed online, 2020), which followed the earlier *Brexit Shorts*.

In a recent article on another collection of short plays, *Black Lives, Black Words* (Bush Theatre, 2017), Lynette Goddard explores the political potential of the short Black play. They argue that the short form is an aesthetic response to socio-political crisis, noting that in *Black Lives, Black Words*, it produced 'compressed and impressionistic performances, a raw provocative style that got straight to the heart of pertinent concerns that are linked to real life concerns within the #BlackLivesMatter debates'.[18] In my analysis of *White Open Spaces*, I acknowledge a similar space for political potential through the topicality that Goddard ascribes to the short form, with each monologue in the series being under ten

[17] While there is little in the way of review material for *White Open Spaces*, SoundCloud records how many times the podcasts have been played. The project's reach was fairly modest, and the number of listeners fluctuates significantly across the series. Where the first podcast had 409 listeners, the fifth dropped to 149 before the final podcast by Testament climbed again to 385 listeners at my time of writing this chapter in December 2019, three years after its release.

[18] Lynette Goddard, 'Fifteen Minute Moments: Black Women's Short Plays as a Political Aesthetic of Crisis', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 8:1 (2020), 143 – 159, p.157.

minutes in length, and, in Goddard's terms, forming 'compressed' performances which 'get straight to the heart' of race and racism in the countryside today. In this series of short, sharp monologues, I identify two themes to take forward in my analysis of *Black Men Walking*: the hostility of rural communities towards Black people and the reclamation of Black history in rural England.

White Open Spaces – and Testament's *Jerusalem*, in particular – laid out many of the key themes which shape *Black Men Walking,* which, as I noted above, was also directed by Walton and produced as part of Eclipse's Revolution Mix initiative. *Black Men Walking* is the second full-length play by Testament, following his debut, *Blake Remixed* (West Yorkshire Playhouse, 2015). Testament's aim to decolonise Blake's verse was made clear in the formal experimentation of *Blake Remixed*, which combined hip hop, rap, and beatboxing. This blending of different performance media is also evidenced in *Black Men Walking*: the play moves between prosaic – though stylised – scenes of the men walking, choric interludes with the characters marching to a beat, and some elements of physical theatre where the men make stiles and parts of the landscape with their bodies.

Black Men Walking was produced and first performed at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, before two national tours to regional theatres across the UK in 2018, and again, in 2019, reflecting Eclipse's key commitment to regional touring theatre.[19] The play is based on a real Black men's walking group who meet on the first Saturday of every month to walk together near Sheffield in the Peak District.[20] The three Black men in Testament's play – Thomas, Matthew, and Richard – cover similar geographical terrain to this real walking group on their adventure: Thomas declares that the men will be 'crisscrossing the Yorkshire border' and there are references to a café in Grindleford, Padley Gorge, and Whirlow on their route.[21] These middle-aged men are also middle-class: we learn that Thomas is in his early sixties, has a history degree from Huddersfield polytechnic, and works as a senior administrator and resource manager; Matthew is a GP in his early fifties; and Richard is a computer programmer in his late forties. The men's privilege is marked in their costume: each of the three men

[19] Venues included Tron Theatre in Glasgow, Exeter Northcott Theatre, Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, and the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough.
[20] The co-founder of the group, Mark Hutchinson, described the group in *The Guardian* as 'a safe space for Black men'. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jan/23/black-men-walking-royal-exchange-manchester-testament>[date accessed: 22/10/2019].
[21] Testament, *Black Men Walking* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2018), p.11.

are decked out in branded walking gear, which is later ridiculed by Ayeesha – a nineteen-year-old woman who they meet on their walk – who claims they are 'trying to find [themselves] in [their] Berghaus and [their] North Face' (p.46). In the first main scene, audiences are also made aware that the men are from different backgrounds and geographic regions: Thomas has Jamaican heritage and has lived in Yorkshire for most of his life, Matthew also has Jamaican heritage but is from Hertfordshire, and Richard is Ghanaian and has lived in Yorkshire since 1997. This marks a key difference from *White Open Spaces*: where the protagonists in *Completely See-Through*, *A Question of Courage*, *You Say*, and *Jerusalem* only visit the countryside for the day or a short weekend (Melanie and Courage mention that they are from London and the protagonist in *You Say* notes that Birmingham is her home city), the men in *Black Men Walking* have lived in Yorkshire for years and are frequent visitors to this rural landscape.

The play opens with a young Black woman – who later plays the character Ayeesha – dancing slowly over the rocks stacked on the stage. The three men then appear behind a reflective gauze, breaking this tranquil opening by creating a beat with their bodies and chanting 'We Walk', a choral interlude which is sung at various points throughout the play. This chant varies as the play progresses but in this opening scene, the men speak as what the script characterises as 'the Ancestors' and define their purpose of being on the land: 'we walk, we walk, we walk […] we walk our identity, we walk for sanctuary, we walk to claim this land […] though we are written into the landscape, you don't see us, we walked England before the English' (p.1 – 2). As I examine in detail later, the Ancestors function as a choric body in the play: a group that asserts the place of Black history in the English landscape.

After this dream-like, choric opening, the play adopts a more naturalistic tone as Thomas – the eldest of the men and leader of the walking group – introduces himself to the audience, detailing some of the challenges that he faces at work as an older Black man. For example, he explains that he has had to work twice as hard as his white colleagues for a promotion and is rarely invited to social events taking place outside of work. When Matthew and Richard meet Thomas at Grindleford café in this first main scene, it is clear that each of the men bring their own troubles to the walk: Matthew is fixed to his mobile, having an argument with his wife; Richard is dealing with the death of his father who lived in Ghana, with whom he had a complicated relationship; and Thomas is increasingly distracted, talking of connecting with the spirits of the Ancestors embedded in the landscape (see Figure 5). As the weather

turns – just as it does in Newland's *A Question of Courage* – the men report an encounter with a policeman, who advises them to cut their walk short. However, Thomas ploughs on, convinced that he is tracing the path of the Ancestors, with Matthew and Richard in tow, albeit reluctantly as they check the weather app on Matthew's phone. It is in the depth of the storm that the men meet Ayeesha, a nineteen-year-old MC from the Manor Estate in Sheffield, who is standing in silence on the rocks. Convinced that Ayeesha is an embodiment of the spirits of his Ancestors that have been distracting him all morning, Thomas follows her, while Matthew and Richard lag behind, trying to get both of them to return to safety. This meeting, which takes place in Act Two, marks the coming together of generations and genders for the remainder of the play, sparking conversations on home, belonging, and racism that cut across generational and gender divides.



FIGURE 5: Testament's *Black Men Walking*. Directed by Dawn Walton (2018).

Image copyright: Tristram Kenton.

Blackness and Rurality

Through this dual focus on Blackness and rurality, *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* address a gap in theatrical representations of the rural: rural plays rarely represent Black experience and Black plays are rarely set in rural spaces. Black people are *not* represented in the number of rural plays that I have identified so far: in the seven plays that I have explored in detail, not one of the characters is specified to be Black, although *Common*, *Albion*, and *The Sewing Group* each have one Black actor in roles that are framed as examples of 'integrated casting'.[22] A wider scoping of other plays that feature in this thesis also demonstrates an overwhelmingly white set of characters and casts: despite its critical acclaim as a state-of-England play, Butterworth's 14-strong ensemble in *Jerusalem* (Royal Court, 2009) did not include one person of colour and more recent rural plays on London stages such as Kirkwood's *The Children* (Royal Court, 2016), Gill's *The York Realist* (Donmar Warehouse, 2018), Norris' *Nightfall* (Bridge Theatre, 2018), and White's *Mayfly* (The Orange Tree Theatre, 2018) were similarly made up of majority white casts. While this certainly points to a deeper institutional problem in which Black characters are less frequently represented on British stages, I argue here that the acute absence of Black characters in these plays in particular is owing to the rural focus of this work.

Eastern European characters are more often represented in rural plays: one might look to Krystyna, the Polish cleaner in *Albion* and the nameless 'Guy Tree' in *Gundog*, as well as the workers depicted in Julie Wilkinson's *On Saturdays This Bed is Poland* (New Perspectives, 2007) that I mentioned earlier in this thesis. As with that play, Bartlett's and Longman's representations are reliant on stereotypes of migrant labour. In *Albion*, Krystyna is depicted as the 'good immigrant' and is simply a vehicle for Bartlett's Brexit narrative: she is at the centre of an uncomfortable exchange in which Katherine baldly addresses shifting public attitudes towards immigrants following the 2016 Referendum, one of the most explicit references to Brexit in the play. Guy in *Gundog* also functions as a stock character: he is nameless and is denied a backstory. As the play unfolds, audiences learn that

[22] I take Goddard's view here – who resists the popular term 'colour-blind' and instead adopts 'integrated casting' and 'multi-racial casting'. In their work, they draw attention to the pejorative idea of 'integrated casting' which effaces the deep-seated institutional inequalities at work when approaching ethnicity in the theatre industry. See Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Guy is working without payment for food and shelter, which taps into contemporary debates over modern slavery in rural areas, specifically the conditions for migrant farm workers.

