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Was it rural populism? Returning to the country, “catching up,” and trying to understand the trump vote

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In May 1982, news broke that heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar would lay off another 8000 workers, mostly in Illinois (UPI, 1982). The company blamed a global recession and high interest rates for the job cuts that, by then, had totaled 17,500.

The spate of layoffs in the ’80s reverberated through rural central Illinois communities, where wages drawn from blue- and white-collar industrial jobs had served as a pillar of economic stability propping up agricultural incomes. The loss of these solid paychecks only contributed to the sense of collective devastation in a region already in the grips of a national farm crisis.

“I was laid off in 1982. That was a big kick in the head,” said a former Caterpillar employee during an interview in June 2017. “A lot of suicides, a lot of divorces … It’s like being castrated to be laid off like that.”

He, his wife and I were into the second pot of coffee of a three-hour discussion around their dining table in Henry, a small farm town in central Illinois. While a Midwestern rainstorm poured down outside, our conversation dwelled on everyday life in Henry and the region. We went over schools, churches, families that everyone knows, shops that everyone patronizes and so on. Often as not, such conversation would linger on a business, institution or family that had packed up, sometimes to be replaced, sometimes only to leave behind another empty storefront or homestead. This became something of a game: What else has changed? What else isn’t there anymore?

I would repeat this intentional trip down memory lane more than 20 times during a two-week visit that summer to this community of just 2200 people nestled in the sparse riparian woodlands and sprawling farmlands of central Illinois. I met my interlocutors sometimes in their own homes, but also down at the bar, coffee shop, office, restaurant, Rotary meeting, grocery store, library and town swimming pool. These were bittersweet conversations; I heard fond remembrances but also lament and pessimism.

“That’s what you get when you talk to people in Henry,” said a retired teacher, now in her 60s. “You hear all the things that used to be here.”

Our second, routine topic of conversation, however, was always me as a researcher. Why had I come from Berkeley? What did I want to actually know? And — centrally to my work — what had I been up to in the nearly two decades since my family had moved away?

This non-traditional academic essay interrogates these intentional reunions with a swath of residents in and around Henry, where my family lived from 1992 to 1998. (For me, that covered fifth grade through my sophomore year of high school.) I frame this research as a still nascent effort at a methodological, reflexive “catching up,” a praxis I suggest is explicitly geographic in that it (attempts to) think across a spatial-historical divide. In the process, I also incorporate autobiography in a gesture to insider research, albeit in an exploratory way.

The electoral earthquake of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and victory thrust mostly white, mostly conservative rural geographies — especially the Midwest — into a political spotlight. In June 2017, I returned to a place now squarely reimagined as “Trump Country.”

An online news query today for the terms “Trump Country” and “rural Midwest” confirms this harsh glare has hardly faded in 2020. Polarized, popular discourse frequently presents this rural political imaginary as a bastion of regressive and insular politics, juxtaposed with supposed liberal, metropolitan pluralism. Diagnoses for Trump’s support “in these here parts” include, but are not limited to: the long death spiral of American manufacturing; envy and resentment at being “left behind” by burgeoning, urban, creative classes; open racism, misogyny, religious bigotry and/or heteronormativity raging against perceived threats; overdetermined hatred of Hillary Clinton; and a Democratic Party that presumes superiority over the “country bumpkin.” Notably, my interlocutors in Henry acknowledged their role or relation in each of these tropes.

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1. Within a month of Trump’s win, political commentators and voting analysts quickly noted that Trump earned key votes in many suburban and exurban counties, as opposed to more classically rural ones (cf. Kaidin 2016). Further evidence that Trump’s base in truly in the ‘burbs is visible in his fearmongering and pandering to suburban voters in the summer of 2020. Nonetheless, Trump also outperformed past Republican presidential candidates specifically among rural upper Midwestern voters, which deserves explanation, too.
As I headed off to Henry, observers had diagnosed Trump and other leaders and movements globally as evidence of a spreading “new nationalism” (Economist 2016) or, in more nuanced treatments, a range of interconnected authoritarian populisms (Scoones et al., 2017). Yet even a cursory view of literature before and since Trump’s election makes clear that many complicated right-wing political formations have been simmering in the U.S. and abroad for decades (Davis 2004; Davis, 2017 Frank 2004; Rosenthal and Trost 2012; Economist 2017; Hart 2019, 2020; Frank, 2020). Trump’s campaign and win reignited older debates about the primacy of race vs. class or the sociological vs. the economic in explaining the political (Garriott 2017; Douthat, 2017). Was the rural economy truly so bad? Had Trump indeed tapped (and set ablaze) deep wells of racism in the land? Was Trump still just a gross idiot to be mocked? Had he stumbled into the role of Great Man of history? Were Midwestern voters collectively hoodwinked again into (supposedly) voting against their interests? To return to the title of this paper and a question urgently asked by so many: Was it rural populism?

I will ultimately suggest that those questions are neither helpful nor particularly novel in response to the shock of Trump’s win. Instead, I argue for critical geographic scholarly and activist practice that interrogates how spatial-material histories in the United States are produced through dynamics of race, gender and class and can become enrolled in contradictory political formations. Concretely, this analysis opens a window onto how the past and present combine into narratives not coming back. In interviews, rural people upheld ideals of cohesion, mayor or city council enrolled in contradictory political formations. Concretely, this analysis

prices and farm productivity meanwhile are mixed blessings; the people to farm them dwindles year on year and increasingly the economy runs on capital and finance that benefit only a few.

Beyond empirics, this paper also problematizes contemporary divisive, political discourse. Through the analytic of articulation, I offer a methodological intervention that I argue is a kind of emancipatory geographic praxis for confronting regressive politics in the current conjuncture (Scoones et al., 2017).

1. “Catching up” in the country

In 1992, my mixed-race family moved to Henry before I turned 10 when my father, an immigrant from India and preacher, was posted in the local United Methodist parish. My mother, a white American with family ties to central Illinois, would work as a substitute teacher in town and later earn a nursing degree to serve in a small hospital a few towns over. My older sister and I would progress through the town’s public school system, seeing many of the same teachers, learning to drive on the same country roads and even working at the same grocery store. After six years, my father was transferred elsewhere in Central Illinois, and our family left Henry. Facebook kept me nominally connected to former friends, classmates and teachers, but I had not set foot in Henry in nearly two decades. When I returned in June 2017, I had just completed my first year of PhD studies.

During a two-week visit to Henry, I canvassed phone directories and social media to reconnect with former classmates, teachers, churchgoers, farmers, family friends and others. Twenty-two people sat for formal interviews. Another dozen or so people listened and chimed in more public settings that, with consent, turned into a coffee shop or bar rail gab session. Though interviews took the form of “catching up,” I was candid about research aims, implications and ethical considerations. I also drove a couple hundred miles of country roads to see again the farms and forests I remembered. I shopped once more at those businesses that remained. I attended a city council meeting, a church service at my former parish and a Rotary International luncheon.

After that Rotary meeting, the town newspaper noted my visit and offered dual identifiers — my status as a PhD student from Berkeley and my late father’s former position as one of the town’s clergy. While I do not claim to be pursuing autoethnography or native anthropology, I would endorse such an approach performed critically. Forms of “insider” research that study one’s own community, geography, social group, “culture,” or subject position clearly entail pitfalls such as biased representation and edited memory (see Taylor 2011). Yet in closed communities, past social relations, shared autobiography and actual sympathy power both access and insights that might otherwise be impossible. In work that inspires my own, Dudley (2000) is able glimpse and navigate family trauma around farm debt, foreclosure and spousal betrayal only by returning to a geography where she has kinship ties. Similarly, Garcia (2010) moves sensitively through communities beset by drug addiction. To use the terms of Bourdieu (1977), insider researchers are more likely to share their interlocutors’ “habitus” (assets, knowledge, tastes); “doxa” (unspoken social norms and beliefs); and familiarity with the overlapping “fields” of rural life (the church, the Fourth of July festival, the high school gymnasium).

