

Issue Introduction

Introduction: An Anthropological Almanac of Rural Americas

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Abstract

Critically cued to a political moment at which “the rural” across diverse North American locales is taken to be a singular, homogeneous place, this introduction to the special issue explores the value of comparative inquiry into settings and subject positions that index the rural in markedly different ways. It does so through the conceit of an anthropological almanac: a genre of forecasting through brief, necessarily ephemeral provocations, which both register the uneven production of space and value across their contexts and illuminate social transformations that extend well beyond the rural. Like other almanacs, ours is marked by a commitment to formal and epistemological pluralism, featuring contributions from scholars across the career cycle and presenting creative narrative selections side by side with more conventionally ethnographic ones. Asserting in the face of widespread precarity that rurality has a consequential future, it looks ahead to ask what the study of rural North America might yet become.

Keywords: rural, comparison, United States, Canada, Mexico

As graduate students developing research projects located on the Great Plains of the United States, reading Jane Adams’s (2007) *North American Dialogue* review, “Ethnography of Rural North America,” came as a lifeline. Her brief article affirmed the existence of a tradition of anthropological study of the rural United States and Canada, even as it grappled with how this body of work had come to be forgotten in contemporaneous surveys of the field. Adams’s genealogy begins in the 1920s, when major foundations started funding ethnographic research on issues of community cohesion, cultural change, migration, race, and poverty in the United States. These studies would pave the way for various New Deal programs and research endeavors, culminating in an article on “Cultural Anthropology and Modern Agriculture” (Redfield and Warner 1940) in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s venerable *Yearbook of Agriculture*.

This era of critical, qualitative, and holistic attention to rural life was, however, short-lived. Due to pressure from agribusiness interests and to a postwar focus on how rural areas could contribute to a hegemonic Pax Americana, research sponsors directed support away from ethnographic investigations of culture, community, and lifeways and toward narrowly productivist projects led by quantitatively minded economists and rural sociologists.¹ For four decades, Adams contends, research on rural North America set out to promote farm technology adoption, swell agricultural yields, and palliate the forms of dislocation that resulted from these processes of industrialization. It was not until the 1980s that significant numbers of anthropologists returned to studying American agriculture, rural inequality, and ongoing practices of rural (re)settlement amid a wrenching farm crisis. This period of resurgence—one led by feminist anthropologists committed to drawing out difference within and across families, farms, and communities—made it possible to ask new questions about rural lives (see Adams 1994; Bennett and Kohl 1982; Dudley 2000; Fink 1986; Salamon 1992; Wells 1996).

Both of us worked our way through the canon that Adams proposed, grateful for a set of intellectual forebears as we defended our interest in “flyover country.” Yet we also wondered about the gaps in

¹See, for instance, the suppression of Walter Goldschmidt’s (1978) examination of industrial agriculture’s negative effects on rural communities in California.

Adams's genealogy, which are clearer to us now, a dozen years after its publication. The review draws a line between studies of rural indigenous and settler communities, despite numerous, fraught histories of encounter (e.g., Foley 1995; Hansen 2013; Wagoner 2002). Canada plays only a small part in the review and Mexico is excluded altogether, a selective framing of North America that edits out classic disciplinary debates about the peasantry (see Murray 2005) as well as autochthonous research traditions that cannot easily be mapped onto US-based periodizations (Giarracca 2001; Harrison and Darnell 2006). Moreover, the review and much of the scholarship it draws on reflect a broader cultural tendency to equate North American rurality with farming, despite the insistence of demographers and other social scientists that "'rural' and 'farm' no longer mean the same" (Hart 1995).²

