

'Come From Away'

Dwelling, Crossing, and the Tensions of Place-Based Environmental Ethics

By Barry Stephenson

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A personal word about what follows. I wrote about half of what follows while away from home: first, while preparing to help lead a FANE seminar on a run-down farm in rural Hungary, with two of Wendell Berry's essays open in front of me; second, while on the ground in Sitke. I was trying to say why Berry's agrarianism moves me: why the old ideal of being born and bred to a place, of dwelling long enough to know and care for it, still seems to me ecologically sound and morally serious. What I found, during 'writing-up' these sympathies, was that I could not advance the ideal without also tending to what it hides. I am a prairie settler's grandson and a "come from away" in Newfoundland, so the questions are not abstract for me. What does the homesteader's belonging owe to the dispossession that made it possible? What can the agrarian eye fail to see in Indigenous ways of tending land? What are the loops in the story of the Batthyány farm? Is Berry simply privileged, does his vision scale, and what are we to do with the uglier political company that the love of place has often kept? I do not resolve these tensions. Following Paul Tillich, thinker of critique, which he called the 'Protestant principle,' I try to give the whence its due while siding, in the end, with the whither: to honour rootedness without making it exclusive, and to hold the root and the rot together as one history seen from different sides. The paper is written from the edges, where I seem to do my best thinking, or so I imagine.

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A Table in the Ticino

I am sitting at a dining table in a small cottage just outside Miglieglia, in the Canton Ticino, the southern, Italian-speaking region of Switzerland. My wife and I are here, as we are most years of late, owing to the generosity of friends who offer us this spot in April or May, for the sun and the warmth that has not yet manifested in St. John's, Newfoundland, our home these past thirteen years. But there is not much heat, and little sun: rain and cold today, and rain and cold tomorrow. And so, I write.

Through the window a lush green, steep descent to the valley. Two palm trees, a bay laurel, and a fig tree stand out amidst the broader mix of deciduous growth. Our fig tree at home survives in a small greenhouse, part of a project to rid our back yard of lawn, replacing it with vegetable gardens. Here, the fig tree is in its element and thriving; at home, we will harvest a few figs this season, if we are lucky.

In my mind, my home place is worlds away from either Newfoundland or the Ticino. I grew up in, and still pine for, the Parkland, the transitional zone between grassland and boreal forest, framed by the front ranges of the Rocky Mountains, a biome of open meadows and

groves of aspen, now contained in the legal fiction of the province of Alberta, which emerged in 1905.

The Ticino is a second imaginative home for me, having published a book on Hermann Hesse, a German who felt like a stranger at home, renounced his citizenship, and left to find a sense of place and belonging south of the Alps, in nearby Montagnola. Our friend's cottage sits in the hills between Breno and Miglieglia, flanked by Lago di Lugano and Lago Maggiore, with the summit of Monte Lema just behind us, marking the border to Italy, and with jaw-dropping views. It is a beautiful place, and I am a stranger in it, though I have been coming here for years. My wife is Swiss-Canadian, and we know this landscape well enough to have affection for it without any presumption of belonging to it.

On the table in front of me are two essays by Wendell Berry: "The Making of a Marginal Farm," first published in *The Smithsonian* in 1980, and "The Agrarian Standard," published in *Orion* magazine in 2002. I am preparing for a seminar on environmental ethics, the FANE Public Seminar, to be held in a few weeks on a rather dilapidated farm I have never seen, located in the small town of Sitke, in Hungary. FANE, For a New Earth, is a Newfoundland and Labrador based non-profit working on the premise of "ecological conversion for everyone," pursuing its mission through place-based, transformative education at the intersection of natural, spiritual, and cultural ecology. That a Newfoundland organization is involved with a public seminar on environmental ethics in rural Hungary is itself a small illustration of one of the themes I am pursuing here: the relationship between the local and the itinerant, between belonging to a place and moving across places in the service of ideas and practices that are necessarily grounded in specific ecologies, histories, and soils, but also gesture toward universal questions and answers.

