

**Beyond the Rural Idyll: Agrarian Problems and Promises in Exurban Sprawl**  
**(Kirsten) Valentine Cadieux, Yale Sustainable Food Project, February 2007**

Working paper; please contact author for updated version or citations

Attempting to provide a text appropriate to the style of the Agrarian Studies colloquium, I have written this paper in two parts, each representing work in progress. The setting is a pause in an ongoing research program about people who want to live on a piece of land that is larger than the average suburban plot and about what they do and aspire to do with the rural landscape. Part One presents a rendition of the most captivating theme of my recent research: widespread reproduction of pastoral ideals in the everyday modern urban landscape – agrarian identity appropriated to shape exurban sprawl. These ideals driving exurbanization relate to a persistent sense that the experience of living “close to the land” – or at least within a very solid chunk of landscape, or “green” – will provide residents with a more authentic and satisfying life experience and relationship with the environment. This main part of the text is an exploratory synthesis of some of the central themes of my most recent research; the next iteration of this story will involve writing in the voices upon which this synthesis is based – in the form of selections from the several hundred pages of relevant interview transcripts upon which I’m reporting – and also more specific description and analysis of their landscapes and the transformations they have effected.

Part Two poses possibilities for exploring the implications of the shaping of modern urbanization by this powerful pastoral narrative. While Part One attempts to form the skeleton of a paper to report research so far in the context of the concept of “conspicuous production,” the exploration in Part Two takes much more speculative forms: research plan, exploratory speculation, invitation for conversation. This seminar takes place in close geographical proximity to the birthplace of the term “exurbia,” and so this text is, suitably, written within the landscape narrative toward which it gestures.

### **Context**

Various ways of constructing stories about “urban sprawl” benefit certain authors (such as central state and municipal planning agencies and real estate developers<sup>1</sup>) and shape certain kinds of agency vis-à-vis environmental planning. Review of the history of North American sprawl and sprawl literature<sup>2</sup> suggests that these stories and the subject positions related to them – supposed to address sprawl, or to be *anti*-sprawl – appear to *reproduce* sprawl, both by facilitating rational development (planned urban growth that may not technically qualify as “sprawl,” but nonetheless qualifies aesthetically in vernacular culture) and by fueling alarmist and escapist narratives and trajectories vis-à-

---

<sup>1</sup> Wekerle, Gilbert, Sanders, Logan, Rutherford

<sup>2</sup> work in progress: Taylor and Cadieux

vis the city (exurbanization). In my current work, I am trying to address this reproduction, which indicates mismatches in the relationship between stories of sprawl and the ways in which sprawl is addressed. I focus particularly on ideas about and plans for “greenspace,” both public and private, and try to understand the ways in which expressions of desire for greenspace encode a complex language of environmental decision making that is only very partially included in existing public processes for environmental decision making.

The concept of “conspicuous production” may help decode the way that people act on exurban landscape ideals. As a framework, conspicuous production provides a set of practices and concepts that people use to explore their social and environmental ideology, and to claim for themselves the moral authority of agriculturalists. This appropriation may tend to take a form that inhibits public negotiation of land management ideology. The exploration of what it means to know what to do with the land, and the experience of resisting and contesting expert knowledge may, however, in an optimistic reading, also lead people into a more politicized engagement in environmental management discourses.

Central contentions of the model explored here are that particular discourses of nature and of agrarianism encourage ways of behaving and of forming identities that are both naturalized and also not given outlets for participation in the planning processes motivated by those same discourses. This situation frustrates political engagement and encourages symbolic resolution rather than meaningful critique or exploration of issues and situations (such as the problems following from urban sprawl) that people are often stirred up enough about to invest considerable energy into efforts at change.

The model of conspicuous production may provide insight into ways that the categories of nature and agriculture are fetishized, naturalized, and commodified – and also into those processes people use to attempt to denaturalize, decommodify, and defetishize both nature and agriculture – particularly through urban agriculture, linked to critical urban social theory and critiques of development ideology. The following section provides a brief introduction to the phenomena of exurbanization and sprawl, and lays out some of the tensions between urban and rural as they are symbolized in exurbia.

## **The phenomenon of exurbanization**

In 1955, the flippant but thoughtful sociological journalist A.C. Spectorisky published a book about a contemporary version of the rural idyll. His modern day counterpart David Brooks has recently written more or less the same book under the title *Bobos in Paradise*; Spectorisky called his simply *The Exurbanites*. Describing the everyday habits of the bourgeois bohemian (bobo) as he [*sic*] commutes from his ruralesque haven to his urban place of high-powered employment, Spectorisky sketched out a story of urban disillusionment, rural promise, and suburban ennui that has been kept well polished in the varied discourses treating “urban sprawl,” “smart growth,” and “livable cities.” Cultural analysts such as Raymond Williams and Leo Marx have offered insightful analyses of the phenomenon, and have pointed out the persistence of the rural idyll in urbanized societies. In fact, critiques of the urban have been made through the valorization of the rural for just about as long as we have recorded texts.

Exurbanization is often defined in terms of its location, density, morphology, or aesthetic. It is the outer (or “deep”) suburbs, with spacious houses spaced at low density (often on plots of several acres), and an emphasis on *green* in the spaces between houses – in the form of “nature,” “the countryside,” or both.<sup>3</sup> Exurbia is the fastest growing land use in the United States, and because of its extensive use of land, it is an increasingly *large* use of land; recent studies of exurban settlement patterns have shown that exurbs cover up to fifteen times as much land as areas settled at urban density in the U.S. Because the lots are large and often located in high amenity landscapes, exurban homes tend to be more expensive than urban or suburban counterparts – although land far from commercial centers is often cheaper per area, so equivalent lots are less expensive. Exurbanization thus comprises a complex motivational mix in terms of real estate, with an underexplored heterogeneity of class and income and property value.<sup>4</sup> Many exurbanizing areas share similar trajectories of political economy, with flagging production (often attributed to globalized markets) contributing to real estate speculation

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a conceptual “green” that may well be brown, as western ranchlands constitute a significant portion of the land area considered exurban. Dorst 1989, Brown et al. 2005, Hanson et al. 2005, Cadieux and Taylor, under review.

<sup>4</sup> A contiguous sample in the Toronto case, for example, included within a one kilometer stretch of one concession some of the wealthiest families in the province on hundred hectare blocks and retail employees on .3 hectare blocks, all with horses and a similar story of wanting to live in the country.

and (often controversial) conversion of productive land to residential. I return briefly to the political economy of exurban land valuation below; however, in this paper I mostly concentrate on the experience and activity of individual households in exurban contexts.