Consider that my first legal employment, at age 14, was a grueling summer job that often falls to kids in farm towns in the Midwest: detasseling corn. I worked for $4.25 an hour, my part of a deal with my father to put in some hard work before we purchased a family computer that would I invariably commandeered for video games. I joined teenage labor gangs that loaded daily onto a school bus in pre-dawn hours for

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2 My sister’s experiences of race and identity in Henry were arguably more difficult and complex than mine. Anna’s sudden death in 2019 closed a critical window onto our family’s past and has prompted painful realizations about the partiality and situatedness of my own experience.
weeks that summer. The work itself involved monotonously ripping off the top of each stock of corn in a row that can stretch a mile. Any rows intentionally left with tassels will cross pollinate those de-tasseled. This perhaps quaint personal history powers insights about the nature of labor and machinery on the farm. At a most visceral level, my experience with “corn rash” and that bit of field labor is a shared experience with my interlocutors, and it informs my understanding of rural perceptions of manual, sweaty, bloody work. That summer also taught lessons of race quietly coded in rural society; a field boss in 1997 routinely lectured that if we didn’t work harder, better and faster, a Mexican work gang would “steal” our jobs. International migrant workers are indeed a feature of the Midwestern agricultural economy, yet they were also always made invisible, through collective remote housing and subtle racisms that kept them away from town. That they would be falsely rendered as stealing work from the community’s teens fit narratives of both whiteness and the select valorization of hard work — only by some people — in the countryside.

Such experiences do not make me a Midwestern insider, but they give me both access to and shared understanding with my interlocutors that power this research and its attempt to bridge geographic divides. This prepares me for the work of finding a door in what Hochschild (2016) calls the “empathy wall” between deeply divided political formations. For Hochschild as well as myself, that means Berkeley scholars probing right-wing political possibilities.

Henry occupies a place in political economic imagination and history: the Midwestern farm community. The settlement sprung up on the Illinois River in the first half of the 19th century amid the wide conversion of the prairie to plowed fields and the slow industrialization of commodity agriculture. Residents envision the town and its environs — through acts of articulation with frontier ideologies, pastoral values and perhaps Protestant work ethic — as the legacy of hardy pioneers and children of the soil (cf. Salamon 1992; Adams 1994; Dudley 2000). The riparian location would provide access to markets while the particular topography of the land would protect the first Euro-American settler-colonizers from flooding. The population in 1850 was estimated at just 400 people; in the early settlement periods, farmers in the countryside around Henry could send corn downriver to Peoria, St. Louis and ultimately New Orleans. Canals would eventually connect lands back upstream to Lake Michigan, and railroad networks would bind the rural hinterland in iron to the nation’s new commodity metropole, Chicago (cf. Cronon 1991), and ultimately to global capital during the international “settler-colonial food regime” (Friedmann 2004: 125). The town slogan — “the best town in Illinois by a dam site” — honors and colloquializes the town’s river lock and dam, situating Henry in this era of expanding commodity agriculture. Midwestern landscapes, and the politics and relations they engender, remain enrolled today in the international agri-food system (Friedmann 1982; Goodman and Watts 1997), the political economy of biofuels (Gillon 2010) and the production of particular agricultural natures (Castree 2003; Perfecto et al. 2009). In framing Henry and the Midwest this way, I rely on a geographic insistence that any locality or “community” must be understood not as static, bounded or natural but rather as “places” constructed and reconstructed through historical, contingent and interrelated processes and politics.

According to the 1990 census, recorded just a few years before my family moved there, less than one percent of the surrounding Marshall County identified as not white. When I lived there, that whiteness was re-rendered as an ahistorical, demographic truth: Residents know that the town, like the county and the rural Midwest overall, is overwhelmingly white. Then and now, this de facto de facto color line remained almost unremarkable for my interlocutors. The historicizing of whiteness I noticed came in subtle references to European ancestries of contemporary residents, European ethnic pride and the rehearsal of distinct European traditions. During my own childhood in Central Illinois (including Henry), my family made return visits to a historic rural Swedish settlement for crafts, candy and, yes, meatballs, in homage to my mother’s own Scandinavian albeit Finnish ancestry. As in many Polish-American enclaves, schools and banks in some Central Illinois towns celebrate an annual holiday in honor of Casimir Pulaski, a Polish-born military leader in the U.S.’s own independence struggle against Britain. At Christmas, we and our neighbors visited nearby towns for European Christmas pastimes of Wassailing, door to door.

This reproduction of silently white landscapes and identities also dialectically hides multiple racisms, past and present. Consider first how indigenous people in many parts of the Midwest are largely written out of community histories, presumed to start only in a hardscrabble pioneering era primarily of the 19th century when European-American settlers conquered prairie ecologies, "opening up" the West for a growing white nation. This false historical beginning assumes away and occludes connection to the settler colonial genocide of indigenous people who, for example, built massive social and physical organizations and stewarded/worked/lived in lands that would become the Midwest (cf. Denevan 1992). The small river bluff that protects the town from flooding also provided a “defensive” position on the riverbank during the earliest settler colonial waves of violence and dispossession. This is a possible pre-history untaught during my childhood in Henry and unremembered in my return as a researcher.

Today’s white Midwest is equally built on the impossibility of access to land for freed slaves and other people of color following the U.S. civil war and Reconstruction; structural racisms, denied promises of government support and a racist “we were here first” narrative left the Midwest almost always closed to black people trapped in the segregated, post-slavery South (Reid and Bennett 2012; Mohr 2013; Finney 2014). In the second half of the 19th century, Midwestern whiteness would also be available for partnership specifically with Southern anti-blackness; this can be seen, for example, in the pages of agrarian magazine Prairie Farmer, which printed racist tropes about black people from Reconstruction. By the time of the Great Migration of freed slaves out of the south, much of the country side remained out of bounds. Even when black farmers could find unworked land in the Midwest and a viable assemblage of crop and capital (wheat and reapers, for example), hostility and segregation contributed to continual declines generation after generation in black farming (Reid 2012). Such racisms are hardly a thing of the past across the Midwest today. Fresh out of college in 2005, I took a job as a newspaper reporter covering politics in downstate Illinois and Missouri, acquainting me with subtle, still-working sundown towns. Protests in the summer of 2020 around racial injustice and police brutality roiled white-dominated politics of Midwestern city and town after city and town, a testament to racisms alive and well (Burch et al., 2020; Parker 2020).

While the Midwestern historical color line largely maintained land ownership as white, documented and undocumented migrants, many from Mexico, have seasonally picked fruit and vegetable crops for low wages in questionable conditions for decades (Terry 1983). While this largely Latinx workforce is all but hidden in the actual day to day of rural life in the Midwest, it is periodically made politically visible, rendered as an invader, when implicit narratives of white, pioneer farming articulate to nativism and ethn nationalism (e.g. in 2016). Ironically, these precarious workers are in ever-increasing demand (Mercier 2014) amid the decline of multi-generational family farming in the Midwest (Ramey 2014).

3 A quite serious question for academics follows when I consider that Denevan’s challenge to the “Pristine Myth” rose to the levels of the Annals in September 1992, when I was 10 years old. If the arguments of this paper are to be taken seriously — for one, that Trump’s politics articulated a right-wing nationalist movement in rural America built on longue durée inscriptions of Whiteness — what is a theory of social change that honestly posits how critical scholarship such as Denevan’s could be made impactful for school children in the Midwest such that it might actually intervene in political configurations as they happen?.

A. Jadhav
I have made this historic-geographic turn to explicitly name whiteness as part of the social fabric of the Midwest precisely because it remains unspoken in most settings in my interviews in Henry. Almost universally without reference to race, residents followed the pioneer imaginaries with oral histories of the arrival of industry in small- and medium-sized towns that bolstered the area’s agricultural economic base particularly after World War II. As farming intensified and capitalized, new rural industries absorbed labor in towns and small cities, in some cases promoting middle-class wages without flight to urban centers. Rural and semi-rural industry became an economic pillar to complement farming. Henry and the region around it benefited from a BF Goodrich tire factory, a fertilizer plant (now a subsidiary of Koch Industries) and the town’s proximity to the urbanizing economy of Peoria, then global headquarters of Caterpillar. ‘There were good paying jobs — we had managers’ salaries,’ said a retired librarian. ‘We had engineers.’ Residents painted a picture of an idyllic small-town even in the ‘70s — decent work, good education, full church pews, winning school sports teams, locally-owned businesses — that offered many people a good life, despite economic ups and downs. ‘We were self-sufficient,’ said one resident, who told me what many others echoed: ‘You didn’t have to leave town to buy anything.’

More often than not, my interviews in 2017 included something of a game we might call: ‘What Used to be Here?’ According to the collective memories of interlocutors, between the 1970s and the 1990s, the downtown housed multiple grocers, clothing outlets, a Sears Catalogue store, five-and-dime-type general stores, an appliance retailer, a pharmacy, diners, bars, hardware stores, an ag supply, law offices, banks, insurance companies, multiple barbers, a florist, a Dairy Queen, an American Legion hall, the town library and a swimming pool.

The 1980 census recorded population peaks for both Henry and the encompassing Marshall County (2700 and 14,500, respectively) with steady declines since, mirroring a wider Midwestern trend of depopulation and depressed economy (Daniels and Lapping 1987). As of 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates Henry’s population at 2,209, an 18 percent decline in not quite four decades.

