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A Common Countryside: Rewriting the English Rural in *Common People*

Katherine Greenwood

Abstract

Fifty years after the publication of Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*, this article considers Williams's legacy in contemporary stories of class and the countryside by Adelle Stripe and Anita Sethi in *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers* and beyond. These stories together address the under-representation of the rural and the urban working classes in literature today, revealing the continued relevance of Williams's account of a countryside 'scribbled over' by a certain form of metropolitan nostalgia, while allowing us to extend his analysis of the 'middle-class rural convention' to an account which entwines the politics of place, race, gender and class. Williams's central argument about the interconnection of country and city is also examined in relation to the concept of the 'edgeland', the places and spaces between country and city which are an expanding feature of contemporary geography and have a particular resonance in relation to writing by marginalised groups in society.

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The contemporary story of the English countryside might be said to begin in the early 1970s, which saw a new environmental activism following the founding of Friends of the Earth in 1971 and the publication of two books in 1973 that marked a turning point in our understanding of landscape, rethinking the rural, the urban, and their interrelation. Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* sought to dismantle a long-standing imaginative contrast between urban and rural in culture and society, drawing attention to the social and economic relations bound up in the history of the countryside and its writing. *The Country and the City* anticipated Williams's later work on socialism and ecology and is seen as one of the founding texts of ecocriticism, though it was written before the term existed. Also in 1973, Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* showed the resilience of nature in urban areas, urging us to perceive nature differently and as an everyday experience. Mabey is generally seen to belong to the genre since called the New Nature Writing, though he and many other of its supposed proponents have expressed reservations about

'nature writing' as a category.[1] The New Nature Writing might be characterised by a discursive, creative narrative style and scientific observation that focuses on quotidian encounters with nature, engaging both with a tradition of writing about the environment and with contemporary climate emergency.[2] In the twenty-first century the natural world is understood as part of our daily lives, the non-human entwined with the human. As the writer, broadcaster and birdwatcher Tim Dee writes in the literary magazine *Archipelago*: 'Nature is no longer perceived to be separate from the more urgent and urban concerns of mankind.'[3]

This article considers some of the ways that post-millennial working-class writers, exploring a countryside that is ordinary and connected with the urgent and urban concerns of the human, are rewriting the English rural. They reshape our understanding of green places and spaces through the lens of class experience, which intersects with place, race, and gender. Written on the fiftieth anniversary of *The Country and the City*, my article draws on Williams to both illuminate and consider Williams's legacy in contemporary stories of class and the countryside.

The publication of *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers* in 2019 was part of a wider initiative spearheaded by the writer and activist Kit de Waal addressing the under-representation of working-class people in the contemporary literary and publishing industries.[4] Part of the problem of under-representation is misrepresentation. The working classes are too often understood in one-dimensional terms in society and culture: prejudice about 'working-class writing' involves ideas of grim and gritty, largely urban and northern stories of toil and hardship, thereby steamrollering over a rich diversity of creative endeavour that is continually evolving. *Common People* sought to 'reclaim and redefine what it means to be working class', disputing (among other things) the facile association of the working classes with urban environments.[5]

The elision of the rural working classes from our literature is compounded by the barriers faced by the urban working classes to the countryside and its stories. This article therefore offers a sustained critical comparison of two writers, Adelle Stripe and Anita Sethi, whose narratives in *Common People* and beyond are in many ways positioned in diametrical opposition, and together address the under-representation of both the rural and the urban working classes in literature today. Stripe describes an English countryside that is a working place, ordinary and material; while for Sethi the countryside is a place of leisure and spiritual transformation, which must be accessible to a diversity of people. Stripe and Sethi rewrite the English rural from different perspectives in relation to the land, articulating both their attachment to the countryside and their ability to move freely around it in contrasting ways. I go

on to invoke the concept of the edgeland in order to explore these two distinct marginalised positions.

Writing about place and the natural world has – until very recently – been largely the preserve of the middle-class white male, with celebrated writers such as Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane and the late Roger Deakin presiding over the contemporary canon. A well-known article by the Scottish essayist and poet Kathleen Jamie in the *London Review of Books* objects to the figure of the 'lone enraptured male' in Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* (2007) who, she argues, has characterised a literary tradition of countryside writing featuring men seeking spiritual succour, while working people are vacated from the land:

> Class comes in here. For a long time, the wild land was a working place, whether you were a hunter-gatherer, a crofter, a miner. But now it seems it is being claimed by the educated middle classes on spiritual quests. The land is empty and the saints come marching in.[6]

Jamie takes issue with the absence of contemporary power structures and issues of land rights in Macfarlane's book and an associated literary tradition. She argues that, as in the pastoral convention of retreat and return, this is ultimately a narrative of consolation, venturing into the wild but returning to a place that is familiar and safe: 'Adventures, then home for tea.'[7]