At the same time, it is also clear that contemporary Black plays are predominantly located in urban environments and rarely document rural experience. In *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: From Margins to Mainstream*, Goddard addresses the work of four prominent Black British playwrights: Kwame Kwei-Armah, debbie tucker green, Roy Williams, and Bola Agbaje. Goddard deploys a spatial frame in the structure of their book which is centred on London: the second chapter is titled 'Street Life: Black Masculinity and Youth Violence in Roy Williams' Urban Plays'; the sixth 'Around the World: African and Caribbean Human Rights in debbie tucker green's Global Plays'; and the seventh 'A Slice-of-Life: British-African Social Comedy in Bola Agbaje's Council Estate Plays'. They draw attention to the urban environment in Williams' plays (the inner-city street in William's *Fallout* (Royal Court, 2003)), the often placeless, global reach of tucker green's work (the war-torn setting in *stoning mary* (Royal Court, 2005) which is set 'in the country it is performed in'), and the South London council estate in Agbaje's *Gone Too Far!* (Royal Court, 2007). This urban focus on inner-city environments is also evidenced in Aleks Sierz's survey of contemporary Black British theatre in *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* in which he looks to the same urban plays by Williams, Kwei-Armah, and Agbaje.[23]

Urban and rural spatialities are thus clearly racialised both in theatrical representations and their critical receptions. Such siloed positions of a Black urban and white rural have been explored in detail by the urban planner, Julian Agyeman. Writing in the 1980s and 1990s, Agyeman examines the material and ideational whiteness of England's rural landscapes and his work identifies the way in which the dominant binary of the country as a safe space and the city as one of danger is inverted for Black people. First, Agyeman addresses socio-economic barriers to the countryside, noting that Black people are more likely to live in urban areas and that transport to rural spaces is often costly.[24] He also highlights a collocation between Black ethnic groups and lower socio-economic status and claims that these

[23] Aleks Sierz, 'Two Nations' in *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp.127 – 162.
[24] Julian Agyeman, 'Black People in a White Landscape: Social and Environmental Justice', *Built Environment* 11:3 (1990), 232 – 236, p.232.

demographics are, in his terms, 'less likely to have leisure time'.[25] Although Agyeman was writing in an earlier period, this binary between Black communities living in urban spaces and white communities living in rural spaces remains firmly entrenched today. According to the Regional Ethnic Diversity Report which was published on 1 August 2018, only 1.9% of Britain's Black population live in rural areas compared to 20.9% of its white population.[26] Second, Agyeman turns to cultural differences and claims that while children's literature in England is saturated with idyllic pastoral narratives, 'Black cultures and mythologies revere the natural world but it is not used as a leisure source'.[27] And finally, Agyeman highlights that cultural discourse continues to construct the rural as a white space and argues that in some cases, the rural is 'still portrayed as the safe-keeper of Anglo-Saxon culture, harbouring a whole host of nativistic reactions in the collective psyche'.[28] He thus identifies racism as his third barrier for Black people in the countryside. Here, Agyeman highlights structural differences between white and Black communities, writing that these far-reaching socio-economic and cultural factors effect what he terms a 'process of containment' which prevents Black people from accessing and living in rural areas.[29]

Both *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* deconstruct these rigid spatialities of Black/urban and white/rural by staging the realities of rural experience for Black people. In doing so, these projects take the perceived alterity of Black people in rural landscapes as their primary focal point and work – albeit in different ways – to embed Black histories into rural spaces, constituting a political and cultural critique of the naturalised whiteness of the rural. Before detailing how *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* write against white English rural imaginaries, I want to first make the case that this hegemonic whiteness is a cultural construction.

Racialising Ruralism

[25] Agyeman, 'Black People in a White Landscape', p.232.
[26] Regional Ethnic Diversity Report, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest#ethnic-groups-by-type-of-location-urban-or-rural> [date accessed: 29/10/19].
[27] Agyeman, 'Black People in a White Landscape', p.232.
[28] Agyeman, 'Black People in a White Landscape', p.232.
[29] Agyeman, 'Black People in a White Landscape', p.233.

As Agyeman notes, Black people are excluded from rural spaces due to a range of social, economic, and cultural factors. Given this thesis' treatment of cultural representations of the rural, I focus here on cultural factors, with emphasis on the way in which the rural is construed as a white space in England's cultural imagination. The cultural geographer Phil Kinsman highlights that the whiteness of the rural is produced and reproduced in cultural media in his PhD thesis on landscape, nation, and race, which remains one of the only studies on Blackness, rurality, and British national identity to date.[30] Kinsman takes a similarly fluid definition of the rural landscape to the one taken in this thesis, but also incorporates race as a point of reference, writing that cultural representations and academic literatures which depict themes of landscape, national identity, and race are 'discursive locations where landscape and nation are distinctly racialised'.[31]

In his study, Kinsman explores this racialisation of the English rural imaginary through two rural magazines, *The Field* and *This England.* He highlights the way in which both magazines gave space to far-right thinkers in two key features in the 1990s: *The Field* ran a series titled 'Fanfare on Being British: Seven Britons Speak Out' in 1990, and a column titled 'Forever England: A Commentary on the Changing Times' ran in *This England* throughout the 1990s. As the titles suggest, each feature was guided by a nationalist project where rural imagery was used to ground narratives of English exceptionalism. This was in the context of increased European integration in *The Field*'s 'Fanfare on Being British' where Norman Tebbit and Enoch Powell featured as guest writers, making

[30] Phil Kinsman, *Landscapes of National Non-Identity: Landscape, Race and Nation in Contemporary Britain*, Unpublished PhD Thesis (University of Nottingham, 1995). Similar studies include, Sarah Hackett's *Britain's Rural Muslims* which examines rurality and the experiences of Muslims in Britain. She examines the ways in which Muslim communities in rural areas are typically written out of British immigration histories. See: Sarah Hackett, *Britain's Rural Muslims: Rethinking Integration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). Divya Praful Tolia-Kelly's *Landscape, Race and Memory: Material Ecologies of Citizenship* also places race memory at the heart of English heritage, exploring place and memory for South Asian women. See: Divya Praful Tolia-Kelly, *Landscape, Race and Memory: Material Ecologies of Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[31] Kinsman, *Landscapes of National Non-Identity*, p.42 – 43. Kinsman's focus is on Britain, not England. In this chapter, I address *English* rural landscapes due to the differences between the English, Welsh, and Scottish rural imaginaries that are outlined in Chapter One. Further, I argue that some of the examples that Kinsman lays out from *The Field* and *This England* are – as the title of *This England* implies – specifically about Englishness, not Britishness. Thus, where there is slippage from the use of the term 'England' to 'Britain', this is only when quoting from the work of Kinsman and others (including French in her podcast play, 'You Say', which I noted earlier in this chapter); it is not an uncritical conflation of the terms.

characteristically Eurosceptic contributions.[32] *This England's* 'Forever England' was written by the far-right political figure, Stuart Millson, who also wrote *The Patriot* for the British National Party and was the founder of the Revolutionary Conservative Caucus. Kinsman notes that Patrick Wright cites the magazine as an example of the dangerous appropriations of his concept of 'Deep England': Wright wrote in *The Guardian* that it promoted 'a highly sanitized and deeply nostalgic view of England'.[33] 'Forever England' enabled Millson to articulate his racist dogmas on racial purity through the idea of a 'Deep English' heritage: he called for the preservation of 'England's Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Norman heritage...in its undiluted form'. [34] This idea of a pure, 'undiluted' English heritage resonates with the dangers of 'Deep England' that I discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two.[35] Indeed, the 'Forever England' column also turns to the soldier poets of the First World War as its inspiration, reaching back to the very same 'Deep England' that I explored in Chapter Two. Although used to a different end, this patriotic rural narrative was of central importance to Bartlett's play: Elgar framed the prologue and the connections between the English soil, the military, and English people were repeatedly returned to across the course of the play. Returning to Wright's earlier definition of 'Deep England' – the frame through which I read *Albion* in Chapter Two – these racialised narratives of rurality are predicated on an embodied knowledge of rural England, or, in Wright's terms, 'an essential experience'.[36] This essential claim to national knowledge through the soil can be quickly mobilised to an exclusionary, xenophobic end, as Agyeman's earlier note on the representation of the rural as 'safe-keeper of Anglo-Saxon culture' makes clear.

Of course, the blood and soil motif is one which continues to be deployed by far-right organisations.[37] For example, Agyeman and Rachel Spooner detail the ways in which the National Front

[32] Powell published a collection of his own pastoral poetry back in 1937, making clear the triangulation between the English landscape, nation, and race, in his politics. Nairn exposes the connectivity between Powell's poetry in *The Break-Up of Britain*, leading David Matless to note that such connections seem to signify 'babbling brooks feeding rivers of blood'. See: Nairn, 'English Nationalism: The Case of Enoch Powell' in *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp.245 – 279, p.262; Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p.10.
[33] Kinsman, *Landscapes of National Non-Identity*, p.49.
[34] Kinsman, *Landscapes of National Non-Identity*, p.50.
[35] Kinsman, *Landscapes of National Non-Identity*, p.50.
[36] Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, p.82.
[37] For example, one might look to British Revival, who position themselves as an alternative to Extinction Rebellion, but align fascist and environmentalist discourses in their propaganda, bringing together ideas of environmental and racial purity. The traction of British Revival in rural areas was documented by BBC's Countryfile in September 2019. See: 'Lake District', *Countryfile*, BBC One, 29 September 2019.

and the British National Party have worked with the ideological potency of this motif for decades. However, they draw this connection with care with the reminder that 'this is not to suggest that all those subscribing to a 'rural idyll', or a British national culture or identity, have fascist tendencies. This is simply one reading of how an ethnically absolute national culture is inscribed in space; however, it is both powerful and frightening'.[38] This idea that 'an ethnically absolute national culture is inscribed in space' is integral to the remainder of this chapter. Rather than making any claim to the intrinsic whiteness of the English rural landscape, Agyeman and Spooner emphasise here that this ethnic reading is produced in cultural discourse. This notion that rural space can bear the inscription of a number of different ideologies is central to my plural reading of the rural in this thesis. Indeed, I have argued that there is not one rural, there are many, and that as these readings of the rural are discursively produced, they can also be rewritten. Despite the entrenchment of this racialised reading of the rural in England's cultural imagination, I argue that *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* have the capacity to change this perceived understanding of the rural as a white space.

White Open Spaces and *Black Men Walking* populate their fictional rural landscapes with Black characters, writing against the idea that the rural is a white spatial imaginary. While these performances are pioneering projects in theatre and performance, creators of other cultural media have been exploring such connections between Blackness and rurality for some time. In *Landscapes of Non-Identity*, Kinsman examines the work of the visual artist, Ingrid Pollard. Her most popular collection*, Pastoral Interlude* – which is comprised of five photographs showing Black men and women in the iconic rural landscape of the Lake District – is an early example of work that depicts Black experience in rural spaces.[39] Pollard draws on the cultural histories that punctuate the Lake District landscape: her style emulates that of the eighteenth-century landscape painting and she makes explicit references to the Lake poets in her captions. For example, in the first image of the woman sitting on a dry-stone wall, the

[38] Julian Agyeman and Rachel Spooner, 'Ethnicity and the Rural Environment' in *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, p.201.

[39] *Pastoral Interlude* was first shown at an exhibition by D-Max (a Black photographers' collective) in 1987 and is now held in the National Collection at the Victoria and Albert museum in London. *Pastoral Interlude* is still shown today, highlighting the way in which its themes still resonate over thirty years after its premiere. For example, the collection was part of *The Place is Here* exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary in February 2017 which subsequently toured to Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art and the South London Gallery in June 2017. See: <https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/whats-on/the-place-is-here/> [date accessed: 19/11/2019].

caption reads ‘I thought I liked the Lake District; where I wandered lonely as a black face in a sea of white’ (see Figure 6).[40] Here, Pollard riffs on the opening line of William Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’, embedding her racialised experience of the rural into this famous poem about the landscape of the Lake District.