2. Imagining and defining America

In the run-up to the 2016 election, Donald Trump’s supporters became caricatures of a rural denizen, laughable and condemnable in turns. Rural Americans — a highly differentiated population in actuality, even in the Midwest — could turn on their TVs and faithfully encounter condescending late-night television comedies, pundits or mainstream journalists. I admit to my share of chuckling at Trump’s campaign absurdities and contradictions, which I took more to be more akin to a racist, sexist circus act than a serious political potentiality. But when Trump won, ridicule gave way to shock and fear. Like millions of others in the United States, I donated to and volunteered with progressive causes. In January 2017, I marched in Oakland and San Francisco, shouting slogans such as ‘Not my president!’ — a refrain of urban street protest that I argue contains an imaginary of the president’s faithful backers always at a remove from the purportedly left-political citiscapse.

This paper, then, reflects my lingering concern that much fear over, ire at and punditry about Donald Trump’s voters carries the risk of reproducing a politically futile, specifically geographic antagonism between the city and the country. This problematic political, economic, social and ecological spatial binary juxtaposes a popular, left political “we” against a conservative “them” (cf. Jadhav 2017). This progressive, metropolitan “we” are shocked and dismayed by the electoral victory of “them,” out there, in the red rural counties, in “Trump Country.”

Consider one of the simplest, even common sense representations of Trump’s victory: A choropleth map of the United States rendering counties Trump won in red shades and counties he lost in blue shades (for just one example, see Fig. 1). With variations on the theme, such cartographic pictures dominated TV broadcasts and newspaper reporting as the electoral dust settled. Read uncritically, these maps might bolster the narrative of a gaping political chasm between urban and rural, imperfectly indexed by the 2016 vote. In this geographic imaginary, “blue” voters shelter primarily in dynamic, multicultural, coastal cities trying to escape the “red” rural bigoted populist masses. As if to confirm the narrative, this same map also imperfectly measures both population density and demographic diversity in blue.

Such a map performs visual tricks. First, even if politics could be reduced to a binary choice for the individual voter at the ballot box, the politics of a people at geographic scale cannot. In the map’s own color schema, all jurisdictions might be better understood as only shades of purple. Second, the vast red swaths of “Trump Country” in this map are not heavily populated; yet this cartography presents Trump support (a sea of red, at most tempered by pinks and pockets of blue) as geographically extensive even if these counties provided him fewer votes than, say, suburbs which in many cases appear blue. In this sense, the map confuses a measure of space with a measure of concentration.

In Illinois, for example, a majority of all votes cast for Trump came from just Chicago’s Cook County; the five, large adjacent, suburban “collar” counties; and the two downtown counties immediately opposite St. Louis on the Mississippi River (Leip 2018). In total, the 20 most urban/suburban counties contributed more than 70 percent of Trump’s vote in Illinois. Conversely, one in three voters living in the state’s 82 remaining rural counties cast their November 2016 ballot against Trump. Yes, rural places have long conservative voting histories. Yes, rural people in the Midwest did vote for Trump, but they hardly formed his numerical base in the 2016 election (Hughes 2017).

In response to Trump’s political earthquake, Associated Press editors in 2017 launched a collection of reportage on politics as seen from Wisconsin, Texas, Kentucky or North Carolina. They named the project “Trump Country,” described on its web portal as “a series of stories from American communities that helped propel Donald Trump to the White House. In deep portraits of the places and people who supported Trump, the AP explores the intricate issues that fueled his rise and we ask: Is he delivering?”4 One headline from February 2017 reads: “Voters await economic revival in a part of pro-Trump America.” Another from December 2017: “In the heart of Trump Country, his base’s faith is unshaken.” Fast forward to 2020, another AP headline reads “Protests in Trump country test his hold in rural white areas.” I might laud an attempt to ask questions across geographic divides if the framing (and often reporting) did not simply drift to Reductionism of Trump voters as duped and outside the mainstream.

This spatial discourse also uses coded language: Conservative voters love their guns and hunt too much. They drive monstrous mud-spattered trucks. The land of “them” is marginal, outside the centers where “we” live. In this narrative, the Trump voter inhabits “the heartland,” the flyover states, the countryside, the endless expanse of farms and forests and scrublands that lack “our” culture, economic dynamism or modernity. “They” are in the places where “we” are not. This spatial dichotomy map on to other familiar binaries — educated and illiterate, refined and uncouth, city and country, lord and peasant. These tropes, known also to my interlocutors in Henry, reflect a long-standing, recurring elitist (and uncouth, city and country, lord and peasant. These tropes, known also to my interlocutors in Henry, reflect a long-standing, recurring elitist (and

4 The AP’s description rings with irony, if we take seriously the work of ortory stitching outlined later as articulation. In that analysis, yes, indeed, “Trump Country” is only “a series of stories.”
line retraces the town’s imagined, quaint agrarian past through an autumn “harvest festival.” A running gag invokes pioneering atrocities against indigenous peoples while simultaneously making this particular historical truth of Midwestern whiteness palatable both for the show’s characters and audience.

Nor is this discourse purely produced through fiction. Consider the deeply evocative but ambiguous documentary Monrovia, Indiana (2018), a supposed filter-less portrait of the rural Midwest. Without narration or characters, celebrated director Frederick Wiseman captures a cross section of public life in the small town of Monrovia, moving between un-narrated scenes of agrarian economy (primarily tractors and similar machines at work), church, school, local government and town commerce. This reproduces rural life as a combination of coffee-shop dialogue, town council bickering, anachronistic religion and visits to the vet, gun and pizza shops. Wiseman’s failure to penetrate stereotype could easily confirm fictionalized accounts of static, small and petty rural life.

In the extreme, this collective identification performs a kind of Othering that defines what is not included in the “we” as “deviant or non-normative” (cf. Mountz 2009: 328). A description and negation of “them” dialectically results from our description of “us.” In Trump Country, “they” who voted for the man are deplorably racist, misogynist or ignorant. At best, they’ve been duped and blindly vote against their interests. Examples of this theme abound in popular media. A comedic “gotcha” interview with a Trump-supporting golf course owner aired by Comedy Central’s The Daily Show and resulting commentary (Dessem 2018) demonstrates the durability of the caricature of the hoodwinked Trump voter.

My interlocutors know well this geographic frame. They recognize the caricature of the hick, redneck or hillbilly. Some may wield it comically about their own — as one might in familial company — but they also chafe at generalized conclusions about the oddity or supposed backwardness of rural “culture.” In other periods in Midwestern history, rural agrarian political movements have rebelled against this kind of elitism (Montenegro de Wit et al., 2019; Frank, 2020). Yet this antagonism also does political work for right-wing pundits and provocateurs. For example, Fox News’ Sean Hannity among others routinely, sarcastically refers to himself (a very rich man) and other Trump supporters as “smelly Wal-Mart shoppers,” an angry, faux self-deprecation that alludes to a particular Trump grievance but also echoes (and feeds) rural suspicions. Grievance also reverberates out of Vance’s (2016) blinkered “hillbilly elegy,” which I suggest deserves critical attention for how he articulates a politics of whiteness with his partial stories of poverty, in what is an ideological manifesto as much as memoir.

Of course, this discursive, geographic rendering of the rural has its reflection in historically produced imaginaries of the urban, black,
brown, immigrant, female/feminist, gay, trans or Muslim person as an Other for the countryside. Racism in the countryside is real and can be terrifying. Color difference stalked the marriage of my Indian immigrant father and Midwestern white American mother. At age 10, I did not fully understand the term “sand nigger” the first time it was shouted at me in my elementary school parking lot. Our experiences of racism were, however, not static; by the time we left Henry, I had numerous surrogate grandparents and close friends who nonetheless had never before met an Indian. Even if much of the community embraced our family eventually, prejudicial stereotypes abounded generally, from the always assumed “Mexican” migrant laborer who would “steal” farm jobs, to the supposedly crime-ridden public housing “projects” in Peoria or Chicago.

Here I gesture to the critical role of storytelling, narratives and speaking in the work of articulation of communal political formations such as nationalism or whiteness (Hall 1980; Hart 2013; Ekers et al., 2020). Multiple, partial stories of rural landscapes and communities are told and enacted by rural people themselves, and written into literature and popular media. Remember, as a historical example, the Prairie Farmer (Mohr 2013). Many narratives include histories that seem innocuous or apolitical, such as the proractted classroom lecture seen in Wiseman’s (2018) documentary on the contributions to state and national basketball history by “we” people of Monrovia.