A more inclusive range of writing about the places outside of towns and cities is beginning to be heard. The gender balance has improved significantly with the prominence of writers such as Jamie, Helen Macdonald, and Amy Liptrot, alongside the emergence of working-class voices such as Natasha Carthew, poet, novelist, and author of *Undercurrent: A Cornish Memoir of Poverty, Nature and Resilience* (2023). Rebecca Smith's memoir *Rural: The Lives of the Working Class Countryside* (2023) is an exploration of the land and the lives of the people whose labour has shaped it; while in fiction, recent years have seen debuts by Jon Ransom, author of the coastal story *The Whale Tattoo* (2022), and Karla Neblett, whose *King of Rabbits* (2021) is set on a council estate in Somerset. Issues of racial exclusion are being addressed by writers and activists such as the British-Bangladeshi ornithologist Mya-Rose Craig, also known as Birdgirl (the title of her 2022 book).

The title of this article, 'A Common Countryside', not only reflects its focus on the *Common People* anthology but also draws on three meanings of the term 'common', which is one of Williams's 'keywords'.[8] My article explores the natural world as shared or communal, raising issues of land access and ownership – in a contemporary context in which 1% of the population owns half of all the land in England – and invoking a long history of the enclosure of common land.[9] Common also implies a class distinction, meaning ordinary.

A third, derogatory meaning suggests something low or distasteful; this experience of recoil and disgust relates to the idea of the edgeland that will be explored in relation to these writings.

A Labouring Countryside

'Driftwood' by Adelle Stripe foregrounds rural working-class life, positioning the countryside as a place of everyday life and labour. It opens with a depiction of a farm worker – who in time is revealed to be Stripe's father – gathering firewood from the debris left behind by floods. Her story begins: 'Outside his red-brick house, sheets of tarpaulin flap between fallen fence posts, and nettles grow in sheltered corners beneath the elderberry tree.'[10] Stripe describes not a picturesque rustic cottage but an ordinary house. The scene is an image of decline and neglect, the fence posts suggesting a kind of failure or demise, amongst which nature thrives, ignored. It is littered with the quotidian and the domestic, as Stripe goes on to describe the junk gathered around the house: ruined, useless things like broken freezers and crockery. The overriding concern is one of practical and economic purpose: 'There's a reason for all this mess. The long days he spends outside, gathering' (194). The farm labourer is collecting wood for fuel to heat his home because he cannot afford to pay heating costs. It is a portrait of pragmatism, incessant work and rural precarity. Nature is not sanctified but entwined with human processes and concerns. The floods that have scattered the ground with debris are tangible evidence of contemporary climate emergency, creating 'a fault line of detritus that extended across the corn fields' (193). The 'fault' points to human culpability, as items of refuse that litter the countryside are expressive of the corporeal and mortal. Used sanitary towels, syringes and old shot-cases scattered across the land suggest bodily waste, illness and violence; while discarded dolls' heads and children's shoes imply ageing and are disturbing and sad. Stripe's countryside is ugly and deeply fallible. The land is marked by the refuse of human life and natural growth, and by the lines of class and history of enclosure: 'Along the verges, which are mapped by discarded milkshake cartons and rampant convolvulus, traditionally laid hedges mark the estate boundary' (194).

In *The Country and the City*, surveying centuries of writing about the English rural, Raymond Williams describes a history of country and city entwined by capitalist social relations. He begins by interrogating the myth of rural 'Old England', which is always located in a just-vanished past. Searching back on the moving perspective of what he calls the 'escalator', he argues that the happier, more 'natural' rural England can never in fact be found.[11] The rural idyll, as Stripe's story shows, is a fallacy.

Williams goes on to critique a specific form of metropolitan nostalgia that obscures the real working rural Britain. He describes the declining importance of the rural economy from the late nineteenth century, which paradoxically in the course of the twentieth century was accompanied by a growing interest in rural life, country folklore, land rights and the natural world. Cultural value was increasingly placed upon ideas of the rural, alongside the notion of a working country as a 'place of physical and spiritual regeneration':

> It was now the teeming life of an isolated nature, or the seasonal rhythm of the fundamental life processes. Neither of these feelings was new in itself. What was new was their fusion into a structure of feeling in which the earth and its creatures – animals and peasants almost alike – were an affirmation of vitality and of the possibility of rest in conscious contrast with the mechanical order, the artificial routines, of the cities.[12]

Williams explains how an imaginative contrast between rural and urban in culture and society generated a 'structure of feeling' in which the land – where people and animals became almost as one – was deemed to be fundamentally restorative, representative of repose and life, and merged with existing ideas of autonomous nature and the cycle of life. He goes on to describe the way in which in the twentieth century men from the cities '*came to*' the countryside.[13] It is crucial, he maintains, to appreciate this movement from city to country. Williams describes men whose associations with the institutions of education, and with the urban, inscribed remotely a kind of intellectualised remembrance of the rural rather than a wholly visceral, authentic experience from within. The countryside was 'scribbled over', as their renderings obscured the real working rural Britain with a composite of true and false.[14]