Yet we remain inspired by the genealogy that Adams offered because of its systematic, structural critique of the homogenization of rural North American locations and people. In Adams's rendition, postwar turns in anthropology toward the search for otherness (in places termed "exotic locales") were produced, in part, by state funding priorities. Hers is thus an avowedly political history of anthropology's engagement with rural North America: while the New Deal demanded commitment to the plights and possibilities of rural communities, this attention was dispersed following the USDA's transformation into a productivist organization charged with securing global agricultural dominance. Reading between the lines of Adams's account, we see an effort to discipline how the rural United States was imagined and to influence what could be said to matter about its social dynamics. Only quantitative social science would become fundable, only research that approached rural America as a fundamentally economic entity.³ We would argue that we still live with the aftereffects of this reduction, at a moment when it remains too easy to talk about diverse rural North American locales as an almost singular place. Both of us participate in that ongoing history and rearticulate its logic when we mark ourselves as being from "rural" Canada or the United States—or otherwise appeal to some kind of shared identity based on rurality (see Ching and Creed 1997). Adams insightfully suggests that there was a complex state politics of reduction and abstraction that made it possible to think in terms of *the* rural or *the* countryside at all.

The States of Rural America

This special issue of the *Journal for the Anthropology of North America* is an attempt to compile an anthropological almanac, a compendium of interventions into settings and subject positions that index shifting conditions of the rural. Within and across the twenty-five short pieces that comprise this collection, there is no single place, people, or way of life that defines North American rurality. There are, instead, many different ruralities that articulate distinctly across nation, region, occupation, gender, race, and class. In drawing inspiration from the almanac—as, among other things, a genre of forecasting—this collection is invested less in recounting histories of anthropological engagement than in

²Gary Paul Green (2012, 307) states it plainly: "Farming is no longer the primary rural occupation in most developed countries. Even in agriculture-dependent regions, farming does not provide the majority of jobs or income for rural households." See also Deborah Fink (1998) on the political repercussions of decentering the nonpropertied working class of the rural United States.

³The stated charge of the USDA's Economic Research Service exemplifies this framing, even though the agency is widely regarded for its broader research on rural social and demographic change (e.g., Beale 1975). The current controversy over the agency's relocation to Kansas City speaks to the politics of where knowledge about the rural is produced.

offering propositions for what vantage points remain underexplored, along with speculative visions of rural flourishing (see also Shucksmith 2018). Counting as kin other experimental publishing projects like the *New Materialism Almanac* (Gauthier and Skinner 2016), the collection picks up from Adams's indispensable review and looks ahead to ask what the study of rural North America might yet become. Channeling a resurgence of interest seen in events like the "Imagining a Rural Anthropology" roundtable convened by Cristina Ortiz and Susanna Donaldson at the 2015 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, the collection is not only a call for renewed conceptual creativity. It also stands as an assertion that rurality, in its various guises, has a consequential future.

In 2008, the United Nations announced that, for the first time, half of the world's human population was living in urban areas. This epochal proclamation, whose metrics were of course contestable, coincided with a wave of scholarship positing the urban condition as endless, planetary, or otherwise totalizing (e.g., Brenner and Schmid 2012; Burdett and Sudjic 2007). Here, the significance of the rural is constructed as either residual or imminently so, a mere sidebar to the world-historical "triumph of the city" (Glaeser 2011). Eight years later, though, the election of Donald J. Trump as the president of the United States in a manner that appeared to be driven by rural, white, working-class voters gave rise to a renewed fixation on engaging the viewpoints of abstracted "rural people" (e.g., Wuthnow 2018; for a critique, see Janssen 2017). Today, it is as if the postwar reduction of rurality on productivist economic grounds is being compounded by a kind of political reduction as diverse populations and places are read through the mathematics of the US Electoral College. The rising tide of rural populism also served as a readymade explanation for the 2018 election of Andrés Manuel López Obragon as president of Mexico. While comparative studies are assessing the virtues and limits of such explanations (see Scoones et al. 2018), we would just flag the apparent reversal in the fortunes of the rural over the course of a decade, from impotent holdover to weighty kingmaker.