Our seminar, the duties for which I share with colleague, friend, and FANE co-director Sean McGrath, takes Berry's agrarian thought as its focus. Sean and I will lead a discussion in ten days' time, and so I am reading, re-reading, and thinking, finding myself in the midst of reflections and reveries marked by a set of tensions I cannot resolve, and have come to think I should not try to resolve too quickly, if at all.

The tensions are partly intellectual and partly personal, and in the kind of thinking I find most honest these are not easily separated. Asked where I am from, I rarely say 'Alberta' but rather the 'prairie,' where I was 'born and bred' a descendant of European settler-farmers who came to the Canadian west on land grants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These ancestors became, within a generation or two, people of deep and particular place: farmers who knew their specific piece of ground with the kind of attentiveness that Berry, in his essays, identifies as the foundation of ecological responsibility and moral seriousness. I left Alberta for school at eighteen and have lived, since then, in several places: Switzerland, various parts of Canada, and eventually Newfoundland, where I have lived for many years now and where I arrived, as the local vernacular immediately made clear, as a "come from away." I am sitting in the Ticino. I am from the prairie. I live in Newfoundland. I will soon visit Sitke, in Hungary's Vas County, situated, Google informs me, at the intersection of the Kisalföld, the Little Hungarian Plain, and the westward-stretching hills of Transdanubia, traversed by the Rába River.

The phrase “come from away” grounded a hit musical based on the arrival in Gander of diverted flights on 9/11. But the image-phrase is older and deeper, and it has stayed with me since I first heard it. It does something that simple description cannot. It locates a person in relation to a place not merely geographically but normatively: it tells you not just where someone is from but something about their standing, their status, their relationship to a landscape and community that has its own fierce sense of itself. There is a song, “Islander,” first written and recorded by folk singer Bruce Moss in 1982, then rocked-up and released by the Derina Harvey Band in 2013, the year I arrived to take up a position at Memorial University. The song’s central refrain and image runs: “I’m a Newfoundlander born and bred and I’ll be one till I die.” As I hear it, the line is not boastful, not exactly, but it is assertive; it stakes a claim, marks a boundary, names a kind of belonging that is understood to be both real and exclusive, available to some and not to others. The “come from away” is defined, implicitly, against this figure: the one who arrived from elsewhere, whose relationship to the place is therefore of a different and, I suggest, of a lesser kind. What it means to be “from away” has shifted since the collapse of the cod fishery, with the rise of offshore oil, with the wealth that came and was not evenly shared; today, the come-from-away is as likely to be resented as a short-term extractor as welcomed as a newcomer; this boundary of belonging is not static, being redrawn across economic, social, and ecological changes and ruptures.

I want to use this phrase, a small but powerful vernacular piece of belonging-theory, as a thread running through what follows, because I think it opens onto something important about the tradition of thought I am trying to engage. Berry’s New Agrarianism is, among other things, a sophisticated philosophical account of what it means to be born and bred and to live one’s life in a place — of why that kind of deep, long-term, place-specific belonging matters ecologically and morally, and of what is lost when it is dissolved by the forces of industrial and transnational capitalism and their attendant mobilities. It is a tradition I find genuinely compelling, and to which I am committed. It is also a tradition whose philosophical foundations contain tensions that it has not always fully acknowledged: tensions around the colonial history of agrarian settlement, around the forms of land relationship that the dominant frameworks cannot see, and around the relationship between dwelling and movement that the born-and-bred ideal tends to simplify.

This paper is not a critique of Berry from outside, nor a defence of him from within. It is an attempt at something I find harder and more worthwhile than either: to think from within a genuine entanglement, committed to the agrarian vision, implicated in its complications, unwilling to resolve the tensions prematurely in either direction. I am, in this sense, the paper’s primary evidence as well as its author: a cosmopolitan-leaning “come from away” who takes seriously the moral and ecological significance of being born and bred, and who cannot, given his own history, take it simply.

What Berry Pushes Us to Consider

To read “The Making of a Marginal Farm” and “The Agrarian Standard” together is to encounter a mind both intimate and systematic, autobiographical and philosophical; in the relationship between these qualities, we find Berry’s characteristic and powerful mode of

argument. Berry argues from experience to implication, from the specific demands of a particular hillside in Henry County, Kentucky, to the broadest questions about how human beings should understand their relationship to the living world. This movement, from the soil-depleted ground underfoot to the civilizational critique of industrialism and back again, is what gives his work its distinctive texture.