The cultural and geographical 'turn' to the country persists and arguably has grown in contemporary times, as communication technologies have allowed affluent urbanites to move to the country, especially in the post-pandemic period. In *Social Class in the 21st Century*, Mike Savage finds that the geography of class is increasingly drawn on lines of urban and rural, with a powerful accumulation of social and cultural capital in urban areas. Savage notes: 'The countryside is defined in terms of the repose – the rest and recuperation – it offers in the context of these voracious urban driving belts.'[15] Thus an understanding of the countryside which is perceived in opposition to the city – and exists as a negation, a place that is not the city, of retreat for leisure and spiritual succour – is given to us by an urban elite, from the cities and towns where social and cultural capital clusters. Williams's argument from fifty years ago remains vital to understanding contemporary constructions of the countryside.

Adelle Stripe's story in *Common People* expresses what Williams in 1973 called the 'true voice of the surviving countryman' as he might exist today.[16] Resisting the social and cultural supremacy of the urban, she rewrites the English rural from within. The countryside in 'Driftwood' is not a place of 'spiritual and physical regeneration' but rather associated with unremitting labour, the material and corporeal, mortality and death. The opening section of the story introduces Stripe's countryman:

> Wearing a torn boiler suit, steel-cap wellies and a fleece hat to cover his shiny head, he spends his days carrying seasoned husks of fallen ash, birch, oak and rowan up the farm with the gales chasing behind him. He drags driftwood from the snake-bend in the river and stacks snapped branches in funeral pyres along the banks. (193)

His clothes are utilitarian, chosen for their warmth and durability and showing the wear and tear of a working day. The story describes his incessant gathering of wood which is a matter of exigency: with his meagre pension, this is the only means of heating his home. The environment, where he is pursued by strong winds as he works, appears unforgiving and even hostile. The 'snake-bend' describes the curve in the river but also implies treachery and venom; while the driftwood itself seems defeated – it is 'fallen' – and suggestive of decline and mortality: hulks of wood are aged and dried-up, the smaller branches broken and heaped into piles, as if to burn corpses. Death and associated images of injury and illness are insistent in the story. Countryside and countryman alike are ailing: the debris is 'coughed up' (193) by the river; while in the cold and the damp, 'Asthmatic coughs as the sun starts to rise' (194). There are gruesome images of tragedy, desperation, and dismemberment. Stripe's father and his friend Les 'talk in the way only countrymen do: stories of lost limbs […] floating, bloated bodies' (195). Their stories are grisly and macabre, showing an unflinching intimacy with death and danger that is specific to rural life.

In the twenty-first century, the countryside continues to be represented in literature by those who are visitors or tourists, in ways characterised by the 'affirmation of vitality' and 'possibility of rest' that Williams described. While Robert Macfarlane's work more widely is concerned with contemporary anxieties and crisis, a strain of this particular 'structure of feeling' can be detected in *The Wild Places*, for example.[17] In Macfarlane's book, driftwood is of interest for its stories and cultural resonance, rather than material value. The following passage describes Macfarlane and Roger Deakin at the furthest seaward point of Orford Ness in Suffolk:

> We […] walked along the tideline for half a mile, picking up pieces of wood, comparing flints, finds. We discussed the driftwood, tried to imagine the story of each stick or shard; where it had floated from, which river had washed it down to which sea. Roger could tell the wood-type of each curled or flattened piece: a waterlogged oak plank; an ash shard that had the brittle texture of cuttlefish bone; even a rare spiralling cherry bough, weathered to a silky silver-grey, like the handle of a well-used implement.
>
> We made a little woodhenge out of the driftwood: a rough circle of poles and spires, pushed down into the gravel – a homage to Derek Jarman's driftwood garden on Dungeness. Our henge would last as long as the next high tide.[18]

Macfarlane describes an amble along the tide line, where driftwood is not firewood but of scientific, intellectual and aesthetic interest, with its variety of textures and shapes. The cherry bough is unusual and feels particularly precious: its surface smoothed by the elements is like silk, as if crafted, a well-worn tool – though it does not, in fact, have a practical use. The woodhenge, built as a tribute to Jarman, has cultural and spiritual rather than economic significance. Its construction is presented as a creative act, quite different to that of the funeral pyres of Stripe's story with their associations of burning and death. A henge is often something ancient and enduring though this one is fanciful and expendable, to be washed away by the tide. The driftwood in these stories represents opposing narratives of the English rural: while Macfarlane's leisurely countryside offers a kind of spiritual regeneration and revival, Stripe's description foregrounds the material and daily struggle of rural poverty, giving voice to a largely unheard story of a working country today.