To be sure, narratives of rural decline have referents that are all too real. In recent years, US counties defined as nonmetropolitan experienced absolute population loss—defined as the conjuncture of outmigration and natural decrease—for the first time in the nation's history (Johnson and Lichter 2019, 4). Schools consolidate, community institutions collapse, and local businesses erode to the point where farm country can counterintuitively become a food desert. Drug overdose death rates in rural areas, increasingly driven by opioid use, exceed those reported in the US cities (Mack, Jones, and Ballesteros 2017; see also Garriott 2011; Pine 2019). In Canada, currency revaluation linked to energy development in the Alberta oil sands led to widespread losses of manufacturing jobs in rural Ontario and Quebec (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation 2015). The 2018 discontinuation of Greyhound bus routes in Canada's western provinces left rural communities and First Nations reserves cut off from public transportation and mobility. Meanwhile, in the wake of NAFTA and subsequent trade pacts, rural Mexico is struggling to maintain its capacity to produce its most basic staple, corn, even as its last remaining stocks of heirloom maize and agave are scooped up for trendy bars and restaurants in the United States (Bowen 2015; Gálvez 2018). A comparatively young rural population lacks access to land, which drives migration within and beyond Mexico and turns the countryside into a remittance landscape (Lopez 2015).

On the other hand, select pockets of rural North America, especially a handful of patches of the United States, appear globally dominant. Swathes of the planet, such as the rainforests of South America, are being terraformed in the monocultural image of US Midwest commodity crops and livestock (Hoelle 2015). The systems of chicken rearing first honed on the Delmarva Peninsula are replicating at an accelerating clip, to the point where the specific osteopathologies of the fast-growing American chicken are emerging as a global form distributed as fossils across the planet's landfills (Bennett et al. 2018; Boyd and Watts 1997; Stuesse 2016). Vast experiments in the refinement of military technology

and the projection of territorial power are being mobilized in the supposed emptiness of rural Nevada and the Dakotas (LaFlamme 2018; Masco 2006). As corporate pork production in the central United States draws thousands of migrant workers to an enterprise that exists largely to feed the populations of Japan and South Korea, social existence in ever more concentrated pockets of rural America is beginning to radiate throughout the world (Blanchette, forthcoming; Miraftab 2015). Thus, in spite of growing precarity in some parts of rural North America, other locales are requiring us to develop analytics for thinking about globally influential countrysides (cf. Woods 2007). Nor is the far-reaching influence of certain ruralities solely a story of capital concentration and domination. In the wake of the Zapatista rebellion in southern Mexico, for instance, or in indigenous-led mobilizations for new ecological and energetic relations in the United States, rural communities are also formulating new models of collective life and political organizing that shape the very terms of global transformation (Estes 2019; Hayden 2002).

Writing Rural Americas

Even as the material conditions of rurality are remade, strategies for representing and reflecting on those conditions alternately leap ahead and struggle to keep up. As an anonymous reviewer helpfully pointed out to us, the postwar lull in anthropological engagement with rural America was counterbalanced by imaginative forms of inquiry in the domains of literature, media, and the arts. For instance, the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s offered textured, immersive accounts of rural places (e.g., Capote 1966), developing writerly techniques that would later diffuse into the repertoire of ethnography. Independent filmmakers daringly blurred genres from documentary to horror as they challenged rural social norms, while participatory media projects in settings like Atlantic Canada grappled with the meanings of remoteness (Crocker 2008).

More recently, a wealth of scholarship published in fields adjacent to anthropology has proposed new ways of contending with shifting realities. Resisting teleological narratives of ongoing urbanization, some have even asserted that ruralization might be a no less useful schema for reckoning with the contemporary (Krause 2013). Geographers embraced a multifunctional view of agriculture, which recognizes the coexistence of more and less intensive regimes of production as well as alternative social functions of farmland (Woods 2011, 80–83). Sociologists emphasized emerging interfaces between rural and urban areas (Lichter and Brown 2011), along with flows and blockages linked to globalization (Bailey, Jensen, and Ransom 2014). Wide-ranging interest in issues like food justice also led to the convergence of academic and activist endeavors, fomenting the expression of new countryside ideals and rural modernities (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Paxson 2012; Penniman 2018; Weiss 2016).

