News from the Back of Beyond

Ben Highmore

Vron Ware, *Return of a Native: Learning from the Land*, London: Repeater Books, 2022, 492pp, £16.99 paperback.

The field of cultural studies often seems preternaturally disposed towards metropolitan culture. Its interest in subcultures, for instance, rather than feeling like a general concern with the idiosyncrasies of groups with shared enthusiasms, feels instead much more like a very specific attraction to flamboyant youth and their spectacular music scenes in cities like London, Paris, Berlin and New York. There isn't, to my knowledge, any cultural studies books about birdwatching or rambling, or if there are, they are infinitesimal in number compared to those devoted to punk, rave and hip-hop. Of course, cultural studies isn't entirely metrocentric in its outlook and there is a rich seam of work that in the UK would include books written by people like Raymond Williams, Patrick Wright and Rosemary Shirley, who seem less fearful or forgetful about the world that exists once you get off the network of motorways and A roads that connect towns and cities.[1] And now we have Vron Ware's new book as perhaps the most fully-realised vision of what a form of cultural studies could look like if it stepped back from its metropolitan fixations.

Like a country lane, Ware's *Return of a Native: Learning from the Land* is meandering and deeply digressive. You can't often see round the corner for the Ocado delivery truck hurtling towards you. But it is also recursive. Insistently recursive. This is the book's double movement: we start somewhere, wander a few miles in any direction, travel back sometimes fifty years, sometimes five, sometimes 300, but we also keep returning to the place where we began, and to the time of the author's writerly present. Any reader of *New Formations* will be familiar with demands that research must be positioned, that we should swap the 'God's eye view of the world' for 'situated knowledges',[2] yet few books could make a claim to have taken this task quite so literally. *Return of a Native* is situated at a crossroads. The crossroads is, according to the author, in 'the back of beyond' (but as we soon find out there is no 'back of beyond' here at all). It is on the edge of the small village or hamlet in Hampshire where she grew up (Wildhern). We are given several photographs of the road sign that marks this crossroads: it is a traditional cast iron finger post, with four fingers pointing in the directions of the lanes. The circular ironwork at the top reads 'Hampshire, Pill Heath', and underneath the fingers is a familiar sign telling us that we are in a 'neighbourhood watch' zone. One finger tells us that if we follow this direction then we will come to Wildhern and Andover (one mile and three eighths, and four miles and five eighths respectively). In the other

1. A small sample could include Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London, 1973; Patrick Wright, *The Village that Died for England*, Jonathan Cape, 1995; and Rosemary Shirley, *Rural Modernity, Everyday Life and Visual Culture*, Routledge, 2016.

2. Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14:3, 1988, pp575-99.

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direction lies Upton and Linkenholt (one mile and five eighths and three miles and five eighths). The other axis takes us to Tangley and Chute (one and a half miles and four miles) and the last finger points to Hurstbourne and Newbury (two and a quarter miles and twelve and three quarter miles). That's situated writing for you.

Return of a Native is a difficult book to precis. There is no overarching argument, no straightforward narrative thread. The title itself evokes Thomas Hardy but the literary feel is much closer to W.G. Sebald's 1995 *The Rings of Saturn*, with its peripatetic tour of Suffolk. The mood though is different from Sebald's: it is fiercer, more politically pointed. At the same time the writing is less distanced, less sombre. Ware's prose, which at times is highly descriptive at others slightly ironic, is also the prose of an investigative journalist: she has a nose for a story and can smell the stench of neo-colonial corruption at twenty paces. Her initial sources are sometimes conversations with older neighbours, sometimes the local parish magazine, and sometimes high-end estate agents. This might take her to the local library, to farming magazines such as *Poultry News*, or to the 1965 collective scrapbook project of the Women's Institute to mark their fiftieth anniversary. In her account of some super-rich local residents with their imposing (and highly defended) mansions, she comes across someone called Timothy Landon who had bought an entire nearby village in the 1970s. His obituary stated that 'he orchestrated the overthrow of the sultan of a Middle Eastern state, threw a lifeline to white rule in Rhodesia and South Africa, gave arms to the mujahedeen of Afghanistan [and] amassed a fortune estimated to be twice that of the Queen's' (p53). This is probably the overall message of the book: wherever you are in England you are never cut-off from the ravages caused by global, imperialist capitalism. It is there all around you if only you look hard enough and don't fall prey to the ideology that the English countryside is some sort of idyllic retreat of unproblematic and simplified national identity.