FIGURE 6: Ingrid Pollard’s *Pastoral Interlude* (1988). Held in the National Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Image copyright: Ingrid Pollard Photography.

Notably, Pollard worked alongside Agyeman as part of the Black Environment Network (BEN). BEN is a non-profit organisation that was founded in 1987 after a conference titled ‘Ethnic Minorities and the Environment’ which was funded by Friends of the Earth and the London Wildlife Trust. After being based in London with project offices in Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Swansea for many years, the charity’s headquarters are now in Llanberis, Wales and its work is divided

[40] Ingrid Pollard, *Pastoral Interlude* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1987).

geographically into three distinct centres in England, Wales, and Scotland. The BEN work at both grassroots and policy levels: they aim to enable full ethnic participation in the built and natural environment, while also collaborating with mainstream organisations such as the National Trust to prioritise the needs of Black people in rural areas. They also publish widely in order to share their practice, provide training to a range of organisations to integrate ethnic participation into their agendas, and offer teaching resources to schools.[41] As of 2020, the BEN is still a registered organisation but there has been no public activity on their website or social media for several years. However, other organisations are undertaking similar projects: for example, following the resurgence of the global #BlackLivesMatter movement in the summer of 2020 which was sparked by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, US on 25 May 2020, a group of rural activists formed Black Lives Matter In the Stix, an organisation that targets racism in rural England, with the aim of promoting anti-racist teaching.[42]

While *Pastoral Interlude* remains a popular collection, Pollard was not alone in her examination of race and rurality in contemporary England and visual artists continue to explore this relationship today. For example, Karis Beaumont's *Bumpkin Files* is a photography collection and journal that archives Black experience in a range of rural settings: she writes on her website that the project is designed to 'widen the narrative, bridge gaps between communities, provide more references and to uplift Black voices from all corners'.[43] Another project which seeks to 'widen the narrative' on race and rurality is *Where Are You Really From?*, which was founded in 2019 by writer, Louisa Adjoa Parker, who is based in the South West of England. *Where Are You Really From?* is an online archive which examines the experiences of people of colour in the English countryside. Supported by the Inclusion

[41] See: The Black Environment Network website, <http://www.ben-network.org.uk/index.asp> [date accessed: 04/11/2019].

[42] For more information on BLM In the Stix, see: Aamna Mohdin and Lucy Campbell, 'Black Lives Matter Group Offers Rural People Insight into Prejudice', *The Guardian*, 8 August 2020, < https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/08/black-lives-matter-rural-insight-prejudice-blm-stix> [date accessed: 02/11/2020].

[43] Karis Beaumont, *The Bumpkin Files* website, <https://www.karisbeaumont.com/bumpkinfiles> [date accessed: 02/11/2020]. The *Bumpkin Files* is available to view online, and Beaumont continues to curate a live, online archive on Instagram, in which other visual artists are invited to share their own images that depict Black British life outside of city environments. See: <https://www.instagram.com/bumpkin.files/?hl=en> [date accessed: 02/11/2020].

Agency and Little Toller Books (a Dorset-based publisher specialising in rural life), the project is comprised of short stories, short films, and a podcast, which are all accessible for free online.[44] Parker places emphasis on nurturing new writers: she ran storytelling and sharing sessions online which led to a collection of over thirty stories, the majority of which were produced by new writers.

White Open Spaces and *Black Men Walking* carry out similar work to these projects, but in a theatrical context: both are centred on placing Black people at the heart of the rural environments and both explore the tensions and effects of the naturalised Black/urban and white/rural binary. However, *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* go further than placing and performing the experiences of Black people in rural landscapes: they also draw attention to the Black histories that are embedded in these spaces. This performative archiving of the Black histories within rural landscapes demonstrates the way in which the writers of *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* point to a longer history of Black presence in the rural that undermines any historicised cultural account – such as the Anglo-Saxon blood and soil narrative – which lays claim to the inherent whiteness of rural landscapes. It is here that I suggest that the performances carry the potential that Robinson identified to *change* rural imaginaries: in their theatrical exploration of what it means to be Black in a rural environment, *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* stage both a contemporary and historic Black presence, which challenges the dominant view of the rural as a white space. The remainder of this chapter is focused on these two points: I first detail how *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* approach the politics of belonging for Black people in their contemporary rural settings, before closing with a discussion of the ways in which these projects work to embed Black histories into their represented rural landscapes.

Staging the Black Rural

As with Pollard's *Pastoral Interlude* and Beaumont's *Bumpkin Files*, *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* disrupt the apparent whiteness of the rural by placing Black people at the centre of their respective rural landscapes. *White Open Spaces* opens with this idea of the stark visibility of the Black body in the rural with Francesca Beard's *Completely See-Through*, which through its title alone captures

[44] See: < https://www.whereareyoureallyfrom.co.uk/#> [date accessed: 02/11/2020].

this feeling of exposure and otherness. As outlined in the introduction, the protagonist, Melanie, tells the listener that she came to visit this rural village for the weekend with her white boyfriend; the podcast opens with her hitching a lift to get back to London, after having left him at his family home. Melanie explains that when her boyfriend was at home with his family, his prejudice came to the fore: he repeatedly mocked her for wearing the 'wrong' clothes and saying the 'wrong' things in this rural setting. Drawing a parallel between the see-through dress that she saved up to buy for the occasion and the colour of her skin, Melanie details that she is marked apart by her physical appearance alone as she claims that 'This is a kind of celebrity looking like me, here, in the country…'[45]

This anxiety about being seen as 'other' is also central to the second podcast, *Black Peter Pan*, where Chillery's protagonist explains that when he first moved to the rural village thirty years ago with his white wife, he was the only Black man living there. The listener also learns the story behind the title of the podcast: he explains that when he lived in Jamaica, everyone called the first white man Peter Pan because he appeared to have flown over from nowhere. In this story, he also notes the difference between the overt and open jokes that his community made to this white man and the insidious, covert racism of the rural village that he now calls home, arguing that 'people don't say nothing to your face' but that he was always made to feel like 'the elephant in the room'.[46] In the third podcast, *You Say*, French takes on the white gaze in a similar way to Chillery. Set on the day after the EU Referendum, French's protagonist reports a distinct increase in her experiences of casual racism. While French's protagonist is from Birmingham, the podcast is set at a yoga retreat in a rural village and she explains that her retreat has been ruined by several racist remarks. For example, she notes a number of examples of casual racism – such as the taxi driver asking where she is *really* from, a question which guides Parker's project *Where Are You Really From?* discussed above – but she also highlights the white gaze of the owners and customers in the village shop, claiming that the shopkeeper 'beckoned his mate over so they could both stand in the window and gawp'.[47]

[45] Beard, *Completely See-Through,* (03:55 – 04:00).
[46] Chillery, *Black Peter Pan*, (03:35 – 03:36; 03:42 – 03:45).
[47] French, *You Say*, (01:57 – 01:59).

Even in the Peak District in *Black Men Walking* – which is terrain that the men walk each month – Testament details the way in which the Black body is perceived as out of place. When Thomas, Matthew, and Richard start out on their walk as they do every month at Padley Gorge, they come across a group of white walkers and Thomas claims that even after living in Sheffield for years and walking the route countless times, he still feels 'the look':

> Did you see her look at us then? Daft int' it? You'll be going about your business and someone will just look at you funny. Y'know, like the way you can feel security guards looking at you sometimes. I mean you forget and then all of a sudden someone looks at you funny (p.18).

While the exclusion felt by the protagonists in *White Open Spaces* is still very much part of their everyday lives, Thomas seems to claim that this look – which scrutinises and alienates the Black body – is largely a thing of the past in that it can be 'forgotten'. His mention of the security guard also indexes institutional racism which is further defined when the men report an encounter with a police officer later on their walk where he stops to warn them about the weather. When Richard and Matthew both agree that he seemed 'alright' and was simply trying to warn them about the weather turning, Thomas is deeply suspicious, asking 'Still you think though, don't you?' a question to which both men agree (p.25). Richard then implicitly refers to W.E.B. DuBois' idea of the 'double consciousness' (which the men discuss in detail later in the play) by noting the impact that this white gaze has on their identity: Richard claims that 'before I came here I didn't really realise I was black […] then you come here and people see you differently…That sense of suspiciousness. They hear your voice, their eyes glaze over and…you're a "black guy"' (p.25). DuBois' basic premise is that Blackness is defined by doubleness, he states that 'it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.[48] Writing in 1897, DuBois notes that the way Black people view themselves is determined by wider social narratives in Western society that systematically oppress Black people. As DuBois suggests, the 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others' is where the

[48] W.E.B. DuBois, 'Strivings of the Negro People', *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/> [date accessed: 25/11/19].

doubleness lies: Black people are defined by the way they are *seen* by white people, in addition to their own sense of self. Thomas, Richard, and Matthew come back to DuBois later in the play but in this instance, they hint at the ambiguity over the way in which they are perceived by the police officer. This reference to the police officer's look is a nod to the systematic, institutional racism of the police force in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, which Thomas and Matthew report having experienced first-hand. A similar acknowledgement of police prejudice is made in Newland's podcast *A Question of Courage* where the Black protagonist seems to be the primary suspect for his white girlfriend's disappearance: he is held for questioning in a Shropshire village police station, unable to join the search team to help find her.

In each of these instances, the Black protagonists are subject to the white gaze: they are marked as 'other' in their respective rural landscapes by the colour of their skin, making clear the multiple prejudices that Agyeman claims come into play when the Black body is moved from an urban to rural environment. Although these performances certainly speak to the alienation felt by Black people and the hostility of white rural communities, they also give space for the Black protagonists to explore and speak against these subordinate subject positions. In contrast to Pollard's and Beaumont's visual art, the performances considered here are embodied and the fictional Black figures in the landscape are able to speak. In this sense, *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* open conversations on this perceived alterity and in doing so, the Black bodies that were objectified by the white gaze are given space and time to react and tell their story.