Subtler are stories that enshrine a white cultural landscape by forgetting prior histories. As a fifth-grader in Henry, other school children and I interviewed local senior citizens for a book about the town’s past. Individual tales focused on pioneering and later Depression era hardships that Henry-ites overcame as sturdy, rural people firmly implanted in a white landscape. It’s telling that the kindly woman I interviewed for my contribution was a local historian and librarian whose own book about Henry was titled after the town’s “dam site” slogan. This oral history project — recalled to me upon my return to town two decades later — helped to naturalize for a generation of school children the town’s pioneer-agrarian-riparian origin story, occluding darker histories of native dispossession and racial exclusion.

The political availability of such deep, collective and yet partial stories is the focus of Hochschild’s (2016) account of conservatives in small cities and backwaters of Louisiana. These people, in Hochschild’s telling, write for themselves a narrative where the state, coastal elites, university professors, mainstream media and other liberal or Left standard-bearers are in league with an urban, (often racialized) Other and are arrayed against conservatives who work hard and wait their turn. They drift further right of the U.S. political center, eventually finding themselves to be, per the title of the book, “strangers in their own land.” Such a narrow, ideological story, of course, fails to account for numerous histories, but it provides insight into why mostly poor, white conservatives align against progressive causes.

Ray (2017: 131) in reviewing Hochschild’s book adds a critical intervention applicable not only to Louisiana’s oil refining belt but also, I argue, the industrial agricultural Midwest:

The state is not seen as their own. It is not ‘of’ them, but rather, destroys the thing that is ‘of them’ — their community. It over-regulates, breaks promises, helps others who are not ‘of them’, and is represented by officials who live off their taxes … [w]hat if we were to, as economists like to say, relax the assumption that the US is a liberal democratic state, or always acts like one? What if we were to think of the US state, in the case of Louisiana, as a historically colonial, extractive state, and now a neo-liberal version of it? If we were to do this thought experiment, could we then conclude that it is not that these Louisianans are strangers in their own land but that they are being governed by outsiders who do not have their interests at heart?

Here Ray frames the U.S. today as a case of ongoing internal colonialism (built of course by white Euro-American imperialism) with a national and international political economy that tends to extract from rural people and landscapes as much as it deploys racial logics to exploit urban workers. Hochschild finds this extraction ongoing in the petrochemical industrial regions of Louisiana, but we can see similar in the environmental devastation of West Texas oil fields or the mono-cultured industrial croplands of the Midwest. Historically, such colonial political economic projects also map to colonial discursive spatial projects and “imaginative geographies” (cf. Said, 1978; Hall 1992; Gregory 2004).

In this analysis then, Trump, his agents and their wavy partners among fractions of capital tapped into and further stoked historical antagonisms as strategy. Frank (2004) argues that conservatives in his home state of Kansas have for years been catalyzed to vote against their interests because they were also activated against abortion, gay or minority rights (i.e. enrolled in “culture war” with an ideological Other). This antagonism is reinforced through media (to wit: Fox News); political practice, including the conservative captures of statehouses and gerrymandering (Nivola and Brady, 2008); and the Tea Party’s muscular political organization (Rosenthal and The Trust 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Parker and Barreto 2013).

If we understand that political articulations arise in part from the multiple, partial and often conflicting stories about the past and present of the body politic, we should not be terribly surprised that,

[1]the presidential election thus also became a referendum on who Americans believed they were, and how they felt about those who were different from them. Ultimately, the election was a manifestation of the country’s broader identity crisis. As the United States changes demographically, socially, and culturally, Americans’ political identities are increasingly driven by competing understandings of what their country is and ought to be—a multicultural society that welcomes newcomers and embraces its growing diversity, or a more provincial place that recalls an earlier era of traditional gender roles and white Christian dominance in economic and cultural life (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2017: 35).

Producing visions of what the U.S. “is and ought to be” and articulating it to a political formation such as Trump’s ethnonationalism is surely a discursive project, but one always worked out in relation to material experiences of the social, economic and geographic. This paper now turns to those experiences as narrated by my interlocutors of life in Henry and the Midwest in recent decades.

3. A lot of things have changed

Henry remains the largest “city” in Marshall County, Illinois, which is dotted like much of the Midwest with small towns, villages and hamlets. In between, corn, soy, wheat or forest may stretch for miles, interrupted by an occasional farm house (see Fig. 2 for a 2011 regional land-cover classification). Much of this Midwestern landscape is an agro-industrial one, with long, complex histories of agrarian politics, coloniality and even populisms (Graddy-Lovelace 2017, 2019; Montenegro de Wit et al., 2019; Frank, 2020).

Seemingly remote settlements remain geographically interconnected via social, economic and family ties — living in/near one town, shopping for groceries in another, buying appliances in a third, visiting family in a fourth, watching children play sports against a cross county-rival in a fifth and commuting to work in a sixth. To see a movie, you…

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5 To be clear, it was “sand” that needed explaining. By age 10, I knew the other word.

6 Dudley and Hochschild’s work both support this argument even if they don’t make it explicitly. I am further motivated to take seriously claims of people in the countryside and to look for the roots of populism as material and actual by Scoones et al. (2017).

7 There are also Marshall Counties in Indiana, Iowa and Minnesota. In this paper, all references are to Marshall County, Illinois.
Fig. 2. Land-cover classification, 2011
Fig. 3. Nighttime stable lights, 2011. Note: White areas represent the brightest night-time lights, corresponding with the highest urbanization. For example, large metropolitan areas such as the Chicago-Milwaukee corridor or the St. Louis region are completely lighted.
might drive from Henry roughly 15 miles south to Chillicothe, a city of 6,000, which also has Pizza Hut and a Kroger chain grocery. But that’s also almost halfway to Peoria, a city of 115,000 in a metropolitan population of more than double that. There, you can find Big Box stores, a large shopping mall, hospitals, Bradley University, late-night Thai food or a muay thai boxing gym. (This social geography has of course been fractured by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.)

Viewed at night, from space, this Midwestern geography looks like a venous network (see Fig. 3); faint hamlets connect to warily lit small towns which connect further to bright large cities. Increasing internet access, though still uneven, has also compressed rural space-time. In Henry, for example, a local internet service provider began offering dial-up connections in the mid-1990s; today high-speed broadband companies serve Henry and cellular data connections in town are sufficient even for streaming video. “We’re not actually that cutoff from the rest of the country,” said one retired engineer. A local business owner of my generation quipped, “We get Amazon Prime, too.”

My return visit to Henry also offers a window into viewing the wider, rural Upper Midwest. Throughout this section I read narratives I encountered through and against a range of statistical, spatial data for the 530 most rural counties of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin.\footnote{\textsuperscript{8} As one retired high school teacher said, “a lot of things have changed.” Below, I discuss five key shifts.} As one retired high school teacher said, “We get Amazon Prime, too.”

Many that could left for school. And many that did would not return.

A retired high school teacher:

What does it take to keep ‘em here? Here, if you’re a mechanical engineer, you don’t have a job. The ones that get higher education, they go elsewhere. Ones that don’t go beyond high school, they probably can’t leave. When my kids went to college, I wasn’t expecting them to come back to Henry.

An important point also arises from data for the entire Midwest. While the percentage of people with only a high school diploma has fallen — a measure of improved educational attainment regionally — there has been a much smaller rise in the population with at least a bachelor’s degree. And in between, sits a group of people who attended a year or two of university, earned community college credits or received only vocational training. My high school offered such a program geared toward the same manufacturing jobs in rapid decline.

Second, the demographics that interlocutors couched as “traditional community” — always also a subtle references to rural whiteness — have also changed. “White alone,” the dominant racial census category, is ever-so subtly shrinking. So are households headed by the hetero-normative husband and wife.\footnote{\textsuperscript{9} U.S. Census data holds to heteronormative categories for both spouses as well as traditional gender binaries.} Similarly, non-family households — cohabitation by unrelated people — have also risen. Interlocutors often interpreted these changes as signs of moral decay of rural family values, yet these shifts also follow in part from social diversity brought by immigration. Interlocutors reported more people “from Chicago” (not unproblematically) eyeing real estate around Henry for second homes. Chatter around town, confirmed by a city official, is that one new resident intended to build loft apartments and a brewpub in an empty bank.

While describing rural communities as skeptical of outsiders, many in Henry also said they welcome at least the most visible signs of racial change: the mixed-race couple that opened a Mexican restaurant or the Indian family that bought the town’s last grocery store or the Filipina woman — the wife of the mayor at the time — who ran a second-hand goods and craft shop. However, in carefully chosen language, respondents very occasionally acknowledged the possibility of strife amid social, demographic and especially racial change. A retired teacher and part-time public official said, “We would not be getting the German or white Protestant base we’re used to. I would hope that we would be accepting of that, but it would be change.” The then-mayor, an aggressive booster, acknowledged occasional racist backlash against diversifying demographics but pivoted our conversation to a valorization of racial and ethnic shifts in the struggle for rural futures. “I do work to educate people,” the mayor added. “I push back a bit. Our culture is blending and in small-town America (community acceptance) has to happen. It’s about surviving … and diversity is a key.”