Households generally move into exurbia from the city or suburbs, often at a life stage transition, such as retirement or the starting of a family.<sup>5</sup> One of the centrally defining features of exurbia is that most residents retain significant connections to adjacent urban areas (employment, association and familial connections, shopping habits, etc.). Commuting relationships between exurbs and cities are not always adjacent, further complicating already complex suburban patterns of adjacent urban dispersion and commuting. Partly due to the role landscape amenity plays in the decision to exurbanize, what has been called the “amenity migration” of exurbanization is often non-contiguous; particular attention has been paid to the exurban phenomena of ranchettes in the American West (often owned by commuters from one or another coast) and second homes in high-amenity international (New Zealand, Guatemala) landscapes in addition to wealthy enclaves forming outer rings around major U.S. (as well as Canadian, Australian, European, and Chinese) metropolitan areas.<sup>6</sup>

The move to exurbia can be freighted with tremendous expectation – a recent sociology of amenity migration claims its central themes are illusion and disillusionment – and as I have argued elsewhere, exurbia, as a symbolic landscape, is in some ways as much an aesthetic and symbolic formation as a settlement form.<sup>7</sup> Even if exurbanization were not a major land use,<sup>8</sup> its impact extends beyond the actual physical domain of exurbs themselves and into the imagination of the American dream home. The importance of exurban archetypes can be seen clearly in the imagery and vocabulary of advertisements for much denser and more urban suburbs, and particularly in the language that is shared across competing discourses that, on the one hand, promote and, on the other, attempt to prevent urban dispersion.

---

<sup>5</sup> Based on current trends, Cromartie and Nelson have projected that baby boomer retirement is likely to inject over \$3,000,000,000 into exurban real estate – tension with the recent Brookings argument about exurbs comprising only 6% of new development – and this in tension with a companion argument about the importance of the archetypes represented and their reproduction.

<sup>6</sup> Hurley and Walker, Walker and Fortmann; Johansson; Luka; Leichenko and Solecki 2005; Hendrix 2006

<sup>7</sup> Dorst 1989; Cadieux and Taylor

<sup>8</sup> as a recent Brookings Institution report argues, trying to downplay the importance of exurbanization by noting that only 6% of new development qualifies as exurban

Urban and land use planners express concern over exurbs for a number of reasons – from the more subtle concern with the destabilizing effect on rural communities of exurbanites who arrive with illusions and depart disillusioned (in three years, several informants have suggested: one of excitement about the rural idyll, one to realize how much work it takes, and a third to decide to leave and to sell) to more prosaic (and saleable) concerns about the fiscal (and now environmental) impacts of low-density development: the costs of curbs, services, and the impact of traffic and other manifestations of urbanization. A significant amount of the planning pertaining to exurbs has to do with minimizing the negative effects of residential settlement on surrounding rural and productive land uses.

The tense and contested urban-rural relationship at the exurban fringe is fraught with irony, and it is at this contentious intersection that my research (and this paper) takes place. The negative view of exurbanization sees it as encroachment, sees “Being in a country place while remaining connected to a city for work and entertainment” not as “a rural life” or “rural reinhabitation,” but as “an increase of urban area,” an onerous demand for “urban amenities in the country,” as Janisse Ray wrote in her colloquium paper a few weeks ago. At the same time, exurban enthusiasts tend not only to view exurbanization as a positive urban get-away and to indeed see themselves as moving (or returning, even if they did not have their origins there) to the country – and to the simplicity of rural life.<sup>9</sup> They may even see themselves as “country people at heart” and as reinventing (and reinhabiting) the rural, points I will explore below.

The rest of the first part of this paper sketches out findings from recent research about the ways that largely urban people see themselves engaging with rurality through ideologies and practices of exurbanization. People who decide to try out or to create a rural lifestyle for themselves experience (self-consciously or not) a fascinating tension between appealing pastoral tropes – as old as Roman country estates and as modern as the telecommunications that enable transnational e-commuting from high-amenity landscapes to high-power centers of capital and information – and exploration of counter-cultural critiques of the modern urban landscape and late capitalism that call these tropes into question.

---

<sup>9</sup> the false dichotomy suggested by Williams in *The Country and the City*

At the same time that exurbanization overtly takes over and replaces farmland, it also posits itself as a venue for the holdouts of traditional subsistence and radical new forms of farming – keep in mind how much of the local and organic food celebrated as the redemption of rural society by Janisse Ray (and many others) comes from hobby or lifestyle farms.<sup>10</sup> As these farms and related relocalization movements face market efficiency critiques and as farmland conservationists struggle to assert the value of farmland in a political economy of “post-productivism,” contradictions and tensions are evident in the rhetoric used to fight off sprawl. Historical, aesthetic, moral, and emotional valuations of farming and other cultural landscapes are reformulated in environmentalist terms that fetishize agriculture, obscure the reasons that people value the environment, and replace accessible bases for environmental decision making with highly abstract and symbolic scientific tropes.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, important moral, aesthetic, and emotional place- and environment-related sentiments are systematically left out of the explicit discourses of environmental decision making while they nonetheless underwrite the symbolism, rhetoric, and results of decision-making processes.<sup>12</sup> Tensions such as these point to the obvious and slightly less obviously ways that exurbia is a venue for and potentially valuable entry point into discussion over how to engage agrarian issues in our everyday modern urban landscapes.

### **Agrarians in exurbia: performing the rural idyll / myth / pastoral**

Over the last ten years, I have conducted separate studies in southern New England, the Greater Golden Horseshoe region of Southern Ontario (around Toronto), and the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand (around Christchurch), interviewing and observing people performing rural activities in urban or urbanizing places. These studies inform the thoughts I present here on how people use and perform agrarian identities in the conceptual and material shaping of the relationship between (1) urban settlement, (2)

---

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie Ogburn-Paige; Also consider the contrasts and continuities with the large scale producers of organic and redemptive food – these also use the same complex of symbolism, and may well have come from the same critical counter-culture, while also exploiting the market.

<sup>11</sup> Greenspace is defended against urbanization – but also against farming; conservation/preservation arguments are so often stretched to apply to inappropriate things [densification, particularly – perceptions of encroaching urban form in general]

<sup>12</sup> often having to find questionable scientific objections for legitimacy, such as the suspiciously planted-seeming herptile found on the development site...

conserved, preserved, or restored natural landscapes, and (3) remnant and recreated agricultural land. My work has been focused on the practices and narrative tropes that exurbanites (and people who aspire to the exurban landscape) use to shape the landscape of the rural-urban fringe/interface and their vision of it; this text draws on this work to sketch out an argument about the prevalence of exurban *conspicuous production* and to consider further directions for my empirical work.

Conspicuous production involves the performance of mundane productive tasks as part of the amenity of the exurban lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> My interest in conspicuous production has to do with the ways in which engaging in productive behaviors appears central to the aspiration to rurality that defines part of the exurban aesthetic. Most archetypes of exurbia are marked by appropriation of the ruralesque by “urbanites in the countryside.”<sup>14</sup> This ruralesque – the rural idyll or rural myth – involves a hybrid of what might be thought of as separate categories: “nature” and “the countryside.” Both the natural and the country life are part of the appeal of exurbia; here I concentrate on elements agrarian and broadly agricultural, which are more related to archetypes of countryside (although they are difficult to separate from tropes of nature and naturalization, as I will argue below). Before leaving aside the category of nature for the moment, however, I briefly note the centrality of nature to the exurban aesthetic.