The Working Classes at Leisure

Anita Sethi's work can be understood as a further counterpoint to both Stripe and Macfarlane's narratives. 'On Class and the Countryside' in *Common People* recounts a childhood holiday away from Sethi's home in Manchester, a subsidised trip to the Lake District with her mother. It is a coming-of-age story, recalling the author's first transformative experience of nature. Sethi is concerned with issues of access to our country's green places and spaces, in which barriers of place, class, race and gender intersect. These themes are explored more fully in her memoir *I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* (2021), the story of a pilgrimage through the north of England that was Sethi's response to a race-hate crime. The book is a call to action and a reclamation of the land and the literature that has been largely denied to marginalised groups in

society. Sethi reshapes our understanding of the countryside by rehearsing and recasting the tropes of the 'middle-class rural convention' that is also a largely white and masculine tradition.[19] Her narratives describe the classic pastoral arc of retreat and return. Sethi writes from an urban perspective, in which the countryside is understood in opposition to the city as a place of leisure, but insists that the physical and spiritual restoration it offers is shared with a diversity of people: a common countryside.

'On Class and the Countryside' invokes and underlines a form of the imaginative contrast between country and city that Williams critiqued in 1973. The countryside facilitates a kind of awakening and revival for Sethi, providing relief from the troubles of the city. The story opens with the transition from a dark and oppressive city to a country that is airy and expansive: 'The huge grey road wound its way up through the hills, further and further up. Out of the M6, the heavy greyness, the cluttered-up world gradually spaced itself out, lifted itself up.'[20] Sethi describes leaving behind the motorway, which is man-made and suggests busy traffic and obstruction. The road spirals into the hills, as if in ever-increasing circles that create space, rising from the city's burdensome grey. A sense of lifting and release – both physically and in mood – is accompanied by a shift from the micro to the macro, from the M6 to the 'earth' and the 'world'. Sethi articulates a sense of becoming less insular, at one with something greater:

> The world grew softer, wider, dragged me out of myself and into something larger, layering into the mountains. Suddenly, everything was slightly warmer. Everything was slightly lighter. The world seemed to open itself up, lift itself, lighten up, shrug a weight off its shoulders. (211)

The open countryside seems to tug at her very being, so that she is unburdened and unfurls into the world around her, which in turn is personified. Person and place, as one, are suffused with a sense of the carefree, of warmth and receptiveness. In Sethi's story, city and country are opposed: a moral contrast is drawn between a benevolent country and malevolent city.

For Sethi, the countryside inspires intense joy and a spiritual epiphany, and she is afterwards profoundly changed. Out walking one day, she marvels at the natural world that surrounds her. As the narrative becomes increasingly fervent, she describes a feeling at her core of opening and expanding into the environment: 'The heart was growing, becoming as vast and deep as those lakes, as wide as those woods' (214). She loses her sense of self as she experiences an extraordinary feeling of renewal, of shedding a hard protective outer layer which is painful and damaged; it is reminiscent of a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, or an invertebrate shedding its skin. The passage gradually builds to

a crescendo, culminating in a euphoric invocation to life and to new belonging and existence as she feels herself becoming part of the natural world around her: 'I was alive alive alive and I was no longer just a girl from home but a girl of the lakes, a girl of the hills, a girl of the flowers, spilling filling thrilling the lungs with their scents, a girl from the world I was becoming' (214–15).

This union with the natural world is an affirmation of belonging in the countryside regardless of class, race or gender. Sethi recalls how her presence in the Lake District is seen as incongruous by an elderly couple who seem to observe Sethi and her mother warily; the man expresses surprise at seeing 'brown folks' in the countryside. She writes: 'It would be true to say there were not many brown people to be seen in the countryside, and not many "common people", either' (213). While Stripe seeks to make visible the rural working-class life that has long been obscured in cultural narratives, Sethi addresses the barriers faced by the urban working classes and other marginalised groups to our countryside and its literature. She emphasises her argument by locating her story in the Lake District, with its Romantic associations of an English pastoral and literary tradition. It is significant, too, that it is the elderly man who comments on the young girl and her single mother: while his male gaze sees their appearance as unusual, Sethi's story of the mother–daughter pair foregrounds the feminine in the landscape, entwining her politics of class and race with a feminist agenda.