Importantly, my interviews demonstrate the role of story and narrative — both personal, individual and collective, geographic — in the maintenance or troubling of race and whiteness in Henry. Two interlocutors told of daughters leaving for college, settling in a metropolitan area and ultimately marrying black men. The mother of a former classmate, with the air of letting me in on an inside joke, said, “When people learn that she married (a black man), they ask whether she met him in Africa on a mission trip. That’s ridiculous of course to think that because he’s black he must have come from Africa. But this is Henry we’re talking about.” Another interlocutor confessed to glimpsing his white privilege in conversations with his black son-in-law: “I’ll say something, and then he’ll tell me, ‘Well, that’s not how I see it.’ He’ll tell me about how race works from his perspective, and, you know, it’s just not something I could ever have understood. Because I can’t see things like he does. But he’s teaching me.”

Third, social changes interweave with economic structural change. More women are joining the rural workforce, improving their share of jobs compared to men. But the pie of jobs in the rural Midwest is not growing apace, and so men also appear to be falling out of the labor force entirely. Higher shares of female employment accompany higher levels of female-only-headed households and non-family households; as noted, multiple interlocutors described these trends as social decline, resulting from “different values.” Threatened class position is another source of fear; interlocutors worried about the “kinds of jobs” that are left. Meanwhile, “development” at the rural margins often comes with tradeoffs; Henry residents in 2020, for example, debated in public hearings and online the economic and environmental pros and cons of protecting a waste storage site near the river.

Meanwhile, farmers noted a decline in agricultural jobs — distinct from a fall in productivity — that they suggest has both resulted from and further motivated rural children in finding “better” prospects off the farm. Yet this development, coded as it is with aspiration for work
Table 1  
Descriptive statistics for Marshall County and the rural Upper Midwest.

| Variable                                      | Marshall County | 530 Counties | Definition/notes:                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                               | 1990<sup>a</sup> | 2010<sup>b</sup> |                                                                                   |
|                                               | mean            | mean         |                                                                                   |
| 18–29 years old (%)                           | 13.67           | 12.96        | 15.94<sup>b</sup> 14.12<sup>b</sup>  Percent of population that is 18–29.           |
| Median age (years)                            | 37.60           | 44.88        | 35.27<sup>b</sup> 41.05<sup>b</sup>  Median age of the population.                 |
| Non-white (%)                                 | 0.73            | 2.92         | 2.73<sup>b</sup> 6.18<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the population that is not “white alone.” |
| Born in another state (%)                     | 11.67           | 11.89        | 21.45<sup>b</sup> 24.02<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the population born in another state. |
| Foreign born (%)                              | 1.19            | 1.93         | 0.93<sup>b</sup> 2.28<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the population born in another country (includes citizens and non-citizens). |
| Husband and wife households (%)               | 65.41           | 56.71        | 62.04<sup>b</sup> 53.67<sup>b</sup>  Percent of households where both a wife and husband are present. |
| Female-headed household (%)                   | 6.00            | 7.73         | 7.48<sup>b</sup> 9.09<sup>b</sup>  Percent of households where a woman is the head without a husband present. |
| Non-family households (%)                     | 10.83           | 15.12        | 12.19<sup>b</sup> 15.85<sup>b</sup>  Percent of households not containing two people related by birth, marriage or adoption. |
| Education, up to high school degree (%)       | 65.49           | 51.17        | 67.02<sup>b</sup> 51.16<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the population, 25 years of age or higher, whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or equivalent. |
| Education, bachelor’s degree or higher (%)   | 10.35           | 16.45        | 11.86<sup>b</sup> 17.92<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the population, 25 years of age or higher, whose highest educational attainment is at least a bachelor’s degree. |
| Employed, civilian (%)                       | 41.80           | 46.12        | 44.75<sup>b</sup> 47.48<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the employed, civilian population, 16 years of age or higher, that is female. |
| Employed, civilian, male (%)                 | 58.20           | 53.88        | 55.25<sup>b</sup> 52.52<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the employed, civilian population, 16 years of age or higher, that is male. |
| Employed, civilian, female (%)               | 41.80           | 46.12        | 44.75<sup>b</sup> 47.48<sup>b</sup>  Percent of the employed, civilian population, 16 years of age or higher, that is female. |
| Median inflation-adjusted household income    | 49,462<sup>a</sup> | –           | 44,958<sup>a</sup> 46,726<sup>a</sup>  Median household income in the previous year denominated in either 1989 dollars or 2012 dollars. |
| Commute time, 30 min or less (%)             | 65.51           | 60.25        | 76.64<sup>b</sup> 70.85<sup>b</sup>  Percent of commuting workers who commute and have a commute time of 30 min or less. |
| Commute time, 60 min or more (%)             | 4.62            | 9.34         | 5.13<sup>b</sup> 6.61<sup>b</sup>  Percent of commuting workers who commute and have a commute time of 60 min or less. |
| Commute by car (%)                           | 93.31           | 95.48        | 92.59<sup>b</sup> 94.61<sup>b</sup>  Percent of commuting workers who use a car (alone or carpool but not taxi). |
| Commute by public transit (%)                | 0.00            | 0.00         | 0.46<sup>b</sup> 0.54<sup>b</sup>  Percent of commuting workers who use public transit (bus, light rail, subway or railroad, but not ferry). |
| Worked at home (%)                           | 6.45            | 4.06         | 7.52<sup>b</sup> 5.04<sup>b</sup>  Percent of workers who work from home. |
| Housing, vacant (%)                          | 7.84            | 12.73        | 12.71<sup>b</sup> 14.45<sup>b</sup>  Percent of housing stock that is vacant. |
| Housing, vacant, used for seasonal recreation (%) | 2.48           | 5.38         | 5.67<sup>b</sup> 6.17<sup>b</sup>  Percent of housing stock that is vacant and specifically used for migrants. |
| Housing, vacant, used for migrants (%)       | 0.06            | 0.10         | 0.03<sup>b</sup> 0.02<sup>b</sup>  Percent of housing stock that is vacant and specifically used seasonal occupation or recreation. |
| Housing, owner-occupied, mortgage (%)        | 30.26           | 39.41        | 32.17<sup>b</sup> 39.11<sup>b</sup>  Percent of housing stock that is occupied by an owner with a mortgage or loan on the property. |
| Housing, owner-occupied, no debt (%)         | 39.87           | 31.21        | 32.99<sup>b</sup> 25.21<sup>b</sup>  Percent of housing stock that is occupied by an owner and owned free and clear. |
| Agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining jobs (%) | 11.01           | 4.82         | 10.33<sup>b</sup> 5.63<sup>b</sup>  Percent of jobs that are the agricultural, forestry, fishing or mining industries. |
| Construction jobs (%)                        | 5.20            | 5.94         | 5.92<sup>b</sup> 7.04<sup>b</sup>  Percent of jobs that are construction industry. |
| Manufacturing jobs (%)                       | 27.41           | 20.02        | 21.00<sup>b</sup> 16.71<sup>b</sup>  Percent of jobs that are in manufacturing of durable or non-durable goods. |
| Wholesale trade jobs (%)                     | 4.30            | 4.10         | 3.72<sup>b</sup> 2.70<sup>b</sup>  Percent of jobs that are in intermediate sales of goods, neither manufacturing or delivering to a final consumer. |
| Retail trade jobs (%)                        | 15.23           | 11.02        | 16.25<sup>b</sup> 11.63<sup>b</sup>  Percent of jobs that are in sales of goods to the final consumer, including food and consumables. |
| Finance, insurance and real estate jobs (%)  | 4.41            | 5.30         | 4.29<sup>b</sup> 4.69<sup>b</sup>  Percent of jobs in financial and insurance industries (including banking) and real estate sales and development (excluding construction). |
| Land-cover, open water (%)                   | 3.07            | 3.09         | 2.05<sup>b</sup> 2.13<sup>b</sup>  Percent of county classified as open water. Time series begins in 2001, not 2010; earlier NLCD classifications are not comparable. |
| Land-cover, cropland, pasture, hay (%)      | 77.06           | 77.00        | 61.70<sup>b</sup> 61.45<sup>b</sup>  Percent of county classified as cultivated crops, pasture or hay; time series begins in 2001, not 1990; earlier NLCD classifications are not comparable. |
| Land-cover, high-intensity development (%)   | 0.10            | 0.10         | 0.13<sup>b</sup> 0.16<sup>b</sup>  Percent of county classified as highly developed (i.e. urban); time series begins in 2001, not 1990; earlier NLCD classifications are not comparable. |
| Mean nighttime light                         | 5.77            | 5.23         | 6.17<sup>b</sup> 7.90<sup>b</sup>  Average intensity of nighttime, stable lights from an annual composite of cloud-free images measured on a scale of 0–63; time series covers 1992 to 2011 due to data availability (rather than 1990 to 2010). |
| Median nighttime light                       | 5.00            | 5.00         | 3.79<sup>b</sup> 5.42<sup>b</sup>  Average intensity of nighttime, stable lights from an annual composite of cloud-free images measured on a scale of 0–63; time series covers 1992 to 2011 due to data availability (rather than 1990 to 2010). |

Note: Variables that derive from the long-form census survey in 1990 were cut entirely from the 2010 census, and are derived instead from the 5-year average of 2008–2012 generated from the American Community Survey. See previous footnote regarding data sources.