The exurban aesthetic is based in large part on an ideology of nature – a naturalized moral ecology that rests on assumptions that nature let to go wild (within acceptable but ambiguously marked boundaries) provides normatively preferable landscapes.<sup>15</sup> The popularity of rural recreation has played a large part in the establishment of exurbia as a desirable landscape, and much of this recreation occurs in landscapes managed for wilderness or natural qualities. The romantic tradition that helped popularize wild nature has also had a formative influence on the form and content of influential North American environmentalist vocabulary and symbolism, a rhetorical

---

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Paul Robbins for encouraging me to concentrate on this interpretation and phrase.

<sup>14</sup> Punter 1974 “Urbanites in the Countryside” PhD Thesis, Geography, University of Toronto.

<sup>15</sup> Cadieux (2006 and under review); the appropriation of natural identities in exurbia presents the opportunity for an argument parallel to the one in the paper

point that is increasingly obvious in discourses such as those about climate change and sprawl.<sup>16</sup>

Although I am interested here in the role of production in exurbia, in all three case studies discussed here, preference was clearly expressed for natural, particularly “green,” landscapes in the urban fringe landscapes in question. I am putting aside this expressed preference for the natural in favor of examining interest in the productive landscape, but I first summarize preferences for the natural that bear on my argument about exurban agrarian identity. First, as several political ecologists argue,<sup>17</sup> identification with nature provides a convenient and accessible foundational moral ecology – in other words, the metaphors and processes evident in nature (and permeating our language and experience as they have evolved within the natural environment) present themselves as irresistible governing narratives: things are the way they are supposed to be (or we want them to be) simply because they are natural. Without belaboring this point, I will note that some of the most compelling stories that exurbanites tell to justify their landscape management strategies (including their agriculture) relate to their passionate desires to allow the environment (nature) to be the way it was “meant to be.”

Second, and especially in colonial and post-colonial contexts where residents experience unresolved (and sometimes unaddressed) tensions having to do with the transformation, violence, and exploitation of settlement histories, identifying with nature relates to an appropriation of indigenous identity, an appropriation aided by the romantic tradition – and related to the appropriation of imagined historical identities. Finally, aided by the moral certainty provided by the naturalization of nature, identifying with nature provides a means for critiquing aspects of the modern urban experience that individuals find disagreeable. Identifying with nature in this way puts individuals on the moral high ground; it also tends to devalue human agency in the environment, a theme to which I will return.

I run through these ways of identifying with nature in part because they are intimately bound up with the ways in which exurbanites identify with agrarianism, as

---

<sup>16</sup> Bruno Latour (in *The Politics of Nature*, 2005, particularly) makes evocative and useful arguments about the heritage of and possibilities for the relationship between nature, politics, and science.

<sup>17</sup> Demeritt, Robbins, McCarthy, Walker, Castree, Braun – and as cultural landscape analysts such as Williams, Olwig, and Smith have argued



well; agriculture is the naturalized historical state of humans, people suggest, even in cultural landscapes (like Toronto or Christchurch) where the majority of the population has been urban for most of European-settled history. Although the valorization of nature arguably devalues the human-shaped landscapes of agriculture to some degree, many exurbanites that I have interviewed describe a complex if vague association between nature and the countryside when they describe their aspirations for living outside the city – for example, blending and merging their pleasure in watching deer in their yard and the value of being able to drive by grazing cattle on the commute to work. Agriculture and nature are, by turns, merged and posited against each other: agriculture’s negative effects on ecosystem health are often raised, and images of agricultural countryside often depicts declining farm buildings and reforesting pastures. However, in valuing greenspace near cities, many people express a positive evaluation of both nature and country – but perhaps just as “non-urban,” rather than as specific landscapes.

My caveats about the simultaneous competition and blurring between natural and agriculture qualities of exurbia summarize a good deal of the results of my interviews about exurban motives and environmental decision making processes. Especially in random or geographically determined samples, exurbanites or exurban aspirants were likely to report their decision to move to exurbia in unselfconsciously symbolic terms – the most common response in the Ontario sample was that residents had been “country [people] at heart” and wanted to live in an appropriate country community to their identity; the most common goals involved *not interfering with nature*, despite residing in exurban subdivisions converted from farms as recently as the 1960s and 70s. The vague assessment or misreading of the landscape (or their relationship to it) represented in these aspirations does not diminish the sincerity of many exurbanites’ desire to do something better for the environment, or to live in better harmony with it, or simply to have more opportunities to interact with the environment – these confusions over what the landscape is and how they relate to it, however, often do interfere with the ability of exurbanites to act on their aspirations.

The vagueness of the definitions of, aspirations for, and experiences of “green” landscapes also helps to define the sample of exurbanites I have been seeking out, albeit negatively. In reaction to the difficulty of extracting usable data from vague plans and

implicit aspirations, I have sought out residents and land managers with specific plans for the non-urban landscape, those who want to do rural things such as grow vegetables, flowers, livestock, or trees, or to preserve or recreate nature in an explicit way. Defining exurbanite broadly, I've been sampling across the rural-urban boundary, including residents and managers of a broad range of landscapes and property sizes who express interest in landscapes in which a central amenity is the productive opportunities offered.

From small kitchen gardens to large afforestation projects, residents (and managers) express their environmental aspirations for most of the exurban land use projects about which I interview them in terms of an environmentalism heavily reliant upon narrative tropes reminiscent of agrarianism and the pastoral aesthetic. Concern about the direction of urban form and urban lifestyle is often expressed in terms of access to land for subsistence and recreation, as well as in familiar narratives about loss of farmland and rural ways of life. Describing their efforts to preserve or re-make the rural landscape on what in Aotearoa New Zealand are often called "lifestyle blocks," residents posit the maintenance or rediscovery of gardening traditions – particularly when they are paired with close-to-nature land use ideologies such as "organic" or "biodynamic" or "native" – as a tonic and counterbalance to perceived excesses and problems of urban life.

Cataloguing the ways in which they steward their properties, farming and gardening exurbanites relate their land uses to their exurban aspirations – both explicitly and also implicitly. Although few identify themselves as overtly anti-urban, many reproduce sentiments of urban critique, often tied to lessons they feel they have learned from the garden and from the culture of production – primarily an often repeated sense of instrumental environmentalism: take care of the land and the land will take care of you. People often identify themselves as "green" because of what they represent as a trajectory or transformation to a more ecological position through interactions with the environment, often gained through gardening.

In addition to regeneration of forest ecologies, most exurban land care in all three case studies involves the maintenance of lawns (most often left out of the description of environmental management, although sometimes mentioned in terms of the commitment required), vegetable or flower gardening, and small to medium scale farming, usually at a

scale manageable by family and sometimes volunteer labor (such as WWOOFers).<sup>18</sup> In interviews, residents emphasize their identification as agriculturalists by highlighting the importance of productive opportunities on their land in their decision to reside in exurbia<sup>19</sup> and by drawing on the ways in which their pastoral impulses have been manifested in the landscape to support their claims to knowledge of agricultural processes – and to express concern over the environmental degradation associated with farmers less in tune with such processes. Discussing their management decisions, exurban farmers and gardeners frequently use their material environmental experience to contest moral ecologies with which they disagree, including conventional received wisdoms of larger scale agriculture, such as the efficiency of monoculture or the benefits of pesticides and chemical fertilizer

Particularly in these cases where they oppose conventional practices of larger scale farmers,<sup>20</sup> exurbanites use their identification *as* farmers themselves – or at least their informed sympathy with farmers, to legitimize their position and their participation in public discourse about specific environmental issues. This rhetorical act is particularly interesting in these cases of contrasting two versions of agriculture because exurbanites tend to evoke narratives of small scale, subsistence, and conservative sustainability (diversity, tradition, strong normative social roles) – all agrarian kinds of stories.