Resisting the White Gaze

Each of the protagonists responds in a different way to the hostility that they meet in these rural settings. Melanie's response in *Completely See-Through* is initially one of anger: when the villagers stare at her she claims that 'I just wanted to slap them and say listen you ignorant village idiots, a) it's rude to stare and b) if you're that interested why don't you come up and make some conversation'.[49] However, 'wanted' is the key term here; despite Melanie's frustration and anger at this small-minded community,

[49] Beard, *Completely See-Through*, (00:36 – 00:44).

she reports that she felt completely debilitated and remained silent. Although she feels unable to confront the villagers in this overt way, she does communicate her unease in this rural setting to the person that she hitches a lift from (and of course, to the listener): she cites the ominous sound of the bellowing cows, the unlit roads, and lack of pavements as evidence that the countryside is 'a violent, nasty place where stuff goes on that you wouldn't wanna know about'.[50]

While Melanie is able to leave the countryside in *Completely See-Through*, the protagonist in *Black Peter Pan* had to settle in the village to live with his wife, regardless of the prejudice that he faced. In his monologue, he thanks the shopkeeper – an Asian man – who made life bearable in the first years of his arrival to the village, claiming that their shared 'outsider' positions in the community made for strong kinship. Chillery's protagonist claims that he was required to earn his acceptance in the community by working hard: he marks the time that he fixed the church spire as a turning point in which he turned from 'minus zero to superhero overnight'.[51] However, despite his assimilation into the village that he has lived in for thirty years, he explains that the death of his wife has finally made him decide to move back to the city. Comparing his own suffocation in the village to being trapped under the rubble of the church that he rebuilt, the protagonist asserts that contrary to the disapproval of his (now adult) children, he must leave because after his wife's death, 'there is nothing [there] for [him] anymore'.[52]

In *You Say*, French's protagonist responds to the ignorance of the rural community with sarcasm. When the shopkeeper and his friend come to stare at her through the window, she waves at them, fully aware that she seems to be an object of fascination in this rural community. Referring directly to the EU Referendum which – in the narrative of the podcast play – took place the day before her yoga retreat, she claims that she felt a palpable change in the way that she is perceived. French works with the yoga analogy to articulate the way in which her protagonist feels different to the other (white) women: she claims that while the other women's bodies are in formation and are 'structurally sound', she trembles – unable to hold her position. She then draws a parallel with the question of her ability to connect herself to the ground which she claims has drastically shifted since the Referendum

[50] Beard, *Completely See-Through*, (01:33 – 01:36).
[51] Chillery, *Black Peter Pan* (05:33 – 05:38).
[52] Chillery, *Black Peter Pan,* (08.09 – 08.10).

the previous day: 'I cannot root myself to this earth because I don't know if I want to. Yesterday I knew, I was sure'.[53] This motif of contact with the English soil is one that we have already seen in *Albion* through the image of the soldier and the land, and in *Common, The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *Gundog* through the lens of rural work. What is clear here is that in contrast to these plays, French's protagonist cannot – and does not want to – connect with the English soil: she does not feel this essential contact to the ground. As with the protagonists in Beard's and Chillery's podcasts, French's protagonist expresses her resistance to this rural place – but also, significantly, to England as a whole – as she does not want to be rooted in or attached to this *country*, in both senses of the word. Crucially, while these protagonists are marked 'out of place', they do not want to belong in these rural places: they highlight their cultural difference and actively resist any assimilationist narrative.

While most of the protagonists in the *White Open Spaces* series are thus unconvinced by the pull of England's green and pleasant land, the men in *Black Men Walking* clearly have a passion for walking in the Peak District. Despite the looks that they receive from other walkers which mark out the alterity of the Black body in the rural landscape, the men meet monthly to walk together. In fact, when the men define their group to Ayeesha when they meet her by the rocks, they state that the purpose behind the monthly meetings is to claim the land as their own and 'walk out [their] identity' (p.44). When Ayeesha is cynical about the group's political potential – she scoffs 'Black on black walking?... Genius. Sounds…like you're achieving a lot!' – Richard makes a rather heavy-handed reference to Malcolm X and DuBois' double consciousness, explaining the act of walking through the lens of identity construction:

> You see, Malcolm X said, 'There's a new type of black man who wants to speak for himself, stand on his own feet and WALK for himself'. It means WE define who we are. We walk […] W.E.B. Dubois writes about a double consciousness? You know YOU are yourself. But they…don't see you as you. They just see their prejudices. They place another identity on you […] So we are in our own culture, and the British culture at the same time. Walking between

[53] French, *You Say*, (05:04 – 05:10).

> two selves! […] Walking two identities. Being black AND being British. A double consciousness (p.44 – 45).

Countering Ayeesha's scepticism, Richard thus argues that the act of walking is inherently politicised when read through Malcolm X's quotation as it signifies empowerment: the Black man [sic] can speak, stand up, and walk out his identity, irrespective of the prejudice that he faces. Richard's reference to DuBois also highlights that the men use the walk as a space and time to explore what it means to be both a Black man and a Yorkshireman. In this sense, then, the monthly walking club is portrayed as a place in which the men can freely discuss the negotiation of these overlapping racial and regional identities with other men who inhabit the same – or similar – subject positions.

Although the Black men in Testament's play are subject to the occasional judgemental look, they belong to this rural landscape: they use it frequently for recreational purposes without discomfort or unease, as the regular beat underpinning their 'we walk' interludes makes clear. Where the protagonists in *White Open Spaces* largely describe their alienation and even fear in the rural landscapes in which the podcasts are set, the men in *Black Men Walking* assert that their place in the Peak District is integral to their politics and to their own individual identities. Thomas, Matthew, and Richard use this rural space as place to walk through – and indeed, talk through – their problems together, sharing advice and support as they traverse the Peak District's rugged landscape. Yet their belonging to this landscape is not confined to the present moment in 2018; the men turn to and claim a much longer historical trajectory which places Black figures at the heart of the Yorkshire landscape. The final section of this chapter turns to this representation of historical Black figures in both *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking*, arguing that in their performative archiving of Black rural history, both projects present a direct, explicitly embodied challenge to the naturalised whiteness of the English rural.

Performing Black Rural History

In the remainder of this chapter, I return to the use of the rural past which was my central focus for Chapter Three on Crowe's *The Sewing Group* and Moore's *Common.* Each thematic chapter in this thesis so far has examined a different type of historical rural England: Chapter Two viewed the 1920s English country garden through the lenses of nostalgia and grief, Chapter Three considered the

mobilisation of pre-industrial rural theatrical narratives, and Chapter Four discussed traditional farm work – centred on the vital connection between the farmer, livestock, and the land – through the lens of radical nostalgia. In each of these cases, a different version of historical rural England was explored, each of which was identified as being mobilised to a different end: Bartlett used the country house setting to approach current national questions, Crowe and Moore stage very different versions of pre-industrial rural England to open up collective socio-economic formations to their audiences, and Leyshon, Bean, and Roberts turn back to the way that farming used to be in order to articulate their critique of the direction in which the agricultural sector is going. Here, I make the case that *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* similarly use the rural past for present political effect: they draw attention to Black historical rural narratives in order to legitimate the presence of Black people in the contemporary rural landscapes represented in each project.

Both *Jerusalem* (the sixth and final podcast in the *White Open Spaces* series) and *Black Men Walking* draw attention to the Black histories that are embedded in the rural landscapes in which they are set. Testament wrote both pieces and both are set in rural Yorkshire: *Jerusalem* is set on the North Yorkshire Moors and *Black Men Walking* is set near Padley Gorge where the men walk the South Yorkshire/Derbyshire border. Yet Black rural history comes into these theatrical narratives in different ways: while the protagonist in *Jerusalem* draws on the historical presence of Black people in the rural landscape in an argument with a (white) middle-aged woman about race and belonging, the Ancestors are embodied as a central choric body in *Black Men Walking* who narrate the stories of Black historical figures at key moments throughout the play. Where the historical material in *Jerusalem* serves as ammunition in an argument, it is thus central to the dramaturgical structure of *Black Men Walking* as the Black ancestors become their own character, functioning as a chorus in the play.

This alternative historicisation of Black rural experience in *Jerusalem* and *Black Men Walking* might be compared to Pollard's visual art produced three decades earlier, which inserted a Black presence into the terrain of the Romantic poets and eighteenth-century landscape artists. Kinsman notes that this manipulation of historical cultural narratives to make space for Black history was a relatively new technique at the time: he writes that

> What she [Pollard] offers is evidence of the presence of Britain's black population which presents them as fully formed, diverse and yet ordinary historical subjects, as a challenge to dominant, racist representations which have constructed black people as exotic, essentialised and dehistoricised objects of a white gaze […] this archaeology of black histories is a slow process, which has only just begun, but is a critical element in challenging dominant representations of black people.[54]

This idea that Black history enables Black people to be imagined as more than 'exotic, essentialised and dehistoricised objects of a white gaze' is of central importance to Testament's *Jerusalem* and *Black Men Walking*. Where I noted earlier in this chapter that the performances open a space where Black characters move from homogenised objects of the white gaze to speaking subjects with their own individual stories to tell, it is clear that the telling of their *histories* is also vital to the performances' political potential. In attesting to – and in the case of *Black Men Walking*, embodying – not only the contemporary but also the historical presence of Black people in rural landscapes, I suggest that these performances are able to bring about a deeper change to the way in which English rural life is imagined, represented, and staged.

In a review of *Pastoral Interlude*, Agyeman – who often worked closely with Pollard as part of the BEN – suggests that the Black figures in her photographs should not look alienated from the Lake District landscape when they were close to Aballava, a Roman Fort which was frequented by the Black Roman Emperor, Septimus Severus.[55] In this sense, he not only inserts Black figures into this loaded cultural landscape, he points to an *embedded* Black historical presence. Agyeman has long argued for the celebration of this deep historical precedent of Black people in rural landscapes: in 1997, he defined the importance of the Black rural historical narrative with Spooner, arguing that 'By reclaiming these histories [such as that of Septimus Severus], people of colour can develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in relation to the countryside'.[56] Baroness Lola Young – another key figure of the BEN and

[54] Kinsman, *Landscapes of National Non-Identity,* p.167.
[55] Agyeman, 'Black People in a White Landscape', p.232.
[56] Agyeman and Spooner, 'Ethnicity and the Rural Environment' in *Contested Countryside Cultures*: *Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, p.202.

now Chancellor of the University of Nottingham – also highlighted the value of this historical rural narrative:

> Finding a black person in an historical setting outside of images of slavery is still unusual. The long history of black people's presence in Britain is most frequently ignored in favour of a myth which says that black people first came here in the 1950s. The placing of a black man in a nineteenth century industrialised setting is just as unsettling as the image of the black person in the countryside: "they" don't "belong" in these contexts.[57]

Here, Young argues for the placing of Black people in historical contexts which reach further back than Windrush in the 1950s, a cultural moment which carries the mythological assumption that Black people had no significant presence in Britain before mid-way through the twentieth century.[58]

While the 1980s marked a moment in which the processes of archiving these Black histories were beginning to take hold across a range of cultural media, this impetus to record Black British history outside of the narratives of slavery remains just as urgent today. Indeed, Young's desire to show a long Black historical presence in Britain is central to Eclipse's Revolution Mix – of which *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* are both part. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, Revolution Mix is defined on Eclipse's website as a movement:

> The Black British story is more than just slavery, immigration and teenage gang crime. Revolution Mix is a movement: placing the Black narrative at the heart of British theatre. Revolution Mix are the Hidden Histories that exist in a landscape of more than 500 years of Black British History.[59]

Eclipse's emphasis on sharing stories that are more than 'slavery, immigration and teenage gang crime' chimes with Young's critique of the tendency to frame Black British history either through slavery or

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[57] Lola Young, 'Environmental images and imaginary landscapes', *soundings*, 1 (1995), 99 – 110, p.103.
[58] Young's wider work evidences such a commitment to historical narratives that stand outside of Windrush and slavery: she was a director of the BEN; has published on race and environmental concerns in her capacity as Professor of cultural studies; was project director of Archives and Museum of Black Heritage in 1997; received an OBE for her services to Black British History in 2001; became chair of Nitro Theatre Company in 2004 (formerly Black Theatre Co-Op and now NitroBEAT), who combine theatre, visual art, and music to find new ways to share Black experience; and was on the boards of organisations, including the National Theatre, the South Bank Centre, and English Heritage. She is also now the Chancellor of the University of Nottingham.
[59] Revolution Mix webpage, <https://eclipsetheatre.org.uk/revolution-mix> [date accessed: 28/11/2019].