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a variable whose standard deviation is greater than its mean, signaling high variability.

<sup>b</sup> As noted in data definitions and notes, statistics derived from the NLCD cover time series beginning in 2001 and ending in 2011. Nighttime light statistics cover 1992 to 2011.
beyond the perceived drudgery of agriculture also signals a dwindling if still romanticized way of life: that of the small, independent family farming business.

Fourth, many interlocutors in Henry told stories of publicly visible rural malaise and hinted at anomie behind closed doors, a concern to which Trump dog-whistled with his “Make America Great Again” slogan. My experience returning to Marshall County supports their claims, as rural counties grapple with problems that might also describe neglected urban neighborhoods. Many storefronts were shuttered. The popular bowling alley had become just a bar, the lanes hidden by a curtain. When I visited, the town had neither florist nor full-time doctor. A local bank and the local pharmacy during my family’s residence have since been bought by regional or national chains. Teachers reported smaller classes in school, fewer college-bound graduates, the inability to offer advanced placement courses, and more low-income students getting free school lunches. Church attendance was down, one parish recently closed and others teetered. At least one food pantry reported running low. A marketing manager for a rural homeless shelter in an adjacent region said demand in 2017 had risen beyond the number of available beds, something that reflects wider trends (Bible 2019). Many interlocutors identified as “working, but poor” (cf. Thiede et al. 2018), demonstrating the imbrication of class fears noted above with real social experiences. In another dark sign of times, multiple residents worried aloud at the open secret of opioids as well as street drugs available in specific haunts in town. Hints of more private traumas only appeared in tangential references, for example, to a relative’s suicide or drunken car crash in the countryside.

Henry’s then-mayor offered me a driving tour of town — around the theme of change — that became a four-hour interview conducted in his pick-up truck. After taking in Henry, we visited nearby hamlets where population decrease (and with it, reduced tax base and local spending) had been more precipitous. After the fifth small town with too many boarded-up store fronts, the mayor grimly said, “That town ... they were thriving. Nice little bedroom community. A fun little town. But now, it’s just spooky.” This road show offered a kind of urgent sales pitch for what the town must avoid: withering away into country dust.

The data, too, tell a tale: more vacant homes; fewer houses owned free and clear; higher unemployment for younger generations; fewer jobs in agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, manufacturing, wholesale and even retail. In central Illinois, periodic layoffs from CAT — as Caterpillar is popularly known — didn’t end in the 1980s. Another interlocutor, a classmate my age, was let go from the company in 2009. Since my visit, another classmate moved her family out state for secure work in fear that her husband would eventually be laid off by CAT. Meanwhile, the former tire plant in Henry has lost jobs and been carved up by national and international chemical companies. The fertilizer plant itself is now part of Koch Industries. Commute times have also stretched as people drive farther for “better” work. A lack of rental housing penalizes people who can’t buy homes. Many interlocutors said increasing healthcare and insurance costs eat away at static incomes (remember, the countryside is greying). Notably, the direction of change across dozens of census variables for Marshall County mirrors the pattern for the wider rural Midwest (see Table 1).

Some rural people are doing better financially. Households in the Census’ top income category —$150,000 or more — were practically unheard of in 1990 (one in 200). By 2010, one in 25 households fit that description, raising the specter of inequality. New homes in Henry had been built since my family left, despite population decline; in nearby residential lake communities today waterfront homes list for more than $400,000, catering to what Henry residents describe as a small number of “rural rich” as well as second-home buyers from urban areas. The five-year average of median household income (2008–2012), even when adjusted for inflation, improved from 1990 levels but remained below the national median (American Community Survey, 2017). Incomes are also spatially uneven across the Midwest; higher median household incomes are associated with higher proportions of a county covered in cropland.

Fifth, farm incomes and farming development are hardly unambiguous blessings. Farmers of commodity grains did report good times almost a decade past: a biofuels boom and giddy corn prices for those who wished to keep farming and high land values for those looking to sell. But industrial farming is a notably variable business, with thin margins and regular production crises. Only farms earning $350,000 or more of gross cash receipts are a regularly profitable category (U.S. Department of Agriculture/Economic Research Service, 2018). Still, some farmers I met in Henry compared today’s economy favorably to the 1980s’ farm crisis, when many faced foreclosure sales of their land at cut-rate prices (cf. Dudley 2000). An older farmer, the father of a friend, remembered those hardscrabble days: “There’s not the risk that there used to be in the ‘80s. I was in debt back in the ‘80s. Had to borrow to put the crop in. Now I’m old and feeble but I don’t have any debt.”

Yet, he said, his children are unlikely to continue the family farm.

Higher fuel prices (and policy supports) did indeed boost demand for corn-based ethanol, which alongside rising petroleum prices helped push corn up to more than $7 a bushel in 2012 before prices settled back down to between $3 and $4 a bushel since 2015 (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2020). Soybean prices saw a similar rise and fall. A rare classmate who returned to Henry after college to farm with his family said, “My generation, we started at a point when farming was doing pretty well — people buying new cars for their wives and putting up shiny new barns. That was my generation, but my dad and my uncle ... they got into farming in the ‘80s and that was a tough time. Prolonged drought, lots of people lost crops, lots of debt. People lost their farms.”

Residents in town reinforce perceptions of a limited farming boom amid community stagnation. Backhanded compliments laced with subtle critique noted the number of new pick-up trucks, combines and tractors visible on many farms. These remarks may betray envy mixed with a complicated, conservative disdain for conspicuous consumption (Dudley 2000), but they also are evidence of the increased mechanization and capital/debt intensification of Midwestern farming. Notably, the heady days of record corn prices are now almost a decade past and Midwestern farmers have struggled under the nationalist trade policy and agricultural tariff wars that have become features of the Trump administration (Philpott 2020).

Full interrogation of agro-industrial development as it transforms rural lives and livelihoods — a contemporary, Midwestern “Agrarian Question” — is beyond the scope of this paper, but some implications are worth considering. Midwestern commodity agriculture involves a political economy of hyper-competition on small-margins, a technological treadmill always offering the newest equipment, inducements to scaling up through debt, incentives to compete and unsustainable pressures on ecology. Tractors are now GPS-guided, larger equipment scales an individual farmer’s labor to a larger plot of land, and farm service firms handle pesticide, fertilizer and soil management. Simply put, labor is less necessary and further alienated from the soil itself. As one farmer told me, only half in jest, “I’m really just managing the tractor.” The machine runs its course, and he listens to audiobooks, waiting to take the wheel only at the turns. Geography matters considerably as uneven Midwestern rural incomes also map onto uneven land productivity; for example, per acre yields in the prime corn lands of Iowa and Illinois can be double that of competitors in the Plains (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2019), capitalization and consolidation of land — at boom prices — may also prefigure a bust, or a crisis of overproduction. Notably, climate change will turn up heat on Midwestern farming, literally and figuratively, spelling disaster for at least some families and operations.

Any farming heyday also has cascading consequences. When productivity comes from machinery (and accompanying debt), the children of farmers are more easily freed (even encouraged) to leave for higher education, further depopulating local economies, schools, churches and social institutions — including the fairs, carnivals, parades, weddings, sports teams and the like that cement “community.” Said one retired
educator and business manager, “We see all these things diminishing, and of course that’s farm-related. There used to be a lot of kids in the country, and there’s just aren’t today. The farmers that still exist, (mostly) they’re wealthy farmers. They’re not plain, old farmers.” While similar changes may result from the loss of manufacturing or other good jobs locally, the paradox is that such shifts can come from seeming farm success, that is only compounded during bust years.