“The Making of a Marginal Farm” opens in the summer of 1956, with the young Berry standing on a road above the Kentucky River Valley, looking out over a landscape he has known since before memory began. What he sees is familiar — woodlands and pastures, the tree-lined river, fields and croplands — but what the essay traces is his gradual discovery that knowing a place and belonging to it are not the same thing. Gesturing toward the valley, he tells the friend beside him, “That’s all I need,” and means it; only later does he grasp how little he then understood of what the words required.¹ When he returns to Kentucky in 1964 and buys a small, worn-out farm at Lanes Landing, Berry begins a process of learning that continues for the rest of the essay and, implicitly, for the rest of his life. The farm, its steep hillsides, the poor soil, a history of misuse, teaches him things he could not have learned from a distance. His relation to the land, as he puts it in one of the essay’s most resonant passages, ceases to be “merely emotional or esthetical, or even merely critical, and becomes problematical, practical, and responsible as well. Because it must. It is like marrying your sweetheart” (“Marginal Farm,” 337).

This analogy, farming as marriage rather than as romance or technical production, is doing considerable philosophical work. It shifts the reader from aesthetics and technics to ethics, from appreciation to obligation, from the freedom of the observer to the commitment of the participant. It pushes us to consider that genuine relationship to a place, like genuine relationship to a person, requires the willingness to be responsible, to stay, to work through difficulty, to accept that care is not occasional but ongoing and unconditional. Berry is not sentimentalizing; the essay is full of honest acknowledgment of mistakes, of costs, of the gap between intention and outcome. What he is insisting on is that this kind of committed, long-term, practically engaged relationship to a specific part of the earth is both a moral achievement and an ecological necessity, and that the health of lands, waters, and air depends on it.

“The Agrarian Standard” extends this insight into a broader cultural and political argument. Written twenty-five years after the influential *The Unsettling of America* (1977), which Berry notes with characteristic wryness would have had a far happier fate “if it could have been disproved or made obsolete years ago” (“Agrarian Standard,” 132), the essay frames the contest between agrarianism and industrialism as the defining moral conflict of our time. The industrial mind, Berry argues, understands the world through the imagery and metaphor of the machine: it conceives of living things as mechanisms, of farming as mining, of land as raw material awaiting profitable extraction. Against this, agrarianism insists on

¹ Wendell Berry, “The Making of a Marginal Farm,” in *Recollected Essays, 1965–1980* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 329–40; and Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in *The World-Ending Fire: The Essential Wendell Berry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017), 132–42. These two essays, the seminar readings, are cited parenthetically hereafter by short title.

the land as what Berry calls, evoking biblical imagery, “an immeasurable gift” (“Agrarian Standard,” 133). A gift’s value exceeds any price that can be assigned to it, and its proper use and enjoyment requires not maximization but reciprocity, not extraction but participation.

What Berry pushes us to consider, across both essays, can be organized around four related provocations. The first is that ecological and human health are indivisible. A culture that treats its land as expendable will treat its people the same way; the patterns of exploitation are not separate but continuous. Abuse nature, stand above it, dominate it, and the same will be done to people. The second is that genuine place-knowledge requires dwelling. The attentiveness and ecological literacy that Berry exhibits in his descriptions of the farm’s soils, its slopes, its capacity to respond to good treatment, is available only to those who commit to a place over time. Berry observes that the time required to generate five feet of topsoil is some fifty thousand years, and that intensive industrial farming destroyed that work in little more than a century (“Marginal Farm,” 335). Knowledge of place cannot be acquired from a distance or in passing; it is something Berry shares with Heidegger’s account of practical know-how, a knowing that is embodied and skillful before it is representational. The third is that the proper standard of land use is not economic but ecological: not what the land can be made to yield in the short term, but what it can sustain over the long term, what its health requires, what it is capable of becoming if treated with the care it deserves. The fourth, perhaps the most challenging given our globalized world, is that the agrarian standard is inescapably local: it requires bringing “local nature, local people, local economy, and local culture into a practical and enduring harmony” that cannot be achieved by applying universal methods indiscriminately across particular places (“Agrarian Standard,” 142).