Scholars from a range of disciplines have begun to question the “metronormativity” (Halberstam 2005, 36) of dominant cultural imaginaries. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the boom of rural queer studies, catalyzed in part by Mary Gray’s (2009) ethnography of LGBT youth in Kentucky. Beyond documenting hidden histories, these scholars have interrogated the place- and class-based assumptions behind putatively unmarked accounts of desire and visibility, as well as their intersection with categories of race and citizenship (Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 2016; Manalansan et al. 2014). Meanwhile, Gabriel Rosenberg (2015) showed how rural organizations like 4-H encoded broader norms about the procreative, propertied nuclear family, and Jessica Smith Rolston (2014) examined how kinship and gender roles were constructed in the coal mines of Wyoming. These works interrupt accounts of cultural invention that presume diffusion from the metropole, and they carry forward an appreciative tradition of listening that extends from Zora Neale Hurston’s (1935) studies of black Southern folklore through Kathleen Stewart’s (1996) affectively charged rendering of Appalachian poetics.

Of course, narratives of transformation from the outside are not unfounded. Infrastructure projects from dams to pipelines reorder rural landscapes for the benefit of distant others, often becoming flash-points of resistance. But with recent work emphasizing the epistemic dimensions of rural governance just as much as the material (see Biolsi 2018), access to knowledge infrastructures has emerged as another site of political contestation. For scholars, this has meant approaching issues of unequal digital connectivity in light of legacies of self-provisioning (Burrell 2018) and assertions of “network sovereignty” (Duarte 2017). It has also meant taking stock of social institutions with the staying power to ensure that rural voices can be heard on their own terms. Worries abound, for instance, about the fate of the small-town newspaper. Yet a recent case from the world of book publishing turned familiar, asymmetrical dynamics of production and reception on their head. J. D. Vance’s (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy*, a memoir of the author’s hardscrabble rural upbringing, was published by a New York publishing house. The book became a bestseller, but critics charged that it traded on and reinforced tropes of the shiftless rural poor. Two years later, a searing corrective arrived in the form of an anthology of criticism and creative writing by contributors actually living in Appalachia (Harkins and McCarroll 2018). The publisher? West Virginia University Press, a small but intellectually ambitious press that prides itself on placing regional issues in dialogue with global concerns. Here and across North America, rural presses, distros, and other institutions are producing forms of knowledge that are accountable to their lived realities.

This attunement to epistemic politics brings us, in turn, to our use of the almanac, the literary genre perhaps most closely associated with the elemental rhythms of rural life. In its heyday, the almanac was second only to the Bible as a staple of American print culture, reaching a mass readership that cut across class, sect, and geography. The earliest American almanacs were printed by the Cambridge Press at Harvard during the mid-seventeenth century, and they emphasized the mathematical exactitude of their astronomical calculations. But once other printers entered the book trade, the almanac evolved into a popular format that historian Marion Barber Stowell (1977, ix) could only describe as “a miscellany: it was clock, calendar, weatherman, reporter, textbook, preacher, guidebook, atlas, navigational aid, doctor, bulletin board, agricultural advisor, and entertainer.”⁴ This collection proceeds from a similar ethos of heterogeneity, featuring contributions from scholars across the career cycle and presenting creative narrative selections side by side with more conventionally ethnographic ones. It does not presume to delimit or authoritatively chart which themes, theories, or genres of writing might speak to the rural anthropologist.

This set of formal commitments comes with epistemological entailments. Thus, Thomas Horrocks (2008) has shown how American almanacs dispensed health advice that ranged from traditional cures and remedies to regimens of sober behavior, knowledge forms that brought together humoral and mechanistic accounts of cosmic order but fell well short of systematicity. Likewise, Peter Eisenstadt (1998) has drawn out the growing ambivalence of almanac authors about astrology’s explanatory power: as the ideals of the Enlightenment took root in public life, almanackers continued to publish customary knowledge but took pains to qualify it as “indeterminate in its operations, uncertain in its results” (Eisenstadt 1998, 156). Yet in our own post-Enlightenment moment, with once-settled forms of expertise called into question, is this not the status of knowledge more generally? Many of the pieces collected here offer sympathetic accounts of how people commensurate knowledge systems in their everyday lives. Our authors grapple with the power of the vernacular as a resource for meaning-making and explore some of its rural variants without consigning them to a time outside modernity.