4. 2016: populist waves of grain?

In Henry, histories of social community, identity and, ultimately, whiteness all interweave in ways that would surely be familiar elsewhere (e.g. Appalachia, the Rust Belt or the Plains). For example, the social malaise interlocutors described in Henry resonates with the depletion of social capital Bell (2009) observed in West Virginia’s mining belt amid depopulation and increased economic insecurity. Collectively, these shifts have been rendered as decline in “moral community” (Wuthnow 2018) or being materially, discursively and politically ignored or “left behind” (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018; Gaventa 2018) or lost (Davis 2004). These narrative patterns, of course, also articulate (with) experiences of the collapse of the Fordist compact and the promise that came with it, of secure work, middle-class wages and a state social safety net (Hart 2018a). In Edelman’s framing (2018), this has constructed rural America in particular as a kind of “sacrifice zone” of neoliberal economy and politics. Are these all then ripples in a reactionary populist wave breaking across U.S. agrarian landscapes?

In popular telling, rural people are “left behind” to nurse internal narratives of grievance, echoing Hochschild’s “deep story” or the lingering resentments Vance (2016) expresses when he gets to the greener other, urban side in college and thereafter. Cramer’s important work (2016) has identified this as “a rural consciousness” and “politics of resentment” undergirded by “a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic” (5–6). Dudley (2000: 15) suggests that a similar politics out of conjuncture during the 1980s Midwestern farm crisis contained the potential for a populist rebellion:

In so far as a populist ideology portrays the farmer as the victim of economic forces controlled by big business, the government and international banks, it authorizes a vision of the ‘little guy’ who must use any means necessary to defend home and hearth against a vast conspiracy. Whether the agent of evil is figured as monopoly capitalism, the welfare state, or a cabal of international bankers, populism encourages a ‘paranoid style’ of political thinking in which the individual must forever guard against an enemy capable of many disguises … In this incarnation, the populist’s adversarial stance of ‘us versus them’ pits the ‘producers’ — workers, farmers and small business owners — against the ‘parasites’ — government officials, corporate executives, and bankers.

Trump certainly excited rural Midwestern voters. In most rural counties across the upper Midwest, he outperformed the average of the last four previous successful Republican bids (Reagan in 1984, Bush Sr. in 1988 and Bush Jr. in 2000 and 2004). This “intensity” was particularly strong in the most rural parts of Missouri and Southern Illinois (see Fig. 4). However, as noted earlier, I have come to find the question of populism — and specifically an urge to measure Trump’s political formation against a theorized ideal type or set of inherent populist features — to be politically unhelpful. Hidden in the question, I suspect, is an already assumed answer and what Frank (2020) has identified as an elitist anti-populism, where populism becomes uncritical code for political bigotry, ignorance and demagoguery.

The appellation of populist has been attached to movements with disparate politics and geographies, from “right” to “left” to “pink,” such theoretical ambiguity threatens to become an intellectual quagmire. The inventors of the term, who also donned the mantle themselves, were anti-elite, pro-poor activists in the Midwest and Plains of the United States who ultimately fueled the 1896 Democratic presidential bid by William Jennings Bryan. Though “populist” wasn’t a pejorative for these rural activists, the label at least in the U.S. has been transmitted by successive political formations (Frank, 2020). Since Bryan, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joseph McCarthy and most recently Donald Trump have all been specifically decried as populist. Beyond U.S. contexts, scholars, commentators and political actors have used analytic of populism on political formations on nearly every continent.

In a global frame, Trump’s ethnornationalism appears only the latest in a line of seemingly authoritarian populist and nationalist movements, from Narendra Modi at the helm of muscular Hindutva in India to the Brexit coalition pitching a British nationalistic against a European system (Scoones et al., 2017; Gusterson 2017). This burgeoning global right-wing politics has of course prompted a raft of scholarship on populism(s); for my part, I presented early versions of this paper at both the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative 2018 conference in The Hague and a 2019 conference hosted in Berkeley by the campus’ Center for Right-Wing Studies. I owe a particular debt to Hart’s theorizations of the contemporary global conjuncture (2013, 2018a, 2018b, 2019) through early Laclau (1977) and, importantly, the works of Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci. I also find useful the discussion by Badiou et al. (2016) on the ideas and ideologies of the “people.”

The concerns of my interlocutors indeed posit the imaginary of a rural “people,” made up of “communities like ours,” who are under siege or threat. This construction relies on stories of who rural people are and where they came from, as told by and to rural people themselves. In this paper, I have noted how many of these stories articulate ideologies and geographic imaginations at home, school, church, on the playing field, in the town square and out on the farm. As a child I learned the history of Henry’s lock and dam, the first of its kind on the Illinois river, rehearsing for me a riparian-agrarian past. As children playing at the waterfront, we were always reminded of Henry’s place while we explored leftover structures of the now defunct lock system or watched the large grain barges still ply the Illinois River. Similarly, as school children, we were taught the biography of the artist Charles Perdew, celebrated far beyond Henry for his waterfowl carvings, which were also actual duck decoys used by area hunters. When my former classmates today post trophy photos of duck hunting trips, they write their own stories that sit alongside narratives of this local, important riparian folk art history. This kind of collective, multi-generational story telling is also at work when, in Wiseman’s documentary of small town Indiana, a school teacher gives a seemingly tangential biography of Branch McCracken, the local basketball hero who became a state and national icon in the mid 20th century. Students respond with blank faces but the teacher carries on with subtle defensiveness for small-town Indiana’s contribution to national sports culture. A gymnasium is named in McCracken’s honor.

In the process of learning and remembering these situated stories, residents of places like Henry write small but durable narratives — not unlike Hochschild’s deep story — of past pioneering effort, European ancestry, so-called traditional values, feeding community and country, humble living, self-reliance and anti-elitism. Historically specific, partial and geographic, such narratives form the fabric of political potential and the imagination of a “people.” This vision of community — again, of a “people” — is of course not through with (petty) bourgeois or middle-class aspirations, patriarchy, racial exclusion and settler colonialism that indeed manifest today in an unspoken whiteness understood as ahistorical demographic truth.

It is this notion of a “people” — the “we” my interlocutors speak through — that is perhaps a condition of possibility for demagogic or authoritarian or proto-fascist forms of populism (Müller 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). That should not lead us to conclude that there is however some other, actual or fully inclusive “people” waiting to
be discovered. As an abstraction, “the people does not exist” (Ranciere, 2016: 102). “What exist are diverse or even antagonistic figures of the people, figures constructed by privileging certain modes of assembling, certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities.”

How such political formations are stitched together in real-time in “society” is the question for Hall (1980). He offers the key analytic of articulation as the process of weaving geographies, histories and ideologies into the fabric of politics and political potential. He deploys articulation in the sense of both connecting and expressing — stitching together as it were disparate stories and ideologies but also rehearsing articulation in the sense of both connecting and expressing.

Articulation is both the process of weaving geographies, histories and ideologies, and “articulation as the process of weaving geographies, histories and ideologies but also rehearsing articulation in the sense of both connecting and expressing.” (Laclau 1977: 173–174). Put a different way, the political formations deemed, even decreed, as populist must be apprehended “in articulation with class discourses and hegemonic projects” (Hart 2013: 303).

Hart (2018a; 2020a; 2020b) sharpens and refines Hall’s analytic of articulation to understand what she identifies as “Trump-Bannonism” through a global conjunctural frame alongside the earlier emergence of distinct but interconnected exclusionary nationalisms in India and South Africa. Hart explains Trump’s coalition as a contingent articulation of “long histories of racism and right-wing Christian nationalism in the United States; the ravages of neoliberal forms of capitalism; and abandonment of the working class by the Democratic Party.” Trump enrolled the combined neglect and wounded privilege of a white Christian (and at least aspirational) Middle Class, whose political ire through decades of political maneuver could be shifted “from Wall Street to Washington.” My conversations in Henry surely reflect this as many interlocutors proclaimed their distaste for politicians, politicians and, specifically, those perceived as being the “elite” or “establishment” in Chicago (Illinois’ de facto seat of political power) and Washington, D.C. Some invoked the Tea Party specifically, but most were more banal: “I’ve been so fed up with politicians. I don’t think they should be paid anything.” said one farmer who voted for Trump, even as he criticized Republican market fetishism and dismantling of social safety nets including “Obamacare.”