Windrush.[60] Further, as also noted earlier in this chapter, the then Artistic Director of Eclipse, Dawn Walton defines Revolution Mix as a movement rather than a conversation about diversity, claiming that it is about 'doing not talking'.[61]

Walton's emphasis on action takes on a new meaning in the context of the resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the summer of 2020, which has energised efforts to tell, share, and teach a range of Black histories. One example of a project which seeks to share some of these 'hidden' Black histories – and one which has gained momentum from the #BlackLivesMatter movement – is the Colonial Countryside, a collaboration between researchers from the University of Leicester and the National Trust. The Colonial Countryside is a youth-led writing and history project which is centred on exploring the African, Caribbean, and Indian connections of eleven country houses in England that belong to the National Trust. While schoolchildren are the Colonial Countryside's target audience – the organisation runs writing workshops and visits to the country houses to educate young people on rural England's colonial past – its associate researchers published a report with the National Trust in September 2020, which directly addressed the colonial history of a number of National Trust properties.[62]

It is thus clear that the archaeology of Black rural histories that Kinsman identified as only just beginning in the early 1990s has now gained significant momentum. I want to return to Goddard's core argument of *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream* here to demonstrate the ways in which cultural engagement with Black rural history has perhaps moved more from the *margins*

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[60] Again, Eclipse use the British national qualifier in their terming of 'Black British history', as do Young and the Colonial Countryside. This points not only to an anxiety about discussing the idea of a Black Englishness, but also to a longer tradition in the discipline in which the terms 'British' and 'English' are national terms that are used interchangeably. Joe Jackson adopts a critical approach to the conflation of Britishness and Englishness in *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain*. See: Jackson, *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[61] Revolution Mix webpage, <https://eclipsetheatre.org.uk/revolution-mix> [date accessed: 28/11/2019].

[62] The release of the report was brought forward in order to participate in debates over England's colonial history which were circulating in the summer of 2020. A national conversation about English heritage followed the #BlackLivesMatter protest in Bristol on 7 June 2020 when protesters toppled the statue of Edward Colston, a merchant and philanthropist, who was also involved in the Atlantic slave trade. For the Colonial Countryside's full report, see: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust> [date accessed: 04/11/2020]. The publication of this report has also given rise to controversy, with the Common Sense Group (comprised of more than 50 Conservative MPs) criticising the National Trust for its 'woke' agenda. I argue that this criticism again points to a refusal to 'see' Black presence in English history, a concern which is at the centre of Testament's *Black Men Walking* and his podcast play, *Jerusalem.*

– being confined to the activity of BEN and specifically, Pollard, Agyeman, and Young in the 1980s and 1990s – to the *mainstream* in the late 2010s. Indeed, one of the main aims of the Colonial Countryside project is to make Black rural histories mainstream by integrating these histories into the curriculum. A similar pattern of mainstreaming might be evidenced in the theatre in that *Black Men Walking* is an 80-minute-long play which is centred on exploring the place – both present and historic – of Black people in rural landscapes. While Goddard noted that major London theatres – such as the Royal Court and the National – were showing an interest in Black work which represented contemporary urban life for second and third generation immigrants, I suggest that the *regional* focus of *Black Men Walking* and *White Open Spaces* evidences a new direction: the impetus to share Black English stories that lie outside of the city.

This regional focus is integral to the archiving of Black history in Testament's *Jerusalem* and *Black Men Walking* and the stories told in each performance feed off these grounded, localised knowledges. A parallel might be drawn here between Testament's *Jerusalem* (and *Black Men Walking*) and Butterworth's play of the same name for the ways in which they each use placed histories and mythologies in order to legitimate the place of their protagonists in the rural landscapes in which they are set. The synonymy between Rooster and the land is a theme which runs throughout Butterworth's play, with the implication being that Rooster's imminent eviction from the wood clearing by the Kennet and Avon council also constitutes an assault on the earth. Rooster is characterised as being of the wood and of the land surrounding it: he describes his arrival in the clearing in fatalistic terms, noting that his mobile home is now embedded in a spot which is veined with ley lines. He also claims to be a character of mythical proportions, often talking about his famous Romany blood and interactions with giants by the Little Chef on the A14. As it becomes clear that the play is one of oppositions: logos/mythos, new/old, urban/rural, progress/tradition, Rooster embodies the latter of these binaries, standing for an old, mythic England as he clings to his 'rightful' spot in the earth. Of course, where Butterworth draws on white mythologies in rural Wiltshire, Testament reveals the Black history that is hidden in the

Yorkshire landscape.[63] As I will now detail, the histories that Testament draws on are located within – or indeed, close proximity to – the terrain that the men walk, which I argue further legitimates the presence of his Black protagonists in this particular rural landscape.

As its title suggests, Testament's *Jerusalem* is an exploration of the hymn of the same name; one which has come to stand as England's unofficial national anthem. As noted in Chapter Two on the rural and nation, the hymn can be read in Nora's terms as an 'immaterial *lieu de mémoire*' for the way that it is used to mobilise an idea of a green, idyllic England – of gentle hills, Morris dancing, and May Day parades. The cultural freight of the hymn and its centrality to narratives of the English nation was captured in the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games, where it was performed acapella by the schoolchildren who represented England among the four nations of the UK. The iconic words of England's 'green and pleasant land' have guided cultural representations of rurality for centuries, as artists either yield to this idyllic representation or deliberately deviate from it. Even today, rural films, novels, plays, and the reviewer discourse that surrounds them all tend to riff on this line for the way in which those four words alone conjure up a dominant way of seeing and reading the English rural landscape. For example, Ayisha Malik took the line for the title of her 2019 novel, *This Green and Pleasant Land*, which details the events that unfold when a Muslim man builds a mosque in a quiet village in rural England, as does Corinne Fowler, who uses the phrase in her forthcoming edited collection, a direct output from the Colonial Countryside project, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections*.[64] In the arena of theatre and performance, countless reviews of *Jerusalem* noted how Butterworth punctured this pastoral myth; and as I outlined in Chapter One, the play has since become a reference point for rural theatre. As noted earlier in this chapter, the hymn is also threaded through the *White Open Spaces* series: the protagonist in *You Say* ironically describes the rural setting of her retreat as a 'green and pleasant land', which is in fact rampant

[63] The Anglo-Saxon and Viking mythologies that Butterworth uses to structure Rooster's final speech have been mobilised by far-right organisations – such as the English Defence League – in the context of the fascist blood and soil discourse described earlier in this chapter. The way in which Butterworth draws on these figures unproblematically to validate Rooster's place in the English soil might thus require a note of caution.
[64] See: Ayisha Malik, *This Green and Pleasant Land* (London: Zaffre, 2019); Corinne Fowler (ed.), *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, forthcoming).

with xenophobia; Joy in *Joy's Prayer* opens the podcast with a recital of the hymn; and of course Testament's *Jerusalem* takes it as both title and central theme.

Testament's *Jerusalem* is centred on a meeting between the Black male protagonist and a middle-aged, white woman and her husband on the North Yorkshire Moors. When the protagonist engages in conversation with this woman, it becomes clear that she frames her anti-immigration narrative through the lens of economics and culture, expressing a covert racism. She declares 'England isn't English anymore, there's no ignoring it' – a claim which the protagonist argues shows she was 'wishing for some long time ago when white English was dominant, pledging allegiance to St George, God, and King, cod and chips, jam scones and *Last Night at the Proms* they sing Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem in this "green and pleasant land"'.[65] Testament then deconstructs the hymn, arguing that the radical, counter-hegemonic drive of Blake's original verse has since been lost since it was used by the Victorians to capture national virtues at the height of British imperialism.

Claiming that the hymn now often stands for the 'monolith, monoculture myth' of a white rural England, the protagonist begins to question the woman's definition of 'England being English' in the past.[66] It is here that Testament draws on historical records which place Black people in the Yorkshire landscape in which the podcast is set. As described earlier, he refers to Septimus Severus, the Black Roman emperor who lived in York; John Blanke, a Black trumpeter who travelled as a royal attendant in Henry VIII's and Catherine of Aragon's court in the sixteenth century; and John Moore, a Black man who was a Freeman of York in the 1600s. The protagonist then connects these historical figures through the podcast's setting near Wade's Causeway, an ancient linear monument where he claims that 'we walk on roads [that have been] scorched out by ancestors whose faces didn't look white'.[67] Here, Testament points out that there has been a Black presence on this ancient moorland since the Romans, which undermines the woman's impassioned appeal to a white rural past. In this sense, then, Testament's short podcast clearly undertakes some of the excavatory and revelatory work that is at the core of Eclipse's Revolution Mix movement: in Walton's terms, he reveals some of the 'hidden stories'

[65] Testament, *Jerusalem*, (01:01 – 01:21).
[66] Testament, *Jerusalem*, (04:01 – 04:03).
[67] Testament, *Jerusalem*, (06:09 – 06.15).

of this Yorkshire landscape. However, it is important to note here that these histories are not *marginal*, he cites high-profile historical figures, including a Roman emperor and a royal attendant of Henry VIII's court. Testament thus highlights the way in which this knowledge should be *mainstream*: detailing the presence of these Black historical figures, the protagonist uses the rhetorical question 'surely miss, check your history, perhaps you're short a bit?'[68] Using the words of the Colonial Countryside project, who aim to tell history 'without gaps', it is clear that Testament's protagonist draws attention to these gaps in mainstream knowledge, rightly asserting the significance of these Black figures to Roman, Medieval, and Early Modern histories in Yorkshire.