Sethi lays claim to a literary convention of writing about the English countryside, drawing on an imaginative opposition between rural and urban to reveal the classed, gendered and racialised structures bound up in this cultural tradition. As noted above, Williams describes how in the twentieth century a particular interpretation of the countryside was written into our stories by the educated middle classes from the cities, who were also male and white, although these aspects do not form an explicit part of his discussion. Critics have noted Williams's neglect of gender and race in *The Country and the City* and in his work more generally, although it must be noted that his account of country and city within an imperial context was ground-breaking.[21] Sethi's narrative – in which she presents an interpretation of the countryside from an urban perspective, as a place of spiritual succour and rest, but one that is more inclusive – offers an opportunity to broaden Williams's analysis. As Jilly Boyce Kay suggests, in this way Williams's work can provide 'theoretical models, political inspiration, and intellectual resources for feminism and anti-imperialism […] rather than disavow it for the silences, absences, and limitations, we might continue to build upon, extend and pluralise what remains a rich, vital and urgent body of work'.[22]

The Question of Perspective

While Sethi is a visitor to the country from the city, Stripe writes from within the rural, her father profoundly of the countryside, its natural world, animals, and agriculture: 'He's as much a part of this landscape as the trees and barns and cattle grazing grass' (196). His friend Les similarly merges with his environment: 'He blends into the woodland' (195). In Stripe's narrative working people are indistinguishable from the land.

As a piece of memoir, Stripe's story is also notable for the absence of the first-person 'I'. The first two of four sections are told in the third person, describing the labours and the life of an anonymous 'he'. In the third section Stripe herself enters the story with a shift to the second person 'you', as she reveals that the farm labourer is her father. Memories of childhood and adolescence are invoked, intimate and domestic, as she describes the spartan conditions of her early years: the bare floorboards trimmed with remnants of underlay and nails and the bitter cold. She recalls her teenage years, which were suffused with a sense of stagnancy and the series of dead-end jobs that enabled her just to subsist. Stripe's childhood home and her father's care are recalled with tenderness – 'He looked after you here, in this house' (198) – and there is something poignant in the food he fed her, which is evocative of poverty and struggle: value sliced white bread, cut-price tins of spaghetti hoops from a budget supermarket, packs of cheap ham, the Battenberg cake that was a treat (198). The passage is emotive and deeply personal, locating Stripe herself at the core of the narrative.

Stripe's use of the second person creates an ambiguous authorial position. 'You' makes her simultaneously narrator and subject, reflecting and reinforcing her position in relation to the story: detached as commentator and yet closely connected. It collapses the distance between the authorial presence and the place described, locating Stripe – present and past selves alike – within the scene. 'You' might also be an address to the reader, inviting us in while excluding us as it is also directed at the author herself. The narrative mode is disorienting, confusing author with subject and author with reader, raising questions about who is observing this scene.

The question of perspective is theorised by Williams, who describes the emergence of two distinct understandings of the English countryside as 'practical' and 'aesthetic' alongside the rise of industrial capitalism.[23] Ideas of improvement and the arrangement of the land in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were closely connected to centres of power in society, as in the case of the country house and what he calls its 'pleasing prospects'. Williams notes: 'A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation.'[24] Though Stripe uses the word 'landscape', her

story that makes visible a working countryside – a place of pragmatism and utility and in many ways disagreeable – contests any straightforward idea of the detached observer. Her avoidance of the first person 'I' instead brings to the fore the rural working people who have been obscured in our literature, in a refusal of the social and political power bound up with the gaze on a countryside which is 'pleasing'.

Williams returns to this theme in his novel *Border Country* (1960), in which Matthew, an academic living and working in London, returns to the Welsh valley of his childhood when his father becomes seriously ill. Coming back, he feels estranged and troubled, but rediscovers a relationship to his homeland, which had altered in going away. He realises that in London his recollection of the valley had been static, a vista, but on returning he experiences the land again as a place of ordinary life and labour: 'It was no longer a landscape or a view, but a valley that people were using […] The visitor sees beauty; the inhabitant a place where he works and has his friends.'[25] Matthew's perception of the countryside shifts from the aesthetic to the experiential and pragmatic, though he is caught between the two perspectives, occupying the 'border country' that gives the novel its title.

Stripe can be seen to occupy a similar border country, the ambiguity of her position an expression of her conflicted relationship towards her homeland, as a writer-academic returning to the working-class home. She writes: 'It was home for a long time. Still is' (198). Her use of the past tense and then the correction – as if an afterthought – communicates her equivocation. Stripe articulates the tension that is a familiar condition of social mobility, a friction between the pull of home and the distance created by education and greater affluence, while also feminising the difficult return home that is traditionally a largely masculine trope in the working-class canon. Williams expresses this tension in the motif of the border that runs through his criticism and fiction and reflects his own personal story as a Cambridge academic and writer from a working-class background in Wales. As he comments in a chapter on Thomas Hardy in *The Country and the City*, Hardy 'sees as a participant who is also an observer; this is the source of the strain'.[26] Stripe similarly communicates through a relationship to the land the fraught experience of being both participant and observer, which are classed positions. Intimately connected with the working countryside of her father and yet set apart, she articulates the strain of class mobility through her use of the second person 'you' which creates uncertainty and a visceral sense of unease.