This little spot of Hampshire is, in some senses then, a place of commonality, but its commonality lies not in its generality but in its specificity. And this specificity involves all sorts of oddities as well as historical processes that would be occurring, albeit slightly differently, across England. So, we have the Swing Riots and various rural revolts against the implementation of new agricultural processes, but we also have Reg Presley from the Troggs (best known for their hit single *Wild Thing* covered with more nonchalance by Jimi Hendrix) being prompted by the author to remember rehearsing in her local village hall, but who turns out to be much more interested in talking about crop circles and his sightings of alien spacecrafts. The book treats eccentricity and happenstance as much a part of the normal business of living on, and with, the land as the systematic exploitation of the land and its workers by industrial methods. The range of phenomena covered is so wide-ranging that chapters can move across history, geography, local politics, geology, botany, farming, ornithology in the blink of an eye. This is

a book that carries you along not by patient and plodding argument, but by the flash of connection, and dissonance of juxtaposition.

In one of the final paragraphs in the book, Ware takes us back to the genesis of the book and a course she taught in the 1990s on 'the making of the English landscape'. The course began with Ware showing her students a photograph of a field in Pill Heath: 'I forbade them to imagine that those dark ridges of churned-up soil represented anything other than a field of battle. I must have made England sound like a terrifying place, although that wasn't my intention. I was just trying to get them to understand what it took to be modern' (pp396-7). 'Being modern' is an overarching concern for the humanities and where and when to locate the contours of the modern is a perennial issue. When I started teaching cultural studies thirty years ago it was conventional to locate key vantage points for witnessing modernity in the Parisian streets of the second half of the nineteenth century and the enormous River Rouge Ford plant in Michigan in the 1920s. Since then, the humanities and cultural studies have worked to multiply these vantage points, to include, for instance, the colonial plantation systems operating across the Caribbean and the Americas from the seventeenth century and the chattel slavery that accompanied it. I would now also want to provide different, earlier examples of the assembly line system so famously deployed by Henry Ford. In a chapter from Siegfried Giedion's *Mechanisation Takes Command*, titled 'Mechanisation of Death: Meat', Giedion shows us that the first assembly lines in the nineteenth century were really disassembly lines for the slaughter of cows, pigs, and chickens, and for the systematic stripping of animal carcasses for meat packaging.[3] Such vantage points are much less metrocentric and take us into the history of agriculture in all its variations. From here we might need to adjust Latour's famous declaration that 'we have never been modern' to something more like 'we have always been modern', if only we can see the modern as the 'hybrid and dissonant experience of living intermittently within modernised spaces and speeds, and yet simultaneously inhabiting the remnants of pre-capitalist life-worlds, whether social or natural'.[4]

It is this hybrid and dissonant version of the modern that Ware shows us, and she shows us that it is best seen not by looking at the dandies of Regency London or the flâneurs of Paris (their version of the modern is too besotted with its own publicity), but by those struggling to deal with the metabolic revolutions that are altering the way that the earth is being cultivated and despoiled. Metabolic change is a key concern throughout the book and *The Return of a Native* does much to provide local detail for the arguments made by John Bellamy Foster and others.[5] The metabolic rift that accompanies the shift from water, horse and wind power to fossil extraction is only the most emphatic of a number of metabolic changes that recalibrate the planetary life world. At the centre of Ware's book is the story of how postwar chicken production changed in the 1950s and 1960s. Incorporating many of the intensive methods of factory farming of chickens in the USA (debeaking

3. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanisation Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*, W.W. Norton, 1969 (1948), pp209-246.

4. Jonathan Crary, *24/7*, Verso, p66.

5. John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, Monthly Review Press, 2000; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth*, Monthly Review Press, 2010.

chicks, adding antibiotics to feed and so on) the 'chickenisation' of England included changes in diet of a population, changes in meat production, changes in the fertilisation of the land, changes in advertising, changes in the construction of 'the housewife', and on and on. This is metabolic recalibration written from 'farm to fork', so to say.