The philosophical tradition that underlies these four provocations is older and richer than Berry’s explicit sources always acknowledge. What he is recovering and radicalizing is, in important respects, the stewardship tradition: a way of thinking about the human relationship to land that runs from the biblical notion of dominion tempered by responsibility, through the Roman law concept of *usufruct* (the right to use and enjoy the fruits of something without diminishing or damaging it), through the common law doctrines of public trust and commons rights, and into the agrarian republicanism of Jefferson and beyond. This tradition is not identical with the Lockean improvement framework that has been so consequential, and so damaging, in the history of colonial land policy. Lockean improvement asks what can be extracted from the land and generates rights through transformation; stewardship asks what is owed to it and generates obligations through use. Where the one privileges the active remaking of nature into private property through productive labour, the other insists on custodianship rather than ownership, and on the duty to pass on what has been received in no worse condition than it was found.

I can hear the objection that this is a distinction without a difference: that the language of stewardship merely moralizes the same possessive relation to land that improvement pursues more nakedly, and that to prefer the one is to launder the other. There may be truth in it. The two are siblings, not opposites: both humanist, both at ease with private property, both pressed at times into the service of dispossession, improvement by

declaring un-‘improved’ land forfeit, stewardship by dressing settler title in the language of good husbandry. I do not claim that the stewardship tradition is innocent. My point is narrower: between a logic whose end is extraction and a logic whose end is a sustainable, limited return there is a real difference, one that shows up in soil quality, for example, and this difference is worth preserving even though neither logic reaches the relation to land that Indigenous thought describes. Stewardship is not the escape from the possessive tradition. It is the best that tradition has so far managed from the inside, which is not nothing, even if not enough.

Berry’s agrarian vision is most precisely understood not as a continuation of the improvement tradition, though it inherits some of its democratic and anti-aristocratic impulses, but as a recovery and deepening of the stewardship tradition: one that takes seriously the obligation to return what has been taken, to maintain fertility, to farm in ways that leave the land capable of sustaining the generations to come. His insistence that the land is “an immeasurable gift” is, in this context, not a rhetorical gesture but a philosophical claim: a gift cannot be treated as a commodity, cannot be exhausted for present profit, cannot be owned in the absolute sense that Lockean property theory implies. Land is, like life, gifted, and each must be received, used responsibly, and handed on. This is the stewardship ethic at its most demanding, and it is, I would argue, the most important positive contribution the agrarian tradition makes to contemporary environmental ethics.

The stewardship tradition remains, in most of its formulations, a humanist framework: one that locates moral agency in human beings and grounds the obligation of care in human responsibility toward a world they did not make and cannot ultimately own. It can and sometimes does tend toward a managerial relationship to the natural world, the responsible custodian administering a resource, and this can shade, under pressure, back toward the domination it is trying to correct. And it has not, historically, been applied with consistency: the stewardship obligations that were readily articulated for the lands of European peasant communities were systematically withheld from Indigenous communities whose relationships to the same land were older, deeper, and in many cases at least as genuinely stewardly. These limits are real. But they do not dissolve the genuine philosophical contribution of the stewardship tradition, and they do not diminish its importance as the positive normative content of the agrarian vision that Berry is developing and that this paper is, in its complicated way, trying to honour.

Chris Smaje, in *A Small Farm Future* (2020) and *Saying No to a Farm-Free Future* (2023), takes these provocations seriously as the starting point for a rigorous and self-aware contemporary agrarianism. Where Berry works primarily through the form of the essay and a commitment to poetics, personal, meditative, morally urgent, Smaje, a trained social scientist, works through systematic argument, engaging with ecological economics, systems theory, and political philosophy to make the case that Berry’s vision is not nostalgic but prophetic. The convergence of ecological crises, climate disruption, soil depletion, biodiversity loss, energy descent, makes the relocation and re-embedding in specific landscapes that Berry advocates not a lifestyle choice for the ecologically minded but a necessary adaptation that industrial civilization will need to make, willingly. Smaje is also notably more willing than Berry to engage the structural and political dimensions of agrarian transformation: land reform, questions of access and equity, and the legislative

and institutional changes that would be needed to make small-scale farming viable for more than a privileged few. I return to Smaje, and to that last phrase, later, for the charge of privilege and the charge of unscalability are the two commonly pressed objections against the agrarian vision.