The ways in which exurbanites mobilize these stories is also interesting. With considerably above-average educational and professional experience, many exurbanites appear to engage in sophisticated rhetoric. Demonstrating themselves both to others and to themselves through their performance of stewarding their smallholdings,<sup>21</sup> exurbanites broadcast their values in a number of domains, particularly through the use of print and electronic media: in the Christchurch sample, where I took systematic note of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Aside from farm managers for absentee owners or limited task specific positions such as lawn care or haying, the hiring of additional farm labor appears to delineate a boundary between exurbanites and more serious farmers.

<sup>19</sup> Even in cases where exurban soil conditions are much less suitable for agriculture than in the urban areas left behind – this is the case in the contrast between urban Toronto and many of its wealthy exurbs, which are located on poorer soils than the city itself, where many exurbanites who expressed the importance of gardening to their exurbanization had raised bed gardens of smaller proportions than many urban gardens.

<sup>20</sup> In the Toronto case, practices that are target include cash cropping of corn and soybeans on land sold to and then rented back from land speculators – practices considered irresponsibly extractive – and in Christchurch, target practices center around intensifying dairy farming that relies on heavy irrigation and fertilization of pastures in a marginally arid zone.

<sup>21</sup> sociological/anthropological literature?

production and transmission of knowledge and normative models of exurban land management, I discovered that almost all of the residents and land managers I interviewed produced some sort of narrative representational activity about land use on their property, such as websites, newsletters, or educational pamphlets designed to promote and to facilitate alliances with other like minded land users. And even those without printed matter about their exurbanization performed well-rehearsed stories about their land uses, justifications for these uses, and how their land uses critically addressed mainstream practices of production and urbanization.<sup>22</sup>

These textual representations that exurbanites produce and consume, along with the material landscapes of exurbia themselves, provide evocative traces of the ways that people act like or imagine themselves as farmers – as well as of what they get out of such identification, and of the implications and limits of this assumed agrarian-ness.<sup>23</sup> Especially in cases where exurbanites maintain high levels of connection with their urban origins (not only through employment and consumption, but also through sending children to school back in the city and expecting urban services and culture of their exurban assumed homes), questions arise from some quarters over whether hobby farming involves an act of impersonation, or of co-optation of “real” farmer identities and plights.

Conspicuous consumption, distinction, taste, and the commodification of the rural landscape identify most exurban landscapes (and landscape practices) far more than any sense of agrarian subsistence – especially in the larger exurbia of which the hobby farm is only a small, if influential, example. However, especially in new exurbs, where the transformation of (often flagging) productive landscapes into residential ones is still taking place, aspirations for environmental interactivity and stewardship find an outlet in the opportunity to shape the landscape and to shape a meaningful relationship to it. In contexts where production has become increasingly rarified in the everyday landscape, but where agriculture, particularly, is symbolically valued – especially in association with picturesque landscapes – it may not be surprising that agriculture provides the

---

<sup>22</sup> bridging abstract and material experiences and descriptions of urban-rural fringe landscapes and landscape issues with interesting conceptual spin-offs on agricultural identification

<sup>23</sup> (why are they willing to put energy into the landscape in these ways; how does it animate them?); links to Rebecca Gould’s work

symbolism, vocabulary, and landscape processes for creating a meaningful relationship with a new home landscape.

If part of the amenity of the exurban landscape involves the ability to create (and inscribe in the landscape itself a record of) a meaningful relationship with a place recently appropriated for a new use,<sup>24</sup> it should perhaps also be unsurprising that the transformation of place from productive to residential involves a symbolic gesture back toward the picturesque productive landscape, or that such gestures might be based on superficial understandings of the place and its political economy and moral ecologies. In fact, such superficial and symbolic gestures appear not only to be enough to successfully popularize the exurban landscape, but even to make it peculiarly evocative.

The combination of the rural picturesque with everyday practices that help encode and perform critique of mainstream environmental practice appears, in any case, to provide a fertile ground for the formation of attachments to place and normative stories about land use.<sup>25</sup> Despite the commitment of agrarian exurbanites to agricultural pursuits, however, agricultural economists in the regions I've been working tend to call all exurbanite lifestylers "hobby farmers," and to treat them quite dismissively.<sup>26</sup> Several tensions underlie contemporary debates around exurbanization – for example, between some sort of authentic agriculture and its hobby parallels and between the valuation of land for agriculture as a "highest use" and the recognition of agriculture's value as the landscaping of the rural idyll.

Many of these debates are about "rural decline," "rural transformation," or "sprawl," and they center on questions about what sort of activities and landscapes are appropriate to rurality. At the same time, in all of these regions, the (sometimes fraught) understanding that residential use is the highest income use of land is confronted by a valuation of agriculture (or, increasingly, conserved nature<sup>27</sup>) as a preferable use – a

---

<sup>24</sup> The appropriation by which a landscape becomes "yours," is particularly interesting in cases where it is not where you reside, but is rather a sojourn: where you are there for a short or limited time, such as on a vacation or at a holiday home – models, in many ways, for the growing exurban landscape.

<sup>25</sup> How does this kind of place attachment, and the process of its formation, exist in competitive or repellent or enhancing relationships with other kinds of exploration or knowledge about a place?

<sup>26</sup> outside of New England, that is, where hobby farmers may be treated better because of the recognition that what is being farmed is the high-real-estate value agricultural landscape itself

<sup>27</sup> or of nature conserved *through* the residential use of people who will treat the land right and conserve the nature on their surplus [central]

valuation buttressed by the symbolic reproduction of agriculturally flavored residential landscapes. It is to this paradox of sprawl, in which rural landscapes are simultaneously constructed as worthy of preservation and as desirable for transformation, that I turn in the next section, first exploring some of the functions of the environmental knowledge produced in exurbia, and then considering the apparent stalemate relating to engagement in social and political discourse, activism, and planning in exurbia.

### **Contesting sprawl, commodifying environmentalism**

This section introduces the category of sprawl, considering how it is addressed in the exurban context in order to explore the relationship between the aspirations toward stewardship and interactivity described above and the tension between engagement and disengagement in public planning policy exhibited in exurbia. I first describe some of the tensions surrounding the categories of sprawl and environmentalism in the context of exurbanization, and then provide some examples from public discourse over sprawl and exurbanization in Toronto that illustrate the way that engagement with pressing issues of sprawl is *disengaged*. Finally, I discuss ways that agrarianness is commodified and fetishized in rhetorical and symbolic moves that makes it appear to contest sprawl, while in fact participating in and reproducing the ideology of landscape that motivates sprawl.