I met no unwavering zealots for either Trump or a populist revolt in my visit to Henry. This must be partially explained by my methodology and positionality. But it also points to the inherent instability in the way rural Midwestern voters articulate to Trump’s ethnonationalist project. I heard hesitancy and doubt from residents of Henry about precisely how we ended up here. Several people said they openly voted for Clinton, a reminder that about one in three votes in the Midwest went against Trump. Others offered their write-in votes for Mickey Mouse, another national Republican name, themselves or their friends as a kind of absolution. A former classmate with Trump voters in the family described the GOP ticket as a “hold-your-nose” proposition. From many people, he heard simply, “Well, you’ve got to support the party,” unsurprising given how political parties work as powerful articulating agents (De Leon et al., 2009). Much of what I encountered also resonates with Winson (1997) finding that rural people (in Canada) ideologically tended toward resignation and acceptance — a kind of “grin and bear it, and don’t complain” — in the face of plant shutdowns and local social and economic collapse. Of course, rural voters need not be comfortable backing Trump to nonetheless cast their votes as an “investment in white heteropatriarchy” (Strolovitch et al. 2017).

When I asked people in Henry more directly about the motivations of their own politics, large social structures of race, gender or class were only ever hinted at. In self-description, many interlocutors reiterated tropes of the rural — autonomy and self-reliance within social bounds; disdain for pretension, ostentation or flash; skepticism of outsiders; loyalty, compassion and concern for one’s “own” community; respect for social and economic order. I also frequently heard conservative (and neoliberal) platitudes: faith in the individual, the marketplace and competition; opposition to taxes, regulation and law from above; a complicated critique of government assistance.10 These “values” and “traditions” — put a different way, these politics — of course resonate with familiar community stories of Midwestern pioneer-settler-farmer-river communities.

Specific policy demands were less forthcoming. One business owner said high minimum wages were impractical. While many people suggested healthcare reform was necessary, I heard no consensus on “Obamacare” or whether the system needed more or less government involvement. The most enthusiastic Trump voter I interviewed couched his support in critique of the status quo: “Trump does some stupid-ass things, says a lot of stupid-ass things, doesn’t keep his mouth shut when he should, it was worth it to try to shake the system.” Votes for Trump were, he said, “a hand grenade for the establishment.”

Most interlocutors reported that active support for Trump’s agenda festered among a cadre of young, un/underemployed white men — “the people who feel most left behind,” according to one retired teacher. When a young business owner put up a “TRUMP THAT BITCH” sign outside his shop for part of the election season, “I don’t think anybody else approved of that,” said Henry’s mayor. The sign had long since disappeared but a local business manager said he still saw some of his young, male workers — who had never voted previously — fired up for Trump. Analysts have suggested this particular appeal may be partly explained by macro-economic indicators showing a growing “lost” generation of young white men (Franck 2017), supporting narratives of rural decline and even anomie.

5. Conclusion: rural articulation praxis

In the preceding section, I argued that the analytic of articulation, in the sense deployed by Hall and Hart of both expressing and connecting or stitching together, points to how the deeply unstable political project of Trump’s ethnonationalism could assemble together a pseudo-populist mass that includes Midwestern voters. In this brief conclusion, I now suggest that the same analytic is crucial to understanding how Trump’s contradictory project — always already coming apart at the seams yet likely to outlast him — could be actively opposed and even unraveled. Insisting on the analytic of articulation as well as a global conjunctural frame, as Hart (2020b) says eloquently, is not just to provide a better explanation of the processes that have generated intensified racist and xenophobic forms of nationalism and populist politics, but to enable a deeper dialectical understanding both of the slippages, openings and contradictions they are generating in practice in different regions of the world – and of emerging challenges, opportunities, and possibilities for alliances and creative political action.

Hart here echoes a famous injunction from Marx that “the point” of critical scholarship is to intervene in the injustices of the world. Reading for articulation to understand how and which political fabrics are stitched together offers the possibility for recognizing antagonisms and points of break. For example, such an analysis might point to different and separable legacies of rural, anti-elite politics in the Midwest that can be disarticulated from Trump’s ethnonationalist ideas of “the people.” Perhaps then through new storytelling, cross-geographic political shoe-leather, rural populism’s concrete history in the U.S. could be re-articulated with a different political project built around solidarity

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10 Farmers acknowledged that U.S. agrarian political economy is rife with government supports and intervention; they tended to justify it as not ideal but necessary to make the agri-food-fuel system run. Many others critiqued people “on the dole,” though this barb was often directed at poor, rural people receiving “food stamps” or “welfare,” rather than a remote urban Other.
Fig. 4. Trump voting intensity. Intensity of voting measured by Trump’s percentage of county vote subtracted from the county average received by the past four successful Republican presidential bids (1984, 1988, 2000 and 2004).
between city and country. I hopefully envision such work connecting, for example, marginalized Midwestern farmers squeezed by commodity agriculture and climate change to marginalized Midwestern urban consumers struggling to afford more than processed food amid a host of urban environmental injustices.

In this paper, I have framed my project of “catching up,” crossing spatial-historical divides and working through autobiography as a necessarily geographic method. I consider this only a first step — more an opening statement rather than a closing argument — in what I hope is my increased engagement as a Berkeley scholar across this particular country-city, rural-urban geographic divide. More collaborative research, more empathetic engagement and more critical story-telling is necessary, alongside reckoning with hard truths about whiteness and rural structures of injustice. And while my reflections here to do not constitute autoethnography, I would welcome such work from Midwestern insiders, a possibility that will require academics and our institutions to encourage and support organic intellectuals in the countryside. Such work could also open doors to participatory action research, transdisciplinary engagements and forms of rural organizing and collective action that both have precedent in U.S. past and present (Gilbert 2015; Grossman 2017; Frank, 2020) and are critically needed ( Scoones et al., 2017 ).

I have noted how whiteness in the Midwest today operates to maintain systematic exclusion of non-white people from material landscapes and property ownership as well as from the political imagination of rural “people.” Much of this occurs through silence around past and present violence (cf. Trouillot 2015 ), but whiteness is also a longue durée project of constructing white identity and defending it and the privileges it entails (cf. Roediger, 1991). Much scholarship and political praxis is needed to unveil and disarticulate these unsaid narratives, occluded histories and hidden practices. This includes self-reflection among scholars of “the rural” about how our own teaching and research might inadvertently accept (and certainly can always better interrogate) whiteness and coloniality. Research agendas can more explicitly seek political cultures — e.g. the production and maintenance of “whiteness” — precisely where economics, sociology, history or geography often presume such politics don’t exist (cf. Mann, 2007). Social scientists of the rural might also contend far more with other scholarship often thought of as ancillary or irrelevant. For example, in revising this paper, I returned Du Bois (1998) but also began the work of thinking seriously with Sharpe (2016) and King (2019). These works sit outside mainstream reading for rural U.S. geographers such as myself yet I have convinced they offer critical insights needed to confront native genocide, slavery and the production of whiteness — the same past and present partially hidden from a mixed-race kid growing up in the Midwest. At the same time, scholars must better recognize that the rural color line never completely succeeded; people of color struggled, survived and stripped sometimes in plain sight, if you know where to look. This latter critical geographic work is embodied in the academic, political and creative Black Midwest Initiative.

The stakes of disarticulating rural geographies from exclusionary politics are high for rural and non-rural people alike. Such work could bring stories told by my interlocutors in Henry — stories with genuine sadness and even pessimism — into an inclusive, relational frame with other narratives and experiences of inequality and injustice. Farm bankruptcy, opioid addiction and declining white life expectancy in the U.S. all can be understood as products of a capitalist system that prizes people over profits and relies on racial divisions and whiteness to inhibit political solidarity. As Keeanga-Yamadahta Taylor has argued compellingly ( 2017 ), reframing such stories and rebuilding a more inclusive political project around shared, interconnected, re-articulated narratives and solidarities,

“could allow us to see that the anxieties, stresses, confusions, and frustrations about life world today are not owned by one group, but are shared by many. It would not tell us that everyone suffers the same oppression, but it would allow us to see that even if we don’t experience a particular kind of oppression, every working person in this country is going through something. Everyone is trying to figure out how to survive, and many are failing. If we put these stories together, we would gain more insight into how ordinary white people have as much stake in the fight for a different kind of society as anyone else.”

Acknowledgements

My thinking here owes large debts to fortuante engagements with Gillian Hart, Michael Watts and Garrett Graddy-Lovellace. Jeff Martin, Jane Henderson and Xander Lenc, among other graduate students, have also been critical to these thoughts. Anonymous reviewers also gave generous and generative support. This work was supported intellectually by scholars of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative and the Berkley Center for Right Wing Studies and financially through fellowship with the University of California’s Global Food Initiative and an individual research stipend from Michael Watts. For data, the NHGIS deserves special recognition for making this kind of social science possible. Finally, and most importantly, I must thank the people I met (again) in my return to Henry.

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