⁴ See Isabel Quiñónez (1994) on Mexico’s no less miscellaneous *calendario* tradition, and Rosemary Chapman (2016) on the changing composition of almanacs in Francophone Canada.

How, then, do we hope that readers approach this collection? Perhaps with an eye toward Molly McCarthy's (2010) riff on the almanac as the iPhone of early America. "Just as an iPhone connects users to an outside world and provides a feast of tools designed to make our lives easier," McCarthy writes, "the almanac held the same promise." With its currency conversion tables and list of important roadways, it was an apt example of logistical media (see Peters 2015, 37–38): a cultural form with which its users *did* something. Our hope is that these short essays send readers off into the specialist literatures on which they draw, rendering the latter more porous, recombinable, and hackable. If the pieces function more as provocations than as definitive statements, then this, too, links them back to early almanacs, which were known as ephemerides; having registered the passage of days, they would as a rule be replaced at the end of each year. Yet we do not regard this association with the ephemeral as a demerit: as vectors of weak theory, inheritors to rural traditions of making do, these pieces struggle toward adequate representations of the unfolding worlds they conjure. They resist the bucolic freeze frame, insisting that the rural must be written and rewritten, again and anew.

Issue Themes

At this issue's core are the questions of how and why to render the rural multiple. Many of our authors are wary of the community studies approach that Jane Adams argued constitutes the foundation of anthropological engagement with rural North America: these articles' scales of analysis are decided inductively, rather than presupposed. They do not seek to locate the essence of small-town life in a single, "typical" place, but they also resist more contemporary modes of ideological synecdoche that, for instance, ask a homestead in the US Midwest to stand in for all possible visions of an ideal family farm. If anything, our authors approach such rhetorical moves as data, part of a lively social field in which any bid "to impose a 'definitive' rural domain is itself an exercise in power" (Murdoch and Pratt 1993, 423). Hence, for Joseph Russo, the hard-luck aesthetics of southeast Texas insist on local life as the measure of true rural severity, while for Lauren Hayes, stereotypical Appalachian values are packaged and made into resources for high-tech investment. Midwest metrics of agricultural yield are used to render some landscapes deficient in Alyshia Gálvez's essay, even as Kristen Simmons shows how a colonial sublime renders others open and unencumbered. These pieces prompt us to ask, with Danielle DiNovelli-Lang and Karen Hébert, which rural worlds are unrecognizable to us – unregistered and unscripted in popular media's displays of iconic rurality – and by what further processes of mystification they become so.

Another key question arising from these pieces is that of where to find the rural today. For some, the rural is a definite location indicated by various factors such as population size, distance from a major urban center, or primary-sector occupations. Even here, as for Briel Kobak and Teresa Montoya, much depends on where collective care and obligation are located within nested polities, or, as for Lucas Bessire, on whether subterranean temporalities can be articulated with agrarian life on the surface. For others, however, rurality emerges in forms that are not reducible to physical place or landscape features. In Gabriela Torres-Mazuera's rendition of Mexican *ejido* communal property laws, rurality is a set of codes and conventions that endure even as lands are gradually urbanized. In Peter Benson's experimental essay, rurality is a mode of affect and embodiment that sticks with those who ride horses and brand cattle, even as they move into other settings. For Kristina Jacobsen, the rural is sensible in the circulation of transnational musics, for Ieva Jusionyte, it is an impetus to notice how urban-rooted infrastructural expectations and rhythms do not adapt easily to all terrains, and for Andrea Rissing and Elan Abrell, the rural is a space of difference from dominant norms that must be formed and maintained through fences, sanctuaries, and declarations of independence. Borders and bordering may well

be integral to making sense of rurality's ambiguous spatializations, from Alex Blanchette's sketch of ongoing ruralization in the former meatpacking district of seemingly urban Chicago to Catherine Bryan's account of linkages between the Philippines and Canada's Prairie Provinces.