What this tradition pushes us toward, then, is a fundamental reorientation of how we think about the relationship between people and land: away from extraction and toward reciprocity, away from the placeless universalism of industrial agriculture and toward the place-specific knowledge and commitment that ecological health requires. The born-and-bred Newfoundlander, on this account, represents something genuinely valuable: a life deeply embedded in a specific place, shaped by its particular demands and possibilities, carrying knowledge of its histories, rhythms, and limits that took generations to develop. The phrase resonates with Berry's language, and his values. The tensions begin when we ask what the phrase forecloses, and what history it carries within it.

Homesteaders, Dispossession, and the Colonial Root and Rot

The place held most deeply in my imagination is not the Ticino, beautiful as it is, nor Newfoundland, which has been my home for thirteen years. It is the Parkland region of central Alberta, not far from the Red Deer River: the transitional country between the open grasslands and the boreal forest, threaded by river valleys and coulees, punctuated by stands of aspen, opening to the west onto the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Ecologists call this kind of transitional zone an ecotone, a place where two or more ecological communities meet and interpenetrate, producing a diversity and richness that neither community alone possesses.² The Parkland is an ecotone in this precise sense: grassland and forest, flat and vertical, open sky and sheltered valley, linear eye lines and oxbowed rivers, the horizontal immensity of the prairie and the vertical drama of the mountains on the western horizon. It is a landscape of edges and transitions, of places where different worlds meet.

I was formed here, in the most fundamental sense, at the level of the body, before conscious memory, before the capacity for reflection. The particular quality of light on the prairies, the pungent smell of silver sagebrush, the cottony-seed economy of drifting poplar fluff, the drumming of the Ruffed Grouse, the scale of the Alberta sky, the way the horizon behaves differently here than anywhere else I have since lived: these are not first known intellectually but somatically, through the body's long habituation to a specific environment. The Parkland is marked by a set of river systems — the Upper Peace, the North Saskatchewan, the Red Deer, and the South Saskatchewan — that have shaped its ecology and its human history in equal measure. Perhaps five percent of the pre-contact

² Botanist Frederic E. Clements coined the term ecotone in 1904 to define the physical zone where two distinct plant communities meet. The idea was later adapted to human contexts, in the work, among others, of James Clifford, Robert Michael Morrissey, Mary Louise Pratt, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Homi K. Bhabha. The human ecotone (variously theorized as contact zone, borderland, third space) is a common perspective for studying matters of power, hybridity, and migration.

vegetation remains, mostly scattered along the rivers; the grasslands have been largely replaced by cereal crops.

When we moved our young family from Red Deer to southwestern Ontario, our son was six years old. He had some difficulty adjusting. One night, unable to sleep, I went to his room and asked what was wrong. He said, "I miss home." I asked what he missed. He said, "The sky." I felt, in that moment, like a very bad parent; and I also understood, with a precision that no theoretical account quite manages, what Berry means when he insists that the relationship between a person and a place is registered in the body before it is available to the mind, and what is lost when that relationship is broken. Before we know the world theoretically, we are already involved with it practically, using tools, moving through environments, speaking a language, engaged in projects that require a kind of knowing that is not representational but skillful and embodied. It is what Wallace Stegner describes in *Wolf Willow* when he writes about returning to the Saskatchewan prairie and finding that the smell of a particular plant unlocks something that all his subsequent sophistication had not erased, a bodily memory of place that precedes and outlasts conscious recall. I know that experience. For me, the Parkland is the landscape against which all others are measured, the one that returns in dreams, the one that is most fully mine in the sense that Berry means when he writes about the relationship between a person and a place becoming "problematical, practical, and responsible" ("Marginal Farm," 337), even though I left decades ago and, in truth, have increasingly little connection to it.