The narrative of the countryside as a tonic and counterbalance to perceived excesses and problems of urban life is familiar (Williams reminds us of the similar story in Virgil's *Eclogues*), and much received wisdom about the modern urban condition is sympathetic with such a contrast of urban and rural. The naturalized normative qualities of the fundamentally anti-urban sentiments of much rural aspiration, however, raise important questions about the construction of the category of *sprawl*. A central contention of my interpretation of the ways in which residents perform exurban identities is that the dominant narratives of sprawl present sprawl as a paradoxical symbolic category that many, if not most, people feel compelled to vilify while simultaneously feeling compelled to participate in. A further contention is that the fetishization of agriculture makes it difficult to engage this paradox – and the problems of public decision-making that stem from it – in any but symbolic ways.

As I have described above, many exurbanites see their exurbanization as a materialized critique of what is wrong with the urban landscape – a set of problems often collected in vilifications of urban sprawl – and as an expression of their felt attachment to the environment, particularly as it manifests in high amenity landscapes. In the contentious politics surrounding urban dispersion, normative questions of how settlement form should be shaped and regulated are intimately tied to varied and competing perspectives on the landscape – “whose landscape” becomes a pressing question, and one not well handled by existing planning mechanisms. In the face of conflicts between existing landowners (often farmers) and aspiring land owners (often urbanites or the land speculators who mediate urbanization of rural land), the valuation of agriculture as a valuable use for land that might otherwise be urbanized becomes a central node of the policy and rhetoric of sprawl and urban containment.

In this context, identifying with agriculture becomes a viable strategy for those who wish to move to the countryside without having the rest of the city follow them. If individual households can buy whole farms, they might preserve the rural look of the landscape; in a parallel effort, municipalities attempt to set minimum lot sizes in order to try to preserve rural functions.<sup>28</sup> In the era of post-war suburbanization, many municipalities (especially those influenced by British Town and Country Planning ideals) used growth boundaries to shape urban growth efficiently and to protect farmland. Under more recent neoliberal transformations of local and regional governance, many of these growth boundaries have been abandoned or significantly weakened. Nonetheless, even in areas of ambiguous legislation about who is allowed to build in the countryside, those with agricultural ambitions and identification are often looked upon more kindly and given freer reign in land management decisions. This tendency is only strengthened by the failure of public fora for land management decisions to take into account valuations of land that are not framed in the traditionally legitimate vocabulary of agriculture (or the increasingly legitimate vocabulary of natural ecology).

---

<sup>28</sup> Lot sizes often increase as this strategy fails from 2, 5, 10, 15, 20, 33, to even 50+ acres. This strategy is also designed to attract wealthy households who will balance the additional drain on municipal services with payment of property tax – a strategy whose efficacy (not to mention equity) has been called into question but that is still widely used. In addition, large lot size exempts municipalities from the provision of services such as sewerage.

This situation contributes several additional tensions to the phenomenon of agricultural identification at the urban-rural interface. In peri-urban locations where uncertain tenure, landscape fragmentation, increasing tax rates, and market pressure are present in combination, farmers often find themselves in debates over sprawl, painted as poor stewards of the land for cash cropping and as conspirators with land speculators and real estate developers – whose purchase of their land, farmers often argue, is all that allows them to keep farming. The replacement of these conventional farmers by smaller scale, more ecologically minded farmers in a position of moral elevation achieved through farming may function as a significant step in the transformation of productive landscapes. And since hobby farmers, as a group, tend *not* to produce significant surplus for market (despite important outliers who do) and tend to allow significant portions of their land to revert to forest, this transformation does tend to signal the decline of productive political economies and their replacement by moral ecologies of greenspace.

In the midst of this often contentious and confusing transformation, exurbanites are central actors – they are the nominal drivers of the real estate market, for one thing – but the shifting and ambiguous markers of land use, ecology, social fabric, and politics do not lend themselves to easy comprehension or straightforward action. The remainder of this paper explores the shifting and duplicitous moral ecology with which exurbanites are faced as they try to enact their aspirations for the pastoral landscape. Starting from the observation that exurbia’s major paradoxical shortcoming appears to be that it reproduces the very urbanization process from which it claims to be escaping, I ask how agrarian ideals and impulses are translated into social action – or are not – and how they contribute to the reproduction of sprawl and the commodification of the aspiration toward rurality itself.

I am particularly interested in specific promises and pitfalls of using agriculture (as well as nature) as an excuse to develop and transform the rural into a somewhat mythical version of itself. At a fundamental level, the process of exurbanization is caught up in a humanistic liberal tradition of self-centered exploration and betterment. Where and how do the impulses toward betterment, the aspirations described in the desire to commune with the rural at heart, get turned toward – or away from – a broader polity and community? While some become involved in land management issues at a larger scale



than their property, becoming engaged in local politics and land management, many scholars argue that most exurbanites use the space of exurbia to withdraw into their properties. How do both versions of exurbanite interact with the management plans around them?<sup>29</sup> As an example, I note one of the largest growing high-impact but conceptually almost invisible land use, the lawn. Why do exurbanites plant (and mow) lawns (extending, in a recent Ontario survey, to 10-15 acres)?<sup>30</sup> Which exurbanites explore alternative land management practices, and why? Why is experimentation with land management so firmly associated with the rural, so that the question of how humans relate to the environment seems out of place in the urban and suburban settings in which most residents of industrialized nations live?

Rather than catalogue the ways that sprawl and agriculture both work as highly polarized categories that paradoxically invite identification with both polarized positions, I illustrate below some of the ways in which urban sprawl and agriculture work as symbols using examples of sprawl discourse set in the Greater Golden Horseshoe region around Toronto in the year 2004. The linked reproduction of common knowledge about sprawl, the city, and agriculture are evident in these three examples: a film, *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream*, the awarding of the Canadian Governor General's Architecture Medal to the Erin House, an exurban "country retreat for two urban professionals ... located only 45 minutes from downtown Toronto, in an area that is surrounded by suburban encroachment," and anti-sprawl activism leading up to the designation of the 1.8 million acre Greater Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt Plan.

In a climax scene of *The End of Suburbia*, James Howard Kunstler, a well-known critic of sprawl, stands in an archetypal suburban Toronto neighborhood and dismisses out of hand the future of suburbs, arguing that because the houses cannot practically be moved closer together, there will not be room for farming when oil ends, implying that the suburbs will starve and ignoring entirely the urban agriculture practices for which Toronto is well known – practices that could well extend onto the fertile soil beneath lawns in the suburban periphery. This first example demonstrates a common failure to

---

<sup>29</sup> Concern over fragmentation in the Catskills, for example.