The remaining essays might be said to hinge, in one way or another, on shifting values ascribed to rurality in North America. Jessica Cattelino and Kathryn Dudley grapple with efforts to recast working landscapes as spaces for conservation, while Julia Sizek tarries with notions of waste and play in the California desert. Tom Özden-Schilling introduces us to urban-born amenity migrants seeking new lives and vistas, but Canay Özden-Schilling and Nicholas Shapiro show how less charismatic locales are nonetheless proving indispensable to the energetic infrastructures and patterns of habitation that underpin modern consumer comfort. For Brienne Berry and Cynthia Isenhour, by contrast, rural modes of repurposing ground calls for creative reuse and circular economics that challenge wider fixations on capitalist growth. Even as new ruralities and values are emerging in these cases, we also see entrenched icons of rural life newly opened to query. For Casper Bendixsen, a child's farm upbringing flickers between cherished cultural symbol, antidote to urban illnesses such as allergies, and site of industrial harm. And, for Michael Polson, romantic accounts of the rural outlaw demand texturing with respect to sanctioned and unsanctioned forms of illegality.

Why, then, place these diverse settings under the sign of the rural at all? Why not join the chorus of critics who have argued that the concept has outlived its usefulness, given the fluid geographies of contemporary capitalism and the vitiation of governance at the local scale (see Halfacree 2012, 388)? For us, as anthropologists, the answer lies in the tension between particularism and comparativism that has long been at the heart of the discipline. Even as we insist on the contingencies and conjunctures that shape our various field sites, most of us also hope to produce knowledge that can travel beyond them and shed light on other contexts. Indeed, Matei Candea (2019, 133–44) argues that we are in the midst of a revival of anthropological interest in comparison, tempered though it is by the perpetual urge to mark a break from old, bad comparativisms. His formalization of the comparative enterprise is too complex to reconstruct here, but it includes defining the entities that are to be compared and offering an account of the nature of the relation being drawn between them. Both of these moves are contentious ones.

Comparison necessarily involves reduction, as certain features of a social reality that are judged to be revealing get designated as salient, while others that are judged to be uninteresting, awkward, or askew fall out of the analytic frame. Kim Fortun (2009) usefully casts this in terms of manipulations of figure and ground. For us, the category of the rural defines a space of comparison for the locales and lifeways presented in this collection. More specifically, this collection invites a comparative undertaking organized not (just) around the well-worn polarities of the country and the city (see Williams 1973), but rather around the country and the country, putting the sameness of that signifier to the test. Here, we follow Candea (2019, 346) in arguing that comparisons are strengthened and whittled down to their appropriate scope "by the objections they encounter." So, to the extent that the trends identified in what follows point in multiple directions, this strikes us as a spur to explore the differential production of space and value across these contexts, as well as possible grounds for solidarity and collective action. Rejecting a politics of rural equivalence sets the stage for perceiving injustices on other terrains as both discrete and interconnected. It is no substitute for the hard work of making common cause, but at least it positions rural people as agents in their own right and not as the interchangeable objects of others' abstractions.

Comparison also proceeds from a set of motives, whether to prove the lawlike applicability of a theoretical framework or to bring the comparer's own context into critical relief. The aims of this collection are more diagnostic in nature. Our individual research agendas have led us both to believe that various rural parts of North America are sites at which global processes of stratification and disruption can be

seen with particular clarity. Thus, even if you as a reader have no particular stake in rurality, we invite you to approach this collection as a sentinel device (see Keck and Lakoff 2013) that registers and anticipates transformations in nonrural settings. We also invite you to interrogate the uncertain coherence of “North America” as it is presented here and across the backfiles of this journal. The fact that the bulk of the essays that make up this collection address the mainland United States is at once reflective of our personal networks and the hegemonic worlds in which we write. The gaps and silences in what follows can, we hope, be heard as a call for others to join in the construction of a comparative field that arguably today exists more in name than it does in substance. Counter-almanacs await. We long to read them.

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