Black rural history is even more central to *Black Men Walking*: the primary function of the Ancestors, a choric body, is to share information about the Black historical figures who have traversed the landscape in which the play is set. While the Ancestors are their own collective character, the actors who play Thomas, Matthew, and Richard double roles to form this Black chorus in the production. The interludes with the Ancestors constitute dream-like sequences in the play, marking them apart from the main plot: this distinction between roles is made clear as the dialogue between the men breaks into a rhythmic spoken word style as the actors begin to make a beat with their bodies. While the men take the lines of the Ancestors, the actor who plays Ayeesha also doubles as an ethereal presence, alluding to the elusive fourth-century 'bangled princess' who Thomas claims that he is trying to connect with throughout the play.

The importance of the Ancestors is defined in the first scene where we meet this nameless woman before the men enter chanting 'We Walk'. Although not indicated in the script, the young woman – who later plays Ayeesha – is the first person that we see as she poses behind the gauze on the otherwise scant set, her outline ethereal. The play thus opens with a sense of intrigue: the woman's presence is fleeting; she is an exoticised figure, elegantly poised in silence behind the screen, before disappearing at the sound of the men arriving. The three male actors – who later become Thomas, Matthew, and Richard – enter chanting in their role as the Ancestors, laying their claim to the land and their historic presence in this landscape: 'we walk out our identity, we walk for sanctuary, we walk to

[68] Testament, *Jerusalem*, (01:32 – 01:34).

claim this land, we walk OUR land' (p.1). While the woman's role at the opening of the play is initially ambiguous, the Ancestors' aims are clearly outlined in their chant as they come on to the stage: they assert that the act of walking the land is inextricably connected to their ownership of it.

From the play's outset, Testament therefore makes clear Thomas' interest in what Eclipse term 'hidden histories' and the opening scene closes with him being drawn out of the house by the call of the Ancestors: he exclaims 'And now, I can hear them. All of them. Calling for me. And I'm out the door' (p.6). Thomas is distracted for the remainder of the play: he is incoherent, blind to the weather closing in, and becomes increasingly isolated from Matthew and Richard as he claims to be following the calls of his Ancestors. However, contrary to Matthew's view that Thomas is unwell, the audience follow Thomas and like him, they see the Ancestors and hear their calls.

As their name suggests, the Ancestors' primary function in the play is to share stories of Black historical figures who have traversed this rural landscape. While these figures are discussed in turn at various points in the play, references to each of them are embedded in the first scene where the Ancestors chant 'Faaanfare! The declaration, the keyholders, guildsmen, merchants, emperors, we are the past, we are the future' (p.1). Audiences learn through Thomas in the first main scene that the refrain of the fanfare in the Ancestors' chorus refers to the Black trumpeter John Blanke, who was also referenced in *Jerusalem*. Thomas comes to be the link between the Ancestors and the main plot: he later encourages Matthew to use historical evidence as a tool to educate the prejudiced patients in the doctor's surgery – just as Testament's protagonist did in *Jerusalem* – claiming 'you should've told him there are Africans buried in Barnsley from Roman times, 2000 years ago! Africans! […] hey, we'll be coming up to the Roman road after the Rocks' (p.22). Here, Thomas references the archaeological discovery in Barnsley in 2013 where skeletons originating from North Africa and evidence of mummification techniques (gypsum plaster casts) were found in Pollington, a rural village in the East Riding of Yorkshire. This reference to the ancient presence of Black people in rural Yorkshire begins to define the Ancestors, who come to stand for all of the Black historical figures in the region.

While this dialogue between Thomas and the Ancestors continues throughout the play, it is the Ancestors who share the remainder of these Black rural histories in their rhythmic interludes. In the third interlude, they cite John Moore, who – as already discussed in relation to Testament's *Jerusalem*

– was made a Freeman of York in 1687. The Ancestors detail his prosperity as a merchant and with reference to his wealth that enabled him to be a keyholder, they repeat the refrain 'Freedom. Keys in our hands' (p.28). At the beginning of the fifth main scene, Thomas then slips between his roles as one of the Ancestors and the protagonist as he responds to the Ancestors' above chant about Moore, declaring 'I've still got the keys in my hand' (p.28). This integration of Thomas into the collective character of the Ancestors becomes clearer in the fourth interlude where Testament indicates in his stage directions that the '*The Ancestors speak. Sometimes Thomas joins them*' (p.34). Together they then share the story of the famous Black circus proprietor and equestrian performer, Pablo Fanque – formerly known as William Darby – who travelled around the country but performed mostly in Yorkshire and Lancashire until his death in 1871.

After the men stumble across Ayeesha who is alone on a rock, seemingly unaware of the severity of the conditions in this remote landscape, the Ancestors reference their final historical figure in their fifth interlude: a fourth-century princess lying 'adorned, arms interlaced with bracelets of two materials of ivory from the African elephant and of Jet gemstone from the Whitby Yorkshire coast' (p.67). This parallel between Ayeesha and the fourth-century princess is by no means accidental: where Ayeesha ends up as the only woman in this walking group created solely for men, the fourth-century princess is a counterpoint to the male-dominated historical narratives that are threaded throughout the play. While Ayeesha comes into the narrative to challenge Thomas, Matthew, and Richard on their politics and their activism by highlighting the ways in which their age, gender, and class position them as privileged in relation to her, the reference to the princess also makes clear the androcentric focus of the Black historical figures listed in the play. There is also a duality to this princess: she wears bracelets made up of ivory from the African elephant and Whitby jet, symbolising both her African descent and her place in Yorkshire. The princess is thus both African and settled in Yorkshire, highlighting the doubleness that defines DuBois' 'double consciousness'. Yet as Ayeesha points out to Thomas, Matthew and Richard earlier in the play, this might be complicated and considered a 'triple consciousness' for women as she reveals three overlapping racial, regional, and gendered identities. Just as Ayeesha prompts the three men to recognise the masculinist drive of their politics, then, the Ancestors' reference to the princess asks the audience to reflect on the gender of the historical figures

that they hear about as they bring this ancient Black woman to the centre of the narrative at the close of the play.

While the role of the Ancestors might at first seem to be to simply open the play and to provide mythical, lyrical interludes to the otherwise prosaic conversations between the three men (and later Ayeesha), the histories that they share are much more than a subtext to the main narrative. The sharing of these histories constitutes the only moments where these men from different backgrounds and with different concerns speak together, transformed into unison. As the play progresses, the links between Thomas, Ayeesha, and the Ancestors become more apparent, renewing the connections between the ancient and contemporary users of the Yorkshire landscape in which the play is set. This coming together of race and region, past and present, and male and female perspectives is emphasised in the play's final scene where all of the actors chant together to the Ancestors' final verse, united. While I would argue that the neatness of the play's ending seems to oversimplify the complexity of the gendered and generational critique that Ayeesha presents to the men, this final verse turns away from the past and looks to the future. We learn that Matthew's family life has settled, Richard returned to Ghana for his father's funeral, and Thomas left his job to found Sankofa Saturday School, which is focused on revealing in Eclipse's terms the 'hidden histories' for Black communities in rural England: the Ancestors note that the students' minds explode when 'they learn of fanfares, top hats, keyholders, bangled ladies, a great multitude in God's own country' (p.79). This reaching out to the present moment is highlighted in the play's direct appeal to its audience when the chorus exclaim that they walk in the footsteps of 'the carer, the student, the teachers, the person in the chicken shop, everyone in the place tonight! That person next to you!' (p.79). The Ancestors thus address the audience in the building – here and now – and in this open-ended appeal, ask us to take away the importance of learning and sharing these Black rural histories as we leave the theatre.

Conclusion

Through centring the representation of Black experience in their rural settings, *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* aim to change the way in which audiences imagine rural England. Both performances challenge the idea of a mono-ethnic rural imaginary – so often reproduced in cultural

discourse – by addressing the politics of belonging for Black people in the rural landscapes in which they are set. Crucially, as performance pieces, *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* go beyond merely representing Black people as objects in these rural landscapes: they open up discursive spaces in which their Black characters can literally talk back to the white gaze and explore their place in the countryside. This is also a question of embodiment in *Black Men Walking*, with the Black bodies on stage performing these stories in regional theatres across the UK.

As the first projects to come out of Eclipse's Revolution Mix, both performances meet the movement's main aims: they imagine contemporary Black experience outside of the city, but also represent Black history 'outside of slavery, Windrush, and teenage gang crime'. Yet *Black Men Walking* and *White Open Spaces* mobilise these Black rural histories in different ways. In *White Open Spaces,* the protagonist in *Jerusalem* initially drew on these histories as ammunition in an argument with the walker he met who made essentialist claims to England's historic whiteness.[69] In contrast, *Black Men Walking* makes the embodiment of Black rural history central: it is core to the play's themes of belonging and access to rural landscapes, but also to its dramaturgical structure as the Ancestors act as a collective character that hold the narrative together. In Goddard's terms, it could be argued that Black rural history has moved from the *margins* – as ammunition in an argument – to the mainstream; *Black Men Walking* is a play that is dedicated to exploring these 'hidden histories' and seeks to make them central.

While contemporary Black playwrights tend to locate their work in urban environments and plays that represent the rural tend to have majority white casts, these two projects unsettle this binary that distinguishes between a white rural and Black urban. In their dual focus on Blackness and rurality, then, I suggest that *Black Men Walking* and *White Open Spaces* break new ground in contemporary theatre and performance. Both performances take Eclipse's main aim which is to make theatre about and for regional Black communities: they discuss specific regional identities and place-specific histories

[69] This mobilisation of Black British history to educate a racist character is also seen in Roy Williams' *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (Dorfman, The National, 2002; Chichester Festival Theatre, 2019) when Mark – a Black British ex-soldier – confronts Alan, who takes the stance of the 'educated' racist. Alan cites Enoch Powell and draws on precisely the same discourse of an ethnic English identity which was discussed in relation to *The Field* and *This England* magazines earlier in this chapter.

in their productions, but were also accessible to all of England's regions, with *White Open Spaces* being free to download anywhere and *Black Men Walking* touring to a range of regional theatres in 2018 and 2019. In doing so, these projects – as part of Eclipse's Revolution Mix movement – push the boundaries of how theatre and performance can tell both Black *and* rural stories together, offering important interventions into how we stage the rural, race, and region today.