<sup>30</sup> Environics

engage with the political ecologies of suburbs and an anti-urban shrugging off of the city that often characterizes environmentalist critiques of modern urban land use.<sup>31</sup>

I next quote at length from the description of the Governor General’s award, because it captures not only the blurring of nature and the agricultural landscape (in which this house is set), but also the exceptionalism of the exurban attitude and the paradox of exurban sprawl. The Erin House is a paragon of getting away from urbanization while creating more urbanization – from which one must hide (and hide oneself), both materially and conceptually. The fact that it received the year’s highest honors in the context of unprecedented policy debates about the landscape in which it was set can only highlight the degree to which the values that drive sprawl into the rural landscape – at the same time that they fuel rural aspiration – are sublimated and relegated to the realm of the symbolic or the artistic – values not traditionally given much standing in land courts. According to the panel awarding the Medal:

The main design challenge was to create a strong connection to the land and to maintain this ten-acre site as a natural setting for the house. The siting strategy was particularly important. The obvious location for the house was up on a hill overlooking the landscape, but this site would have been vulnerable to “view pollution” due to unpredictable suburban sprawl. Instead, the house was embedded in a tree row adjacent to the road. This decision minimized the length of the driveway and its environmental impact. It enabled the house to frame views of undulating hills and a wetland pond that had originally drawn the couple to the site. It also ensured that the sense of retreat and the views from the house would not be jeopardized by future development.

The house ... sits lightly on the land...[and] is an environmentally responsive design that builds thoughtfully on an increasingly populated urban fringe, where ostentatious buildings often dominate the landscape in a wasteful and insensitive way.

By rewarding this home for addressing many of the charges against sprawl, the promotion granted by the Governor General’s Medal publicizes the crux of the matter: as the public, you are expected to want this house, to value its environmental sensitivity, taste, and setting, and yet also to politely refrain from acting on your desires by crassly participating in sprawl and allowing your rural aspiration to become part of the “view

---

<sup>31</sup> which in this case is oddly achieved by identification with petroleum based large-scale agriculture, an irony that goes unmentioned in the context of the end-of-oil argument, but that supports Williams’ observation about the way in which the urban and the rural are used to mutually exclude and negatively and symbolically define each other

pollution.” High profile activism to protect the undulating hills around Toronto involved similar contradictions of access, desire, and insider status: some of the most vocal opponents of exurban development defended their own exurban habitation in authentic old farmhouses while decrying further development in melodramatic terms, calling roads “ribbons of death” slashing across the landscape, for example.

Case after case across the process that led to the ambiguous designation of a greenbelt to enshrine Ontario’s “protected countryside” demonstrates the mobilization of familiar aspirations toward rurality as they are used to inscribe lines of protection, insider and outside status (along rural-urban boundaries), and rules of moral ecology for the exurban, rural-urban fringe landscape. As the landscape of greenspace is repeatedly evoked as a desirable but fragile entity, made up of a rural hybrid of nature and agriculture, these familiar narratives of environmentalist aspiration can be seen as instrumental in multiple lights. Rural environmentalism is revealed here both a strategy and as a commodity – a way to argue for the preservation of already highly commodified landscapes, and as a way to legitimize exurbanization as a mode of stewardship that can be bought with a piece of the rural landscape – albeit, as the countryside is protected, as an increasing rarefied commodity.

The next section considers the performance of and identification with agrarianism in light of the mismatch between the symbolic language of sprawl and agriculture and the discourses of public policy and capitalist governance. Decoding the ways that agrarian identification stands in for and helps make comprehensible issues of human agency vis-à-vis the environment might help us wade into what promise to be ugly and emotional battles over moral ecologies, landscape preferences, and the protection of home landscapes to which residents are attached – and to which aspiring residents might like to move.

### **The lifestyle of conspicuous production: a modern pastoral**

Exurbia is almost always identified as a landscape of conspicuous consumption. But the stories that are used to justify exurbanization – including the governing narratives recounted by exurbanites to others and to themselves about what they are doing there and why – use a vocabulary and symbolism of *production* to contextualize and perhaps also

to obscure consumption and its implications. In the face of persistent discourses calling into question the problems related to energy overconsumption, urban flight, and loss of productive land and land use knowledge to sprawl and agribusiness, exurbanites have tremendous incentives – conscious and unconscious – to buy into the fetish of production that helps to redeem and sanctify exurbanization.

For the purposes of the current text and my current research, I have no idea how this fetish extends to or functions within the residential estates that exist at the interface between suburbs and exurbs – large lot subdivisions with farm-related names but covenants and restrictions against vegetable gardens and livestock. They may share in the model of conspicuous production (isn't that why residents need "utility" vehicles?), but I will remain focused here on a much more articulated version of the exurban "lifestyle," those exurbanites who follow through on their lifestyle aspirations and manage their property to include something more than a large version of the suburban lawn and specimen trees.

Repeating my caveat about the preliminary nature of this analysis, I explore the proposition here that exurbia not only provides opportunities for manifesting the fetish of agriculture, but also provides environmental and discursive opportunities for materializing the agricultural justifications, symbols, and appropriated identity that mark exurbanization. Further, I suggest that the process of realizing an agrarian identity that might otherwise be mostly symbolic offers a way for many people to negotiate a relationship with sprawl that is consistent enough with their larger sense of moral ecology that they are not plagued by the difficulties of trying to force the reconciliation of incompatible and dissonant experiences<sup>32</sup> that, it could be argued, are part of the drive to escape the modern urban landscape into the commodified haven of the rural.

As part of this line of reasoning, I explore the possibility that part of the success and rapid adoption of relocalization movements stems from the high concentrations of wealthy, powerful, media-makers in exurbia<sup>33</sup> and from the ways of coming to terms with many of the dissonant features of modernity and globalized late capitalism offered by

---

<sup>32</sup> self-deceptive cognitive dissonance reduction

<sup>33</sup> This was Spector's main contention, albeit before the era of local food – however, his exurbanites often professionally used the pastoral imagery they also cultivated in their home landscapes, and his book highlights amusing moments of suspicion and realization that they are tricking themselves into believing in their own commodified imagery of the rural

conspicuous production. These are large claims. In the rest of this section, I sketch in the shape of these claims using as a framework the concept of the pastoral. In the final part of the paper, Part Two, I outline possible avenues for further exploring these claims.

I set out in this paper to explore the agrarian problems and promises in exurban sprawl. In the category of problem, I have posited the way in which agriculture is used in a symbolic way that does not particularly facilitate material engagement with either the problematic issues of sprawl or the rural or with the environmentalist possibilities toward which exurbanites often aspire. The construction of the agricultural countryside as an exurban commodity exacerbates the problematic nature of agrarian symbolism, leading to unsatisfactory address of the problems posed by urban sprawl, most notably the paradoxical *escape* of sprawl, in which exurbanites move ever further out to find the pastoral landscape as it transforms the countryside ahead of sprawl<sup>34</sup> and to avoid confronting the contradictory nature of exurbanization.<sup>35</sup> The process of commodification, and particularly of commodity fetishism, exacerbates this set of problems, because each successive strategy for coming to terms with the contradictions (greenspace protection, conservation subdivision, new urbanism) can be similarly commodified in its turn.

The *promise* of the appropriation of agrarianism in exurbia is similarly multi-layered. While the superficial promise involves the symbolic aspirations for rurality expressed in being a country person at heart (a basic naturalization of the rural as good), the more critical aspects of the promise of agrarianism point out some of the dissonances and contradictions of superficial rural symbolism: farming is not necessarily “green”; rural aspirations often encode race and class biases; the modern urban landscape (even as it is manifested in rural areas) consumes tremendous amounts of energy and resources, even when ornamented with the symbolism of production (like wagon wheels, a perennial favorite). The relationship between the promises and perils of exurban agrarian identification are similarly multi-layered; the progressive commodification of rurality can apply to the critique I’ve described as associated with rural aspiration and promise – “good” moral behaviors that critique and address the pressures to escape, disengage, or

---

<sup>34</sup> This is John Fraser Hart’s “perimetropolitan bow wave.”