While the avoidance of the 'I' in Stripe's story foregrounds the working people on the land, Sethi asserts the first-person pronoun as a seizing of places and spaces denied to those marginalised in society historically and now. The position of observer is assumed in a deliberate appropriation of the land. The

epiphany which is central to her story in *Common People* is a paean to her own life and existence, to selfhood and a sense of belonging to something greater, to a natural world. The use of the first-person pronoun is similarly prominent in *I Belong Here*, as the very title shows. In a chapter on 'Bearing Witness', Sethi describes giving a statement to the police following a race-hate crime. She is shaken and exhausted but as she speaks, she gains courage and resolution:

> *I* […] A letter so strong and sturdy, upright […] for so much of my life it had been a struggle to fully say it, to be it, all the forces that had tried to flatten it, extinguish it. I. I exist. I have a heart that beats. I have a right to exist and move around the world safely, to belong.[27]

For Sethi, the use of this pronoun represents a form of resistance, of standing strong – 'upright' suggesting a stance that is honourable and ethical – against the forces that would destroy her. Kathleen Jamie's critique of the 'lone enraptured male' notes the prevalence of the 'I' in the literary tradition in which the countryside is a place of masculine spiritual quest. Jamie argues that by making visible the author rather than the wild places, it is a form of 'appropriation' of the land – as if ownership of the land has been taken, or at least a particular version of it has been given to us by a 'single mediator'.[28] Her argument recalls that of Williams in which the countryside is obscured by interpretation. While Stripe's avoidance of the 'I' resists that version of the countryside externally imposed, Sethi takes possession of it, laying claim to the land and the literature long denied to marginalised groups in society.

Edgelands

Fifty years ago, Raymond Williams maintained that country and city are always interconnected. In the twenty-first century the interaction between rural and urban is given physical, spatial form in the edgeland, the places and spaces between country and city which have a particular resonance for the socially and culturally marginalised. In the edgeland, rural and urban meet and mingle in unnamed wastelands and areas – usually but not always on the outskirts of large cities – where refuse is collected, sewage is disposed of, and other things happen that we would rather forget about or ignore. The term was coined at the beginning of the twenty-first century by the writer and land-rights campaigner Marion Shoard, who described the 'rural–urban interface' as an expanding feature of our geography and the 'story of our age'.[29] In literature, the publication in 2012 of *Edgelands* by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts advanced a new aesthetic which sought to 'break out of the duality

of rural and urban landscape writing' and celebrate an unofficial wilderness: disregarded, overlooked, and all the richer for it.[30] Farley and Symmons Roberts see Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* as the forerunner of the new edgeland narratives that have emerged as a sub-genre in contemporary literature. The meeting grounds of country and city have subsequently been explored in novels such as Melissa Harrison's *Clay* (2013) and non-fiction such as Rob Cowen's *Common Ground* (2015).

Stripe's countryside in 'Driftwood' is a kind of twenty-first-century edgeland, where rural and urban, human and animal, people and place coalesce. She describes a kind of wasteland where nature thrives, ignored, amongst the debris of human function: 'You walk out into the garden, stepping over the rubble, and walk up a mound of ash, now covered in grass and dandelions' (199). The story describes a land littered with the refuse of contemporary existence: abandoned fridges, bin bags, a bike with flat tyres; just as Marion Shoard writes that 'the [rural–urban] interface sucks in the detritus of modern life'.[31] This place is characterised by utility: Stripe complains to her father that it's like a scrapyard outside his house; while elsewhere the story describes in his garden the stench of the nearby sewage works and there are 'cooling towers on the horizon' (198). According to Farley and Symmons Roberts, there is no sign of an edgeland 'truer or more emphatic than the sight of cooling towers in the distance'.[32]

The edgeland aesthetic celebrates that which is conventionally ignored and seen as ugly or unappealing – even threatening. These overlooked places and spaces have a capacity for subversion: they can be lawless and anarchic because 'nobody is looking'.[33] The road that runs through the hamlet is 'for rat-runners, tractors and joy riders': it exists mostly as a place on the way to somewhere else, or for opportunistic crime (194). The shabby, foul and offensive are scattered throughout Stripe's story, and death and danger are never far away. Things bodily and revolting are expelled onto the land, such as used sanitary towels 'coughed up' by the river (193). Shoard writes that the edgeland inverts established notions of good taste: it 'relishes what other landscapes vomit up and […] laughs at current notions of taste'.[34] The coughing up and vomiting suggests things ejected uncontrollably, even violently. Stripe deliberately and unapologetically foregrounds the abject and unlovely in her portrait of a forgotten place and people.