The Parkland I carry is not only the landscape I directly experienced. It is also a landscape saturated with narrative: the stories of European adventurers and fur traders who moved through this country before settlement, the legends that gathered around specific rivers and crossings. Not far from where I was raised, Anthony Henday laid claim to fame as the first European to sight the Canadian Rockies, in 1754, at Antler Hill. In our hay field we plowed up a cache of Cree arrowheads.

People formed in ecotones tend, I think, to develop a particular kind of perceptual attentiveness, an orientation toward edges, transitions, and the places where different worlds meet, that shapes intellectual as well as ecological sensibilities. The person who grew up in the Parkland, between grassland and forest, between prairie and mountain, between the flat and the vertical, may find themselves constitutively drawn to the kinds of in-between spaces and tensions that this paper is trying to inhabit. I cannot prove this as a general claim, but I can say that it describes something true about my own intellectual temperament: the preference for thinking at the edges of traditions rather than at their centres, for holding tensions open rather than resolving them, for the place where different worlds meet rather than for the security of a single, unified ground. I have never trusted systems that promise to explain everything, whether in theology, philosophy, politics, or science: thinking at edges, holding contradictions open, lingering in the places where one framework gives way to another: bleeding boundaries are my preference.

The Montana of Norman Maclean was close enough to my Alberta Parkland, the same mountains in the west, the same river-valley country, the same quality of light and weather and seasonal drama, to serve as an imaginative amplification of what I was already living in. Robert Redford's cinematic adaptation of *A River Runs Through It* provided a

heightened, narratively enriched version of something I already knew somatically. These artists work in an elegiac mood; their narratives are, at heart, accounts of loss, of a beautiful if hard way of life being dissolved by time and historical change. This elegiac quality is not incidental to the literary imagination of the West; it may be constitutive of it. And it connects directly to Berry, whose work is also, in an important sense, an extended elegy for a form of agricultural and communal life that industrial capitalism has largely destroyed. The elegy honours as it mourns what is passing, insisting on the irreplaceable value of history, ancestors, and tradition. It is a form I find deeply compelling, and to which I am temperamentally drawn.

But Paul Tillich, writing in *The Socialist Decision* in 1933, a book that cost him his position in Germany and remains one of the more politically courageous acts of writing in the twentieth century, presses a question by distinguishing between the *whence* and the *whither*: between what he called the “myth of origin,” which locates authority and legitimacy in roots, in the powers of place and kinship and the bonds of a particular community, and the prophetic demand, which breaks those powers open in the direction of a justice not yet achieved. Tillich gave the whence its due. He understood the genuine human need for rootedness, for belonging, for the sense that one’s life is grounded in something that preceded and will outlast the individual; and he lamented that the political left of his day had ceded that connection to the fascists. But his allegiance — and, I want to say, ultimately mine — was with the whither. The myth of origin cannot be the final word, because it looks backward, sacralizes what is given, and tends toward the closure of community against the outsider, the excluded, the one who does not share the origin. The prophetic demand insists that the whence must be broken open: not destroyed, but oriented toward a future that includes and transcends it.

The question Tillich might have posed to the elegiac imagination of the West is simple and devastating: whose elegy is this? Whose loss is being mourned? Maclean’s Montana is a landscape charged with beauty and loss, narrated from the position of the European settler whose presence in the landscape is taken, in the narrative, as the natural and unquestioned starting point of the story. Perhaps it can’t be any other way. But the Indigenous peoples whose relationships to this landscape are deeper, older, and in many cases more ecologically sophisticated than anything the settler tradition produced are largely absent from that narrative imagination, present, when they are present at all, as part of the backdrop against which the settler story unfolds. The landscape I carry most deeply in imagination is real, and it is mine in the sense that it formed me. It is also a landscape whose human history, in the stories that shaped my imagination, begins with European arrival, and that beginning is, in historical fact, a displacement.

This is where the family history presses in, and where the whence reveals its rot alongside its root. My ancestors came to the Alberta prairies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, part of the great wave of European agricultural settlement that the Canadian government organized, promoted, and subsidized as a deliberate project of nation building and economic development. They came from various parts of Europe, from places where land was scarce, where the new industrial economy extracted blood, where the promises of the old world had narrowed to something barely survivable. My English ancestors from Northumberland were coal miners; as government reports from the late

nineteenth century reveal, their working conditions were harsh and their futures bleak. My Norwegian ancestors were born into a late version of serfdom, taking the name of the agricultural estate on which they were born. And so on down the line: the Irish, Germans, Swedes, Danes, English, and Norwegians, when they had the chance to get out, they got out. The New World was an escape route.