Conclusion

Writing this conclusion in January 2021 – almost a year into the global COVID-19 pandemic – it is clear that questions of spatiality, place, and belonging, which have been central to this thesis, are circulating with a renewed sense of urgency. England is part way through its third national lockdown, as are many other countries in Europe and across the globe.[1] We have thus been confined to our homes and rooted to our local environments in a way that we never have been before, prompting a reflection, in Kingsnorth's terms, on our own 'sense of place and what constitutes it'.[2] At the same time, given that this is a thesis on theatre, it is also difficult to ignore the effect of the pandemic on live performance. While it is still too early to determine the full implications of COVID-19 on the theatre industry, months of shutdowns have already resulted in mass redundancies, the dissolving of theatre companies, and theatre closures. If social distancing will continue to be the 'new normal' for some time to come, it is difficult to think about what this might mean for theatre and performance as place-making cultural forms, which are built on experiences of liveness, intimacy, and togetherness. Beyond this bleak projection, I suggest that 2020 has not only asked us to think more deeply about our relationship with our homes and immediate surroundings: it has also brought two of the core themes which run through this thesis – ruralism and Englishness – into sharp focus.

First, the pandemic has altered – and in most cases, strengthened – our relationship with the rural and the natural world. As social distancing measures have largely limited face-to-face meetings to outdoor settings, rural landscapes have become vital spaces for social contact. This has resulted in a significant increase in footfall to rural areas: for example, the Peak District National Park reported a third more visitors in July 2020 compared to July 2019, while back in March, Snowdonia National Park in Wales reported their 'busiest weekend in living memory'.[3] Although this increase in visitor numbers

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[1] I am writing from a UK context and specifically, in relation to the set of regulations that were put into place in England.
[2] Kingsnorth, *Real England: Battle Against the Bland*, p.106.
[3] See: 'Record numbers of people enjoying National Park 'multi-user' trails following lockdown', Peak District National Park webpage, <https://www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/learning-about/news/current-news/record-numbers-of-people-enjoying-national-park-multi-user-trails-following-lockdown> [date accessed: 16/11/2020]; Emyr Williams quoted in Joe Robinson, 'Snowdonia experiences busiest weekend "in living memory" despite concerns', *The North Wales Chronicle*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.northwaleschronicle.co.uk/news/18325126.coronavirus-snowdonia-experiences-busiest-visitor-day-living-memory-despite-concerns/> [date accessed: 16/11/2020].

is certainly a positive, indicating that more people are enjoying and appreciating rural spaces, it has also brought a set of challenges. These include littering, forest fires, and damage to livestock, making clear a lack of understanding and care for rural landscapes and the communities and animals that inhabit them. Another key concern which has come out of this increased use of rural landscapes is related to questions of access and inclusion – questions which I discussed in detail in Chapter Five on race and rurality. In June 2020, BBC's *Countryfile* drew attention to the way in which the pandemic has accentuated access issues and directly addressed the ways in which people of colour might feel excluded from rural landscapes. This episode drew on the 2019 DEFRA commissioned report, 'Landscapes Review', which stated that 'the countryside is seen by both black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and white people as very much a 'white' environment'.[4] Social class is also intricately bound in these concerns: for many inner-city communities, rural landscapes are only accessible via car. The pandemic has thus highlighted questions of access and inclusion which have run through this thesis: how are rural landscapes being used at this time, who are they used by, and who may not have access to these landscapes at all? And of course, vitally, what part can theatrical representations of those landscapes – and the lives lived within them – contribute to those debates?

Second, the pandemic has also thrown the English question – which has been threaded throughout this thesis – into sharp relief. While I have argued that Brexit is a political event which placed more pressure on the already weakened union, COVID-19 has further compounded the tensions between the four nations in the UK and the three nations within Britain. As noted at the outset of this thesis, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland made use of their devolved powers to enact different national responses to the pandemic, with each taking varied approaches. This has led to the sense that the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, is governing the English alone, prompting many political commentators to highlight that COVID-19 has exposed the divisions within Britain and the UK.[5] Suzanne Moore drew on Nairn's loaded terms in the title to her article in *The Guardian* where she

[4] DEFRA, 'Landscapes Review', <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf> [date accessed: 16/11/2020].

[5] It is important to note that such differences have also played out *within* England, with the inequalities between the North and South being starkly revealed in the English government's tiered system, which initially placed areas in the North of England under more stringent lockdown measures without providing sufficient financial support.

claimed that 'Instead of Uniting Us, Boris Johnson is Presiding over the Break-Up of Britain' – a claim which may be validated if the Scottish National Party hold a second referendum on Scottish Independence as reportedly aimed for in 2021.[6] It is therefore clear that the pandemic has made the political context of this study all the more pertinent, inviting further urgent critical reflection on England's position within Britain and the UK as a whole. This is work that this thesis has already begun: by taking the representation of rural England as my central critical focus, I have examined the ways in which English theatre is staging and critiquing relationships between place, politics, and nation.

Thesis Overview

In this thesis, I have documented and explored the development of a rural tradition in contemporary English theatre and performance, highlighting that these theatrical representations of rural England are rich, varied, and always political. In each chapter, I have examined a different rural imaginary that has been depicted on stage – the country house, pre-industrial rural environments, farms, and recreational rural landscapes – each of which draw on different cultural histories and traditions through which the rural has been represented in England's wider cultural imagination. Questions of nation, social class, and race are imbricated in these rural histories and traditions, and, as I have shown, these varied readings of the rural are contested politically, moving across both left and right of the political spectrum.

In Chapter One, I made the case that despite the apparent richness of this rural seam in contemporary theatre and performance, there has been little to no critical interest in the English rural in contemporary theatre studies. Indeed, I demonstrated that while significant scholarship has coalesced around the rural in Irish, Scottish, and Welsh theatrical contexts, there has thus far been little in the way of an English equivalent. What scholarship has turned to rural England – seen most prominently in studies of site-specific, amateur, and community theatre – has centred on questions of site rather than representation, which is my focus here. The remainder of this thesis examined a range of rural plays which premiered on London, regional, and rural stages across England through four thematic lenses:

[6] Suzanne Moore, 'Instead of Uniting Us, Boris Johnson is Presiding over the Break-Up of Britain', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/23/boris-johnson-breakup-britain-prime-minister-covid-england> [date accessed: 17/11/2020].

rurality and nation, the use of the pre-industrial rural past, farming, and race and ruralism. While these lenses attest to the breadth of English rural imaginaries, the range of performance sites which these plays were performed in also captures an engagement with the rural across the whole of England's theatre ecology.

Chapter Two and Chapter Three examined the representation of the rural past, or, in Williams' terms, 'Old England'. While Chapter Two approached the English country garden in Bartlett's *Albion* through the lenses of nostalgia and 'Deep England', Chapter Three developed this reading of rural temporality, addressing the ways in which past, pre-industrial socio-economic formations are used to present political effect in Crowe's *The Sewing Group* and Moore's *Common*. Chapters Four and Five then moved away from this focus on the rural past through discussing plays which stage contemporary rural England as a lived and worked landscape. While Chapter Four explored the changing nature of agricultural work in *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars*, Chapter Five developed these themes of access and ownership further, examining the politics of belonging for Black people in the rural landscapes depicted in *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking*.

In the introduction, I identified that the two primary objectives of this study were to a) track the ways in which socio-political events have shaped thematic representations of the rural on the English stage, and b) explore the ways in which such theatrical representations might be able to change audiences' understandings of the rural. Each chapter has responded to this first aim, drawing connections between the theatrical representation of the rural which is offered to the audience and the social, cultural, and political context in which it was produced. Chapter Two examined the representation of the English country garden in *Albion* through two events that contributed to the national debates circulating at the time of the play's premiere: the First World War Centenary (2014 – 2018) and the Brexit vote in 2016. Chapter Three then developed this reading of the discursive use of a specifically English rural past in the aftermath of the Brexit vote which made the tensions between the four nations in the UK increasingly pronounced. Looking back to the early twenty-first century, Chapter Four highlighted the ways in which *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* were shaped by a number of events which pushed agricultural England to the centre of political discourse, including

the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001. Finally, Chapter Five drew on debates on race, inclusion, and access to rural spaces that have been circulating since the 1980s in order to contextualise *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking*. In my analysis of these projects, I pointed to the work of Agyeman, Young, and Pollard as members of the Black Environment Network in the 1980s, but also to the current #BlackLivesMatter movement, which has renewed discussions on the politics of belonging for Black people in rural spaces.

As for the second objective, each thematic chapter explored the ways in which these plays might expand – and potentially change – wider understandings of the rural. Each chapter considers how the chosen plays present a different challenge to their audiences: Chapter Two discusses the ways in which *Albion* deconstructs the idea of 'Deep England'; Chapter Three invites reflection on the specifically English pre-industrial rural pasts depicted in *The Sewing Group* and *Common*; Chapter Four highlights the ways in which *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Come the Nightjars* detail the changing nature of rural work at the start of the new millennium; and Chapter Five proposes that *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* have the potential to change the perceived whiteness of the rural by placing Black people both centre-stage and at the centre of the rural landscapes that they represent. However, while each thematic chapter offers a different reading of the rural on the contemporary English stage, it is also important to note that these individual readings work *together* to change broader understandings of rurality. As such, I have identified three key ways in which the plays and performances in this thesis work together to potentially *change* understandings of the rural.

First, my discussion of these plays shows that the English rural is not just one spatial imaginary. As I note above, this thesis has examined the theatrical representation of the English country garden, common land, farms, parkland, and other open spaces, including National Parks. This range emphasises that there is not just one English rural, there are many, and each of these different spaces encode different communities and practices – and come with their own histories of cultural representation both within and beyond the theatre. These fundamental differences determine the ways in which the characters use the rural spaces in which the plays are set. For example, such a contrast is clearly marked in a comparison between Audrey, Bartlett's protagonist, who has the means to buy her way into – and

out of – the Oxfordshire village in *Albion* and Vic and Rose in *The Farm*, who are tied to their land on which they live and work by both history and economics. At the same time, while the farmers in *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* are represented as being *of* the landscape, despite seeming to be stuck there, the place of the Black protagonists in the rural settings of *White Open Spaces* is repeatedly called into question by the white characters who feature in the background of these podcast plays.