There is a class implication and analogy in the edgeland's essential quality of being neglected and passed over, one that allows for the possibility of resistance. For the edgeland exists outside the processes and concerns of dominant groups in society. It has its own aesthetic and principles, which can be seen to have a particular honesty and integrity. Shoard writes that the edgeland is 'the ultimate physical expression of the character of our age,

unmediated by the passing tastes of elite groups'.[35] According to Shoard, the edgeland is quintessentially contemporary, a concrete manifestation of the spirit of the twenty-first century, direct and authentic, not subject to the casual value judgements of those who are most powerful. Stripe's emphasis on an unaesthetic countryside is not to tell us that we should be repelled by this place and people but rather articulates a deeper truth about contemporary humanity and its relationship with the natural and animal world, representing the realities of rural poverty and the climate crisis in the twenty-first century. As Shoard argues, rather than recoiling from this landscape we should pay attention to it: 'Town and country may show us the surface of life with which we feel comfortable, but the interface shows us its broiling depths.'[36] The edgeland reveals difficult and urgent truths about contemporary life.

In the concluding pages of her essay Shoard addresses the persistent nostalgia that continues to surround the countryside in the twenty-first century:

> Today, we prefer to celebrate the romantic aura that surrounds traditional activities from the past rather than to grapple with those of the present. We yearn to live in a medieval cottage, perhaps a converted forge or farmhouse. Yet when such a cottage actually functioned as a forge or farmhouse it was probably thought of much in the way we think of a sewage works or a car-breaking yard: noisy, smelly, hot and mundane.[37]

Shoard argues that the rural industry of the past, which in the twenty-first century is the focus of our nostalgia, is the historical equivalent of the contemporary edgeland. As Williams maintained in *The Country and the City*, the more natural, more virtuous Old England was always a myth. Shoard suggests that we confront those aspects of the present that we might prefer to ignore rather than finding solace in an imaginary past, just as Stripe's edgeland narrative insists on a more direct, more honest, account of the English rural, one characterised by the disagreeable and routine, by human function and the messy reality of everyday life and work.

Stripe's 'story of our age' represents a departure from contemporary edgeland literature because it is written not as a visitor to the edgeland but from within, presenting a portrait of isolation and decline which is steeped in a sense of inertia. The title 'Driftwood' suggests a place and a people washed-up, cast adrift, and subject to powerful and irresistible forces. It is a remote and forgotten place, epitomised by its bus stop, which is '(out of use)': marooned and expendable, as if in parentheses (193). Though the notion of a rural backwater is not new, Stripe writes in opposition to most contemporary place and nature narratives which hinge upon some kind of journey, a ramble or a wander, which facilitates a personal advancement or revelation. In doing so,

Stripe resists the narrative of mobility – both physical and spiritual – that lies at the heart of these writings.

Farley and Symmons Roberts tell us that 'very few people actually live in the edgelands'.[38] Their own status as tourists in these places and spaces between country and city invokes the sociological concept of elective belonging, where in affluent, highly mobile social groups an attachment to place is understood as an expression of identity and is chosen, rather than pre-determined.[39] While Farley and Symmons Roberts' exploration of edgelands is whimsical and celebratory, Stripe's story has an anxious air: 'Each scrap in his garden symbolic of the person you could become' (199). Though Stripe tells her story with tenderness and a wry sense of humour, she also fears this place and the effect of its inertia on her own life. She describes a profound connection to a place which has become unyielding and disquieting, recalling Williams's account of settlement which 'draws on many deep and persistent feelings: an identification with the people among whom we grew up; an attachment to the place, the landscape, in which we first lived and learned to see'; yet 'can become a prison: a long disheartening and despair, under an imposed rigidity of conditions'.[40] Stripe's edgeland story is an illustration of this 'prison', in which the bond to a homeland has become dispiriting and restrictive. 'Driftwood' is melancholic, showing that the possibility of movement is tied to privilege.

Anita Sethi's stories represent a very different kind of edgeland: a marginalised place that offers a precarious freedom and hope. 'On Class and the Countryside' ultimately moves beyond the country–city dichotomy which characterises the piece. As the story concludes she describes the pictures she drew for her mother as a girl, childlike expressions of her devotion that she wouldn't give to her directly but rather leave where they might be found. These 'little bits of inarticulate love', unspoken and offered obliquely, show:

> houses with paths stretching from their doors away over the hills and towards the lakes and off the page into a future we could dream about, if there was space left in the head for dreams; paths stretching into a space off the picture, off the edges of the page, where hope might live. (218)

The paths stretching off the edges of the page offer an imagined future without boundaries. It is an optimistic vision of belonging, of home – and of the possibility of movement away into an unknown space which is full of promise and freedom, although there are no guarantees. Sethi embraces the radical uncertainties of occupying a marginalised position.

