

Call for Papers

Re-Reading British and Irish Landscapes in the 21st Century: Nature, Networks, Identities

International Workshop
University of Mannheim, 14-15 June 2024

This conference takes its cue from the fact that various topical tendencies and events have refuelled interest in landscapes and the countryside in recent years, be it the climate crisis, the crisis of national identity in the context of the Brexit debate or reconsiderations of Britain's colonial past. It aims at exploring the multi-layered interest in British and Irish landscapes in the 21st century, as writers and researchers alike critically engage with the ideologically charged notion of the countryside by re-reading and reconfiguring popular tropes.

While the aesthetic of the so-called 'green and pleasant land' is still booming in the nostalgic discourse on England, there seems to be a return (or update?) to the pastoral theme in non-fictional agricultural narratives, such as James Rebanks' *English Pastoral: An Inheritance* (2020), as well as in fiction, such as Daisy Hildyard's *Emergency* (2022), which are both concerned among other things with the effects of a globalised (agricultural) industry. Ecological and ecocritical viewpoints on environmental change as well as the relationship between humans and more-than-human nature also determine contemporary nature writing; Robert Macfarlane's *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (2019) and Dara McAnulty's *Diary of a Young Naturalist* (2020) are cases in point. In this context, the hidden structures of roots and fungi and other networks of communication and connection are currently attracting great interest, as for instance in Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* (2022). Global structures are as much involved in the pastoral setting in these examples as regional identities.

Critics have conceptualised different ways of framing this renewed focus on landscapes and the countryside, particularly, but not exclusively related to the notion of the pastoral. Deborah Lilley identifies a 'new pastoral' (*The New Pastoral in Contemporary British Writing*, 2020) in a whole range of contemporary writers responding to the environmental pollution and climate crisis of the present. Besides, anti- or counter-pastoral traditions, such as those described by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973) as a critique of economic conditions, also appear revived. In a 2015 article, Robert Macfarlane documents the flip side of the idealised English countryside in the form of a widespread aesthetic of the "eerie countryside" (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane>), a concept equally central to novels such as Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall* (2018) and music albums such as PJ Harvey's *Let England Shake* (2011).

On the part of postcolonial and Black British literature, which is usually associated with the big city, writers have critically examined the English idyll for some time (V.S. Naipaul's 1987 novel *The Enigma of Arrival* being the most obvious example), but this trend has recently increased in pace with novels such as Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021), which negotiates the country manor as the seat of the legacy of colonial power structures, or the group of writers in Alinah Azadeh's "We See You Now" project, which comes together on the iconic south coast of England and places it in new contexts to reveal the imperial and global networks in which the supposedly insular English landscape is enmeshed (<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/culture-heritage/we-see-you-now/>). This reconsideration of Britain's colonial past is also at stake in critical projects such as Lucienne Loh's *The Postcolonial Country in Contemporary Literature* (2013) or Corinne Fowler's work on the 'colonial countryside' in *Green Unpleasant Land* (2020).

In light of these trends, we invite proposals for papers (20 minutes) on the following subjects among others:

- rural economies and global networks
- the colonial countryside (Fowler)
- the 'postcolonial countryside' and "rural networks of empire" (Loh)
- 'eerie countrysides' (Macfarlane), 'haunted' or Gothic landscapes
- landscapes and the countryside in crime fiction and folk horror
- ecological and ecocritical perspectives
- the pastoral tradition and new pastorals: 'black pastoral' (Greene), 'dark pastoral' (Sullivan), 'post-pastoral' (Gifford), and others
- regional landscapes and identities including the North-South divide and beyond as well as Ireland
- landscape and national identities / Englishness / Britishness / Irishness
- rural radicals: enclosure, activism, and the commons
- rural poverty, rural 'Others' (e.g., the traveller community), and the issue of class

Proposals may cover a variety of genres (non-fiction, fiction, poetry, popular music, and film) and should focus on contemporary examples.

Please email your proposal to both Prof. Dr. Caroline Lusin (c.lusin@uni-mannheim.de) and Sina Schuhmaier (sina.nathalie.schuhmaier@uni-mannheim.de) by **Monday, 30 October 2023**.