<sup>35</sup> The concept of “semiotic closure” is particularly appropriate here.

further commodify can themselves be branded as rural or agrarian, and a multitude of sins can be washed away through the practice of sanctified land uses (like composting) or the purchase of an organic gardener's services.

The literary trope of the "pastoral," a formal mode of expressing pathos (eliciting sympathy and agreement from the audience through emotional manipulation), sheds some light on the relationship between exurban agrarian promises and problems, and on how commodification follows easily from a pastoral approach to landscape, particularly in the context of attempts to express agency in the environment in association with urban critique. As a mode of expressing critique through the formal evocation of rural decline in the face of urban corruption, and of exalting the rural idyll as an escape from the evils of the city, the pastoral, arguably, is the conceptual model upon which exurbs have been built.<sup>36</sup> Setting aside the wilder implications of this suggestion for the landscape and its relationship to our landscape ideals, I focus instead on some elements of land-use decision making processes that the concept of the pastoral highlights.

From the perspective of public planning of environmental management in exurbanizing places, one of the most problematic aspects of sprawl is the failure of planning policy to gain purchase on the fraught relationship between the "problems" of sprawl and the "promises" of exurbia. One suggestion following from the close match between the trope of the pastoral and the landscape of exurbia ("a place apart," found by "an outsider, preferably an urbanite for whom the country offers a welcome change"<sup>37</sup>) has to do with the deep and almost invisible cultural ruts that have helped shape and naturalize exurbia as a desirable landscape. This naturalization complicates the explicit discourses of environmental management decision making that rarely take such cultural roots for landscape into account, especially in the context of the emotionally charged experience of and attachment to place and landscape involved, but not really allowed or accounted for, in public land management fora.

Further explication of the concept of the pastoral helps further explore the ways in which people often don't want to think about planning, or the need for planning, or about

---

<sup>36</sup> I make this argument in a much more extended form in my dissertation, and would be happy to discuss it – or any of the other missing citations here – further.

<sup>37</sup> Magowan 1988: *Narcissus and Orpheus: Pastoral in Sand*, Fromentin, Jewett, Alain-Fournier and Dinesen, p.7

unconsciously held ideals of moral ecology. In her 1999 survey of mid-century European critical urban social theory, the architectural historian Hilde Heynen applies the concept of the pastoral to rhetorical attempts to smooth over the dissonances and mismatches that she argues are inherent in modern urban experience. Likening attachment to a pastoral illusion of consistent progress to a kind of fundamentalism, Heynen points out the way that stories that smooth over snags are, in fact, quite important to the operation of the world around us – but are also dangerous and in opposition to the emancipatory work implied in liberal humanist ideals of progress. Heynen’s project in *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* involves a call for recognizing and engaging the dialectic between obfuscatory pastoral narratives or impulses and the “counterpastoral” recognition of the dissonance, disjuncture, and challenge present in the experience of everyday life.

Although this rendition of Heynen’s reading of the pastoral is highly condensed, it offers a way to interpret the pastoral “lifestyle” of exurbia not only as a way to mask negative experiences that lead to cognitive dissonance (and the pastoral smoothing of cognitive dissonance reduction), but also as a positive story that contrasts and might conceivably address some of these constant problems. In this light, the badge of “lifestyle,” a “badge” that many argue is worn lightly as a conspicuous and commodified aspect of consumer identity, “rather than [expressing] a commitment to environmental aspiration per se,”<sup>38</sup> might be seen as a more or less explicit marker of the intention to critically engage with problematic dominant landscape ideologies. “Lifestyle” is not immediately recognizable as a mode of radical social change or resistance, and this engagement is likely to exist in constant tension with the disengaging co-optation of commodification, naturalization, and aestheticization that may characterize exurbanization.

The narrative of transformation that appears to accompany conspicuous production, however, involves a dramatic recognition of the pressures to *disengage* from radical or politicized engagement. This narrative of awakening or recognition in the exurban land use context often involves food, and a moment of noticing alienation from production and consequently experiencing an insight into issues of political economy and

---

<sup>38</sup> Sowman 2004.

ecology in everyday life.<sup>39</sup> These insights are often encountered in the context of gardening or engaging critical local food networks, perhaps because food culture is considered so universal, while relations of food production have been such a central and contentious part of imperial trade relationships. Local food networks link insights about production in everyday life to issues such as hunger, inequitable terms of trade, agro-industrial agendas, and the relationship of the future of food to the future of capitalism. These are links that offer moral support for and encourage the conspicuousness of production, and that provide an encouraging outlet for environmentalist aspirations. However, exurban producers rarely engage the political economy of production at a more than aesthetic scale, and their activism encounters a mismatch between symbolic aesthetic and material political economy

## **Part II: Exploring conspicuous production; studying the exurban counter-promise of critical neo-agrarians**

I have claimed above that “part of the success and rapid adoption of relocalization movements stems from ... ways of coming to terms with many of the dissonant features of modernity and globalized late capitalism offered by conspicuous production.” Recognizing the idealism involved in the analysis I’ve presented of conspicuous production, and of the comparatively small percentage of exurbanites who engage critically with such practices, this concept presents me with challenges in further research about what people get out of their participation in sprawl, and particularly out of their appropriation of agrarianism. This second section of my text is a briefly sketched exploration of the issues involved in continuing with research that seems likely to be illuminating but unpopular with multiple audiences. In addition to exurbanites, most farmers, conservationists, developers, and public policy planners also do not particularly want to hear or talk about the ways that they participate in sprawl or that more explicit consideration of the complex cultural motivations involved in exurbia might lead to more

---

<sup>39</sup> One of my favorite examples: “I first became focused on education when my children had a friend over to stay [and I was getting] eggs from our wee bantams, and the visiting kid refused to eat the eggs because they weren’t from the supermarket. The eggs from the bantams, they’re small, and maybe it had a bit of poo on it, and the kid could tell and thought food should come from the supermarket not from the backyard.”



satisfactory decision-making processes. In fact, even in academic explorations of the topic, most researchers stop at the boundaries of individuals' or household motivations and offer disclaimers about disciplinary specialty – usually at the same time they suggest that understanding such motivations may be key to addressing some of the mismatches between motivation and practice in the realm of exurbia.<sup>40</sup>

This exploration of methods begins with my reaction to what I have found so far in exurbia, and with my motives for the new directions of further work. As I interview exurbanites and work within local food networks here in New England, I am motivated by my puzzlement about the paradoxes of commodification, by the research possibilities offered in the nearby exurbs, and also by the desire to make my research useful in bridging conversations about land use and landscape ideology – across disciplines such as environmental history, geography, and cultural anthropology, and also between university researchers in environment and planning and community members and leaders who struggle with the frustrations of the paradoxes of sprawl and rural decline. Broadening the discourse on exurban land preservation to include more explicitly the motives that drive both exurbanization and food activism might allow public environmental decision-making to better incorporate alternative forms of urbanization that address structural problems of the modern urban landscape rather than planning them into the periphery, both locally and globally.