Ware's methodology might be described as based around association and happenstance. It is the accident of birth that provides her with this specific crossroads as her starting point (and her vantage point) and from here she plunders the contingencies of history that she finds within the parish and its environs. But happenstance and association are also the way that the world seems to work. Tracing some of the explicit links between chicken farmers and the gurus of the New Right, with their mantra of 'free market' capitalism, she quotes Oliver Letwin on one of the pioneers of chickenisation: 'Without Fisher, no IEA (Institute of Economic Affairs); without the IEA and its clones, no Thatcher and quite possibly no Reagan; without Reagan, no Star Wars, no economic collapse of the Soviet Union. Quite a chain of consequences for a chicken farmer!' (p204). Of course, this associative logic (Letwin's rather than Ware's) is heavy on 'necessary but not sufficient' forms of causality. The kinds of determinism at work in Ware's book are never explicitly addressed but this is not a grand narrative of historical inevitability where changes in the means of production are part of a great unfolding of history. But neither is it the renunciation of determinism. Her persistent attention to contingency and local evidence gives us history as insistent and often grubby opportunism coupled with complex and confused responses. Often those that are most able to voice radical critiques of agricultural capitalism are also associated with some of the most pernicious ideologies of the modern world (William Corbett's defence of slavery coincides with his radical account of English rural life).

Return of a Native has been twenty-five years in the making and is an example of what the author, acknowledging her debt to others, calls 'slow ethnography'. In today's world of rapid scholarship, slow ethnography is unlikely to find many adherents from those knowing that they must fulfil research and publishing quotas just to hold down their jobs. Yet it is the slow accretions of learning – much of which has been drip-fed through long-term relationships with an older generation of villagers – that gives the book so much heft, so much heart. But the slow gestation was also caused because an initial version of the book was rejected by various publishers in 2005 – a process that she admits was 'painful but in hindsight' resulted in something 'much more coherent'. Ware writes that the earlier version was 'not quite nature writing, and neither a memoir nor a sociological study, this first person, feminist account of how an insignificant English village was shaped by the forces of global capital, simultaneously infused with rage about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was always going to be a hard thing to sell' (p447). This new version is coherent, but it is still 'not quite nature writing,

and neither a memoir nor a sociological study'. At its best this is what cultural studies does. It forges new genres of writing out of the 'not quite this and not quite that'. Previous genres of writing are not quite adequate for giving shape to emergent, even pre-emergent, ways of understanding and rendering the complexity of planetary life.

In a recent discussion about trying to find a 'voice' for writing about the different ways remorse is expressed, experienced and deployed within the criminal justice system in Australia, Kate Rossmanith writes about how she needed to erase her default tone of chatty long-form journalism, a voice that she associates with the *New Yorker*. The breezy tone she had crafted was ill-suited to the often anguished world she was describing. It wasn't so much about finding her own 'unique' authorial voice, but of producing 'the truth-speaking presence, the narrating "sound" of a piece of writing, the timbre of the consciousness on the page' that was attuned to her topic.[6] She was in search of a 'narrating "sound"' that could resonate with her subject but wouldn't foreground the writing self as the persona of writing. It is worth asking about the 'timbre of the consciousness on the page' of *Return of a Native*. Listen to its opening words: 'It is late when I arrive at the crossroads. A Thursday evening in November is approaching the time of twilight. The stubble fields behind me appear grey in the ebbing light, but ahead there is a startling mix of ripened auburn leaves, still green grass and golden seedheads. The eye can't help but follow the line of a road on the far side of the intersection, drawn to a vague horizon that emerges with soft clouds like distant smoke' (p2). It is all there already. A rhythm, an attentiveness, a way of noticing that the grass is not just green, but that it is *still* green, even in November. And we in turn, are invited to notice this way of noticing, not because we are given access to Vron Ware's private consciousness (her interiority, so to say), but because we are being sensitised to a form of attention, to a way of connecting, responding.

The refusal of the author to become the subject of her own book is one of its strengths. This doesn't mean that the book isn't personal. It is. How could it not be when her father was part of a wave of chicken farmers producing broiler chickens en masse? But the narrating subjectivity never lingers on the trappings of individualism. What we see instead is something much more collective taking shape. It is a collective narrating 'sound', voiced as an invitation to share the intimacies of knowing a landscape, of knowing its ecologies, its dirt, its metabolic life and its human dramas. It is the sound of someone providing a sense of what it has taken to be modern at this crossroads which is simultaneously a point on a map, and a place that is always pointing beyond itself.

6. Kate Rossmanith, 'Ditching the *New Yorker* Voice', *Public Books*, 26 May 2022, first published in the *Sydney Review of Books*, https://www.publicbooks.org/ditching-the-new-yorker-voice/

Ben Highmore is Professor of Cultural Studies, School of Media, Arts and Humanities, University of Sussex.