In an online launch event for *I Belong Here*, Sethi said: 'I think that space of being an outsider, that liminal space, it can feel like a negative space that can swallow you up and it can be a lonely space, but it can also be a very magical

and creative space if you then inhabit it, you can use that space and reclaim it as your own.'[41] Her words recall the work of the late American cultural theorist bell hooks, who wrote of a spatial alterity that can be radically freeing: a 'space of radical openness' which is 'a margin, a profound edge'.[42] There are clear correspondences between Sethi and hooks, in their concern with the intersections of class, race, and feminism, and in their embrace of marginalised places and spaces – what we might call an edgeland – which can be painful and difficult but also full of possibility. In *I Belong Here*, there is a great deal of suffering and loss, but this is intimately connected to hope and creative opportunity. Sethi recounts, for example, her various struggles with the trauma of the race-hate crime, the death of her friend Sophie Christopher, and her anxiety and depression. Visiting Hull Pot, a sinkhole, the largest natural hole in England, she considers: 'A hole is not only an absence but also an opening, a possibility […] Is there anything that can be salvaged from the place of loss?' (*I Belong*, 198) A negative space in which you might disappear – akin to the space off the edges of the page in *Common People* – has the capacity also to be receptive and productive. Living on the edge is painful but brings a profound sense of possibility.

Sethi describes a kind of boundless mobility which is afforded by precarity. In *I Belong Here* she visits Settle on her Pennine journey and considers the difficulties many people encounter in attaining security and settlement due to socioeconomic, geographic, and other inequalities. She finds, alongside her quest for belonging, a contrary impulse:

> That summer I decided not to try and settle down but to 'settle up' geographically by walking up, following my unsettled feeling upwards into the hills and seeing what I might discover. Alongside a primal need for home is a need for freedom and adventure, a longing for somewhere that lets the spirit soar. (160)

Sethi reconfigures unsettlement as liberty: her response to precarity is not to seek fixity but rather to embrace its uncertainties and freedoms. She writes: 'in this state of being unsettled there is wisdom to be found, another way of being in the world' (166). Sethi represents a form of mobility that is never taken for granted, nor ever easy, but the precarious, she suggests, might find a kind of wisdom not attainable by others. Making the case for the working-class writer – and writers from other disadvantaged groups in society – Sethi shows that the outsider can access original and distinctive forms of creativity.

Conclusion

Fifty years after Williams wrote *The Country and the City*, the countryside continues often to be 'scribbled over'. Yet Adelle Stripe and Anita Sethi are part of a new wave of working-class writers who are rewriting the English rural, inscribing a working countryside and rural precarity in our stories, and articulating an urban and leisurely experience of the countryside from a working-class, racialised, and feminist perspective. Stripe and Sethi represent, respectively, the rural and the urban working classes; their stories act in counterpoise to redress silences and absences in contemporary literature of the countryside, as well as countering reductive associations of working-class writing with urban environments. Williams's exposition of an intellectualised interpretation of the country which comes from the city and disavows the realities of rural working life is ever-more pertinent in a contemporary landscape of class in which social and cultural capital increasingly accumulates in urban areas. Meanwhile the work of Sethi counsels an extension of Williams's analysis, in her account of the 'middle class rural convention' which entwines the politics of place, race, gender and class.

Williams insisted that country and city are connected historically and culturally by capitalist social relations. In the twenty-first century, his arguments can be seen to find new expression in the burgeoning geography and literature of the edgeland. Stripe's portrait of a forgotten wasteland of human function and fallibility has a particular integrity, confronting contemporary truths that are often not pretty, while Sethi's more abstract form of edgeland embraces the 'profound edge' of millennial precarity. Both these writers show that there is 'wisdom to be found' in the marginalised position. A common countryside is a place of ordinary life and work. It is also shared, by a diversity of people, and fertile ground for creative possibility.

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Notes

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11 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Vintage, 2016), 12–17.
12 Williams, *Country and City*, 362.
13 Williams, *Country and City*, 367 (emphasis in original).
14 Williams, *Country and City*, 371, 375.
15 Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (London: Pelican, 2015), 265.
16 Williams, *Country and City*, 378.
17 See for example: Robert Macfarlane, 'The Eeriness of the English Countryside', *Guardian*, 10 April 2015.
18 Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007), 261.
19 Williams, *Country and City*, 377.
20 Anita Sethi, 'On Class and the Countryside', in *Common People*, ed. de Waal, 211.
21 See for example Jilly Boyce Kay, 'A Life Lasts Longer than the Body through Which It Moves: An Introduction to a Special Cultural Commons Section on Raymond Williams', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 5 (2021): 1009–20; and Gail Lewis, 'Racializing Culture is Ordinary', *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 6 (2007): 866–86. Corinne Fowler's recent work on a 'colonial countryside' notes the importance of *The Country and the City* in the connections the study drew between empire, slavery, rural England, and literature; see *Green Unpleasant Land* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2021), 15.
22 Kay, 'A Life Lasts Longer', 1009.
23 Williams, *Country and City*, 173.
24 Williams, *Country and City*, 172.
25 Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2006), 71.
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33 Farley and Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands*, 8.
34 Shoard, 'Edgelands', 133.
35 Shoard, 'Edgelands', 141.
36 Shoard, 'Edgelands', 142.
37 Shoard, 'Edgelands', 143.
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