Second, the plays and performances that I have explored here not only offer different spaces to their audiences, they also stage different times. Although my analysis has predominantly been concerned with rural spatiality, questions of temporality have also been at the core of each chapter. As I outlined in Chapter One, the rural is a place which is often viewed in past temporal terms. Going back to Williams' observation that it is a place 'to which we are confidently returned', this discursive utility of the rural in clearly articulated in each chapter: through the lens of nostalgia in Chapter Two, the idea of the twenty-first century history play in Chapter Three, radical nostalgia in Chapter Four, and the ways in which the playwrights and theatre-makers of *White Open Spaces* and *Black Men Walking* mobilise Black rural histories to validate contemporary Black presence in Chapter Five. What is clear in all of these cases is that these temporal movements are more complicated than the act of turning to some kind of stable rural past: these pasts, or in Williams' terms, these 'apparent resting places', these 'Old Englands' were always moving, too. While the rural imaginaries examined in this thesis – including the English country garden, pre-industrial common land, and farms – might appear stable in England's cultural imagination, these plays make clear that these rural places were never 'resting'. Several of these plays disrupt the idea of a settled, rooted English rural: for example, *Albion* details the ways in which the very existence of the English country house and gardens has long been contested, *Common* exposes the seismic change that the processes of enclosure dealt to England's rural communities, and *Harvest* demonstrates the number of ways in which the small family farm has had to adapt to survive across its one-hundred-year time span.

Finally, while my analysis has been led by the representation – and specifically, the type of rural imaginary that is staged – one dimension of this study has been the awareness that these plays and

performances make use of a range of theatrical forms. Although the dominant mode for representing rural experience might be kitchen-sink realism – seen in *The Farm*, *Harvest*, and *And Then Come the Nightjars* in Chapter Four, but also in Barney Norris' *Nightfall* (Bridge Theatre, 2018), Matt Hartley's *Here I Belong* (Pentabus rural tour, 2016 and 2018), and Peter Gill's *The York Realist* (The Lowry, Manchester, 2001; Donmar Warehouse, 2012) – I have identified a lively engagement with a range of other theatrical forms that playwrights and theatre-makers have used to stage rural place and tell rural stories. These include the Chekhovian tragic comedy in *Albion*; rural history plays in *The Sewing Group* and *Common* (in addition to Lucy Kirkwood's *The Welkin* (Lyttleton: The National, 2020)); podcasts in *White Open Spaces* (but also in recent work produced by rural touring companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, including Pentabus' *Come to Where I Am: Rural* (streamed online, 2020) and New Perspectives' *Place Prints* (streamed online, 2020), and the blended form of *Black Men Walking* which combines social realism with lyrical interludes of rap and beat boxing (a similar blended form is also seen in Hattie Taylor's *As the Crow Flies* (Pentabus rural tour, 2017) and Robert Alan Evans' *The Tale of Little Bevan* (Pentabus rural tour, 2019), which both incorporate live music into their productions). It is thus evident that playwrights and theatre-makers are finding new ways of staging rural narratives, making clear the formal innovation at the core of this work.

Alternative Approaches and Future Directions

Given the range of contemporary rural plays available, this project could have been approached in several different ways. First, the thematic readings that I have chosen in this thesis – rural and nation, pre-industrial rurality, farm work, and race and rurality – are only four of a number of other themes that I could have discussed here. There are at least three other readings of the rural that I have identified but simply did not have the space to include in this thesis: the rural eerie (Jez Butterworth's *The Night Heron* (Royal Court Theatre, 2002) and New Perspectives' adaptation of M.R. James' *Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You* (New Perspectives rural tour, 2016); rural dystopia (Beth Steel's *Ditch* (Old Vic Tunnels, 2010); Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* (The Cut, Halesworth, 2013); Dawn King's *FoxFinder* (Ambassadors, 2018); Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (Royal Court Theatre, 2016) David Rudkin's

Afore Night Come (RSC, 1963; Young Vic, 2014)); and finally, plays that are centred on rural communities (Norris' *Visitors* (Arcola Theatre, 2014); Hartley's *Here I Belong* (national rural tour with Pentabus Theatre, 2016 – 2018); Stewart Pringle's *Trestle* (Southwark Playhouse, 2017)). My selection of the four chosen lenses is due to a number of reasons. First, the eerie is a dominant reading of the rural which has already received considerable critical attention in cultural studies more broadly.[7] Second, the dystopic reading of the rural itself contains multiple variations which would each potentially warrant a chapter in their own right: for example, there is clear evidence of a specifically environmental dystopia in Kirkwood's *The Children* and Steel's *Ditch*, but also in Ella Hickson's *Oil* (Almeida, 2016). Such a focus on the politics of the rural as a site of environmental damage chimes with the burgeoning interest in resource fictions across literary studies and the wider humanities – a reading that requires more space and one that I intend to develop in future work.[8] And finally, I have already begun to explore rural community plays elsewhere: for example, in 'Small Stories, Local Places: A Place-Oriented Approach to Rural Crises', I proposed the ways in which plays about the rural local exercise a soft political power, using Pentabus' rural-touring production of Hartley's *Here I Belong* (2016 and 2018) as my primary case study.

A different, alternative approach to this project might have been an examination of the rural as a site of performance. While I have explored plays that have toured across England to a range of rural locations (*The Farm* (Strode Theatre Company, 2001); *Harvest* (New Perspectives Theatre Company, 2017); *And Then Come the Nightjars* (Theatre503 and Bristol Old Vic Theatre, 2016; Perth Theatre, 2017)), questions of rural representation on stage have been my central focus here. As I noted in Chapter One, existing studies on the rural tend to be centred on site, place, and community. While there has been considerable work undertaken on performances in the rural in Scotland and Wales – particularly in the

[7] In cultural studies, Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* has shaped many critical approaches to the rural eerie and Rob Macfarlane's article in *The Guardian*, 'The Eeriness of the English Countryside', has also proved influential. See: Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2016) and Macfarlane, 'The Eeriness of the English Countryside', *The Guardian*, 10 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane> [date accessed: 30/07/2020].

[8] For example, *Fueling Culture* is a recent interdisciplinary collection which introduces 101 words to contextualise discussions of energy and resources in studies across the humanities. See: Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (eds.), *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

context of Scottish rural touring company, 7:84 and Welsh theatre company, Brith Gof – there is little critical interest in English rural touring theatre. The rich histories of England's oldest rural touring companies – Eastern Angles, Mikron Theatre, New Perspectives, and Pentabus – are yet to be written, offering a clear line of inquiry for future research.

Future research might thus take up the questions of performance site outlined above, providing insights into the production histories and current repertoires of English rural touring companies. In addition to documenting the place-making and community-building structures of rural touring, I would also add here that the plays performed on these circuits are also worthy of critical attention. In terms of rural representations, then, it is my hope that rural plays will begin to feature in wider studies of contemporary theatre. One of the primary aims of this thesis has been to illustrate that there are many more rural plays than Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem,* and that these plays can provide new ways of reading the rural on the English stage. The representations discussed here are only a sample of the many ways in which the English rural has been staged in recent years and it is my contention that new thematic readings will continue to emerge. As I identify above, one reading that carries a particularly topical political charge is that of the environmental dystopia – seen, for example, in *Ditch* and *Oil* – which presents rural land as an exploited, and, crucially, finite resource.

Moving beyond the rural, this thesis has also begun to address wider questions of England and Englishness through its national framing. The focus of this thesis on the *English* rural responds to the current need for national specificity when distinguishing between the Scottish, Welsh, and English contexts, which, as I have already noted, are very different landscapes that are used differently in their respective national imaginations. However, the bounded focus on English theatre is also alert to the distinctions between Scottish, Welsh, and English theatre, which each draw on the rural in different ways. While the Scottish and Welsh rurals have been mobilised as a marker of cultural difference from Britain in Scottish and Welsh theatre – perhaps best captured by 7:84's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black Black Oil* – the English rural remains indicative of England's position as the centre of Britain. This thesis has examined the ways in which the idea of the English rural embodies many of the key contemporary anxieties about Englishness: it bears the imprint of Britain's colonial history, and rural

iconographies have long been mobilised by the far right to articulate blood and soil narratives of racial purity. Future work might continue to explore the ways in which English theatre and performance are responding to English national questions. Nadine Holdsworth's *English Theatre and Social Abjection: A Divided Nation* adopts a similarly bounded national framing to this project and highlights a number of key issues that fracture the English nation through the lens of social abjection, including the North/South divide, riots, the depiction of travellers, and debates surrounding race, nation, and belonging.[9] I aim to directly address the politics of Englishness in my proposed postdoctoral project, 'This is England: Class, Race, and the English Nation in Contemporary Theatre and Performance' which will develop the critical approach to England set out in this thesis and explore the ways in which theatre and performance are staging English questions through a number of thematic lenses, including working-class masculinity, England's colonial history, and sport, as well as ruralism.

My overarching objective in this thesis was to afford plays and performances that take the rural as their setting and theme a central critical focus, with the aim of beginning to recalibrate the urban orientation of contemporary theatre studies. As I have shown, theatre and performance are actively engaging with rural concerns on a range of stages, but this work has received little critical attention to date. This thesis has thus called for researchers to look beyond the city as a site of representation, highlighting the complexity of the rural places and communities that are depicted on the contemporary English stage. Drawing on a range of material from cultural geography, cultural history, and rural studies in my approach to these plays, I have made the case that theatrical representations of the rural are steeped in a much wider cultural and political history, awaiting further scholarly exploration. It is my hope that studies of rural representations will begin to emerge alongside those other spatialities that are already well-researched in contemporary theatre, including the metropolis, the street, the housing estate, non-places, and placelessness. Yet the thematic structure taken here emphasises that the English rural is not a homogenous spatiality that is simply 'non-urban'. Indeed, there are many kinds of rurals to examine and the 'English rural' is a term that should be used plurally to capture different landscapes,

[9] Nadine Holdsworth, *English Theatre and Social Abjection: A Divided Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

different ways of living, and different lives. The rural – as both a thematic and performative space – offers fertile lines of inquiry for future research. This study has only captured a portion of its richness and there is certainly plenty left to harvest.

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Declaration of Published Work

Brief extracts of my Introduction and Chapter One are published in Edwards, 'Small Stories, Local Places: A Place-Oriented Approach to Rural Crises', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 8:1 (2020), 65 – 82. There, I highlight the same issue of political representation for rural communities in England and identify the 'rural turns' in contemporary theatre that I describe in the introduction to this thesis.