As I lay it out here, this research has two components: an extension of the exurban ethnography I describe above into a more systematic and larger New England case study, and an historical survey comparing narratives of current agrarian action and critique in exurbia to narratives about the creation of exurbia explored through research into early century land managers' documents in the Yale archives. The parallel strands of research include a specific focus on the role of the concept of production in determining land use ideology in the exurbs.

Some of the largest methodological challenges facing this work involve the relationship between exurbanites at large and the small samples who engage in conspicuous production. I recognize the biases and un-representativeness of samples focused on production, but I also recognize the challenges involved in eliciting

---

<sup>40</sup> Cadieux 2001

information about land use and land use ideology from residents who have not thought explicitly about their environmental goals or practices. Thus, I am considering ways to ascertain the relationship between small, specific, local sample findings and larger exurban sentiments (particularly in terms of questions such as whether [and how] people consciously or unconsciously respond to sprawl alarmism by reproducing sprawl).

In addition, plagued by a persistent sense of over interpretation, I want to confirm my analysis by investigating more specifically the functions that conspicuous production fulfill in exurbia. How do exurbanites experience the limitations of residential production? Some of these limits seem quite evident in the findings from my recent research; how do I sensitively discuss them, especially when they point to interpretations of exurbanization difficult or unpleasant for exurbanites to own up to? Because I am interested in the ways in which residents and land managers take their material experiences and act on them in social and political domains, I attempt to focus in my ethnographic practices on the questions and pressing issues raised and emphasized by respondents, and to consider how they relate to my organizing questions, without forcing reconciliation. However, in all three ongoing study areas, I have reached an impasse related to the arguable mismatch between the normative (local and small) scale of conspicuous and critical production and the existing scale of consumption and of the political economy of mainstream production. Although a few intrepid souls are eager to explore the dissonances of this mismatch, most exurbanites do not seem eager to be reminded of it by inquiring ethnographers.

I am coping with hitting this wall in my inquiry by examining the representations (and material landscapes) that exurbanites produce and consume, as well as the vectors of transmission of these representations of and knowledge about landscapes. In addition to current representations, I am also turning to archived documents of leading land managers at exurbia's inception to search for common and contrasting motives and activities that contribute to agrarian identification in post-agricultural urbanizing regions. I am interesting in how early twentieth-century land managers, with their emphasis on rational production and civic engagement, imagined urban-rural fringes as something more than recreational escape, and how current neo-agrarians rely upon and reinterpret this vision.

In my historical survey of the concept of production (as an amenity, particularly), and how symbols of production have come to be a privileged while productive processes are kept out of sight, I am interested in the role and influence of land use managers and ideologues in mediating the marriage of radical increases in residential mobility with particular ideologies of land use, vis-à-vis the city, nature, modernization, and the production and distribution of commodities. I focus particularly on two aspects of the way in which land use managers envisioned and disciplined acceptable and desirable urban and peri-urban land uses. First, I am interested in exploring how they represented the translation of their environmental ideals into everyday life and land use, at the urban periphery, especially in terms of the ways in which their social and environmental improvement agendas were carried through into prescriptions for the production of spaces and identities divided according to the ways in which they reflect productivity (especially in relation to my other category of interest, “nature”). The normative preferences and biases of these people who organized and authored policies for urban growth, natural resource stewardship, and country life have become foundations for North American environmental ideologies. These early twentieth-century gatekeepers of management and planning discourses mediated the encounter between urbanites seeking the amenity of ‘the country’ and rural productive land users struggling with the pressures of rural disinvestment and agricultural intensification.

Second, I am also interested in how land managers related their vision for American land use to larger political economies, and especially to the global economy and to other national and colonial models to which they had been exposed. I am interested in this historical research in its own right, but I am also interested in the ethnographic opportunities it may provide. Especially in New England, where environmental histories make good telling, clues provided by historical research about the vocabulary and symbolism involved in the last hundred years of relationship between production, nature, and exurbanization may well provide a new array of stories to exchange in interviews and ethnographic encounters. Talking about the present and future in the context of the past may be less daunting, and the comparison between current and past versions of good production, good governance, and good urban form may open new

entry points into discussion of exurban ideology, motivation, and transformative intentions.

Exurbia is usually studied in terms of impacts, demographics, and servicing, rather than in terms of ideology, motivation, and transformative intentions. These latter ways of addressing landscape manifest in practices such as conservation or identification with particular landscapes; however, as I have suggested, such values are not well or explicitly incorporated by planning discourses.<sup>41</sup> I close with a final, and perhaps circular, note on the value of the category of conspicuous production for the research I have described. It is in many ways no coincidence that conspicuous production has emerged as a central theme in my current research. Not only is it something people like to show off and enjoy talking about (more than sprawl, for example), but the production of foodstuffs, in particular, has become a keystone entry point to larger political ecologies that provide important context for exurbanization.

As a perhaps surprisingly central part of the current trendy zeitgeist,<sup>42</sup> critical approaches to food and production provide handles for many people on otherwise overwhelming and ungraspable problems and issues of modernization, globalization, and capitalism. “Radical” food has become a nexus for counter-movements resisting free markets, agribusiness, and neoliberalization of governance, at the same time that it has become a heavily marketed, processed, and rarified commodity. From the vantage point of the labels on everyday food items, environmental aspirations can be viewed at the same time they are being co-opted; as food activists work to maintain the meaning of categories such as “organic” and “local,” the slipperiness of the relationship between commodification and decommodification becomes visible and almost easy to grasp. In any case, at whatever comfort level of marxian analysis, food localization movements provide an common ground on which many people connect over the ways in which

---

<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to say how self-consciously these values are held outside planning discourses either, as people are often simultaneously overstated and embarrassed about their NIMBYist tendencies – and here ethnographers run into a metaphorical Heisenberg problem when asking people about these values and practices.

<sup>42</sup> Or, if my analysis about the relationship between production and uneasiness with late capitalist urban modernity stands up, perhaps this interest in food is surprising.

ethical commitments and moral ecologies might play out in and exist in tension with the complex and ambiguous realm of food production.<sup>43</sup>

Combining the themes that connect activism in food and in exurbia, exurban food production provides an opportunity to explore tensions between production and urbanization – but I hope that this production might also provide entry points both for conversation and action. Aiming to articulate the way that exurban ideals of nature and identification with an agrarian aesthetic both influence and demonstrate contemporary processes of environmental decision making, I hope to achieve with this project some ways to help make clearer in public discourse the relationship between the local residential scale and the larger, more abstract – and yet intensely material – scale of global commodity chains. A clearer understanding of this relationship might have an interesting effect on conspicuous production, as residents embed their everyday habits into their landscapes, challenging the commodification of envioning, even as they confront a myriad of ways they participate in its ongoing commodification.

---

<sup>43</sup> Several critical geographers have written excellent political ecologies exploring these tensions in the context of food; see Goodman, Friedmann, Guthman, Henderson, Walker.