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Rural Values

Sweet Knoll

By Kathryn M. Dudley

Abstract

Rurality in the Anthropocene is a tactical mode of existence in imperiled ecologies. Neither a strategic enterprise nor an identity politics, it is rooted in geopolitical histories and a congeries of feral ontologies: ways of being, communicating, and understanding in multispecies worlds that are rife with conflict, struggles for survival, and unexpected moments of grace. As a relational construct, rurality indexes the intersubjective copresence of more-than-human beings who materially and affectively sustain futurity in landscapes ravaged by extractive industries and climate change. This essay, based on interviews with public land ranchers in Oregon, conjures rurality as an ethnographic encounter in three registers involving wild horses, small-scale ranchers, and a bewitched anthropologist.

Keywords: wild horses, multispecies ontologies, ethnographic writing, critique of anthropology

The grasses were so good out there.

They called it "behind Sweet Knoll." We knew where it was. We'd get to running across the plateau and then, moving together in the same pattern, we'd disappear! There were breaks in the high desert's landscape, but you could not see them if you did not know where to look. It was a perfect place for horses. It was too rocky for cattle and the mustangers could not find us there.

"When I gathered cattle on Hart Mountain, I'd notice them," Richard said. "My father showed me where they ran. He would tell me all these stories. There were families that came before us, and some of those horses were abandoned. My family homesteaded in the 1930s, and we inherited those horses. That happened a lot in the West. It's basically a story of migration."

Before the Taylor Grazing Act mandated federal oversight of public lands in 1934, itinerant herders and rustlers seized whatever grass and livestock they could. To settler colonialists, every resource on the continent's western frontier was free for the taking. And horses were easy to steal. Ranchers who put down roots near Beatys Butte hid their "wild bunch" in spots that afforded them sanctuary.

You have a part of your history out on the range.

Things changed in the 1970s. They passed the Free-Roaming Wild Horse and Burro Act to protect us from wanton cruelty, but restricted our range to publicly owned scrubland, almost all of which we share with livestock. Ranchers could claim the horses they ran on their grazing allotments or pay a trespass fee. Those they left became wards of the state. Now, the only humans who can legally capture us, break up our families, and hold 46,000 of us in taxpayer-funded feedlots are government agents. Today, almost half of all mustangs born free on the range are in federal custody.

"Some horse people immediately think that ranchers don't like wild horses," Mary said. "My relatives have been here since the 1870s, and I don't think that's true at all. What we don't like is the government's total mismanagement that abuses the ranchers because of the horses. We coexist with them quite well and have for generations. On our ranch, we never called them wild horses. We called them *our* horses or the Lairds' horses or the Lynches' horses. We knew whose horses they were."

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What exceeds the government's managerial capacity is the fecundity of free-roaming equines. Before the Wild Horse Act, private profiteers culled and hunted herds to the brink of extinction. Rounding them up with trucks and airplanes, ranchers and mustangers shot them, broke them for use as saddle stock, and tied tires to their necks to exhaust them before sending trailers full of half-dead animals to slaughter. Congress' ban on funding inspections of horsemeat has temporarily prevented the mass disposal of wild horses in captivity. But no one is under any illusion that the exorbitant cost of removing and warehousing enough animals to appease the state-sponsored appetites of cattle, oil, gas, and mining industries is sustainable.

They took that pasture away because they think you're hurting antelope.

Mustangs were not the only nonhumans to gain rights in the 1970s. The Endangered Species Act put real bite into the National Wildlife Refuge System's mandate to preserve wilderness areas. Establishing a procedure for prosecuting threats to vulnerable species and fragile habitats, the law gave environmentalists leverage to force the Fish and Wildlife Service to protect species deemed native to territorial lands and waters occupied by the United States. But that law does not acknowledge that our ancestors originated in North America and migrated to Eurasia before appearing to vanish from the continent's fossil record ten thousand years ago. Because settler history decrees that explorers and conquistadors brought us to their New World, we are deemed "feral" and an "invasive species" to boot.

"That law is the trump card of everything," Richard said. "It's why there's constant pressure from outside groups to tie up public land. My family, we didn't even know who was putting the pressure on us. We just knew the government was taking the land away and removing it from our grazing system. We knew that urban environmental groups were working with people in the government agency, the biologists. That's the way they think, preservation and all that. They say it's science, right? But it's one-sided science. They didn't consider the effects it would have on us and on our economy."

When Fish and Wildlife revoked hereditary grazing permits on the Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge in 1994, the Oregon Natural Desert Association cut down barbed-wire fences to allow pronghorn to leap wherever they wished. But horses were not welcome. Federal contractors proceeded to round up several hundred mustangs, so the refuge could declare itself "relatively feral horse free."

Having something the rest of society covets is a dangerous place to be.

The rugged terrain was what made us unlike other horses. If you live on the high desert among volcanic rocks, you grow hard hooves and learn to pick up your feet. It gives you range smarts and athletic skills that farm-bred equines do not have. Cowboys preferred to ride mustangs for demanding backcountry work because we could run fast through the rocks without stumbling and falling.

"You say *feral*, and it's like what they called the Irish," Richard said. "It pisses me off whenever I hear it. When you call horses those kinds of names, you're basically belittling my culture. I don't like the word *wild* either. I like to say they're our *cultural* horses. They've been here as long as we've been here. It upsets me when people talk about eliminating the horses by making them extinct. It would be like, I know there are people who want to do the same thing to ranchers. They want to make us not exist. So horses are the same to me. You see what I'm saying?"

In an era of Red State versus Blue State politics, a rural-urban divide can seem inscribed in stone. The notion that a Green New Deal will "take your hamburgers away" gains traction because the dwindling number of Americans employed in agriculture believes the rest of the country despises them and their cows. But liking cows on the range and dinner plate is more than a defiant desire to buck federal

control. It is a cultural disposition that asserts the rights of humans who raise livestock for consumption as commodities over the rights of animals shielded from the predations of profit.

Yet therein, too, lie tactical possibilities for rurality. In the culture wars of the Anthropocene, a rural mode of existence is as much a state of mind as it is the location of the ground under your feet. In at least one version of this affective orientation, it does not matter where you hail from or how you earn a living. What confers collective belonging is a willingness to embrace multispecies histories and refractory alliances that escape humanity's—and yes, anthropology's—best-laid plans. This kind of relational rurality springs from a congeries of feral ontologies that are quick to find open gates and breaks in an unforgiving landscape.[1]

The grasses were so good out there behind Sweet Knoll.

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[1] More or less vast literatures exist on several topics touched upon in this essay. None of those sources—historical, conceptual, or otherwise—directly inspired my attempt to evoke rurality's more-than-human intersubjectivities. Far more influential has been an attunement to the exhaustion of anthropocentric paradigms and the scholarly conventions that uphold them. There are fellow travelers on these paths, to be sure. But the contributions of my primary interlocutors here have no half-life in academe's bibliographic record.