The European peasantry and labouring classes were offered land grants: a quarter section (160 acres) of prairie land, available for homesteading, requiring only that the settler register the claim, break the ground, build a dwelling, and establish a farm within a specified period. They came, they broke the ground, they built the farms. They did not think of themselves as “settler colonists.” Their word, freighted with dignity and effort, with a particular vision of what a decent life looked like, was *homesteader*. The homestead was not taken; it was made, through labour and commitment and the willingness to stay when staying was hard.

What the conception of homesteader could not see, what it was structured, in a sense, not to see, was the prior history of the land on which the homestead was built. The Indigenous peoples who had lived in and with the Parkland for millennia, the Cree, the Blackfoot, the Nakoda, and, later, the Métis whose mixed heritage embodied a long history of encounter and relationship between Indigenous and European worlds, had been removed through treaty processes whose terms were frequently misrepresented and consistently violated, through the deliberate destruction of the buffalo herds on which Plains cultures depended, and through the residential school system that attempted to sever the transmission of Indigenous knowledge and culture across generations. The land was not empty when the homesteaders arrived. It had been cleared, legally, politically, violently, to make it available.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, in *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (2014), and Silvia Federici, in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), provide complementary analytical frameworks for understanding the full depth of this history, and for understanding why it is more complex than a simple story of European villains and Indigenous victims.³ The European peasantries from which the prairie homesteaders came were themselves, in many cases, the products of prior dispossession, a dynamic that Berry clearly recognizes.

“Most of our American ancestors came here,” Berry writes, “because they knew what it was to be landless; to be landless was to be threatened by want and also by enslavement. Coming here, they bore the ancestral memory of serfdom. Under feudalism, the few who owned the land owned also, by an inescapable political logic, the people who worked the land” (“Agrarian Standard,” 138). The enclosure of the English and Scottish commons and the brutality of the industrial economy drove millions of rural people from their own traditional relationships to land, destroyed the agrarian communities that had sustained

³ Dunbar-Ortiz writes: “the culture of conquest didn’t start with the Europeans crossing the Atlantic. European institutions and the worldview of conquest and colonization had formed several centuries before that. ... The first population forcibly organized under the profit motive, whose labour was exploited well before overseas exploitation was possible, was the European peasantry. Once forced off their land, they had nothing to sell but their labour.” Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, 32–33.

them for generations, and created the landless poor who eventually found their way onto ships headed for the New World. The Highland Clearances, which sent so many Scottish families to the Canadian prairies, were among the most brutal of these enclosures: a deliberate dismantling of clan culture and common land tenure in favour of pastoral sheep farming and the profit of absent landlords. The same pattern holds for the Irish fishermen who came to Newfoundland. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, young men from the crowded counties of Waterford, Wexford, and Cork, landless sons of small farmers displaced by the collapse of rural industry and the pressure of a doubling population, made their way each spring across the Atlantic to work the inshore cod fishery: land scarcity, unemployment, and the slow destruction of an agrarian way of life were as much the motors of “settler colonialism” as was the desire to dispossess. By the early nineteenth century, with the migratory fishery giving way to a resident one and the passage to Newfoundland still cheaper than to America, tens of thousands came to stay. By 1836, half the population of Newfoundland was Irish. They brought their language, their music, their faith, and the memory of having been driven from their own ground. And in that memory, they carried something of the complexity that Berry recognized in the homesteaders: a people dispossessed, who would in turn become part of a new world’s dispossessions.⁴

The homesteader, on this account, is a figure of double dispossession: someone whose own people had been driven from their land by the same forces, the enclosure of the commons, the rise of industrial capitalism, the conversion of land from a shared resource into a private commodity, that Berry identifies as the root of the agrarian crisis in America. They arrived carrying the wounds of their own uprooting, coming to live on land they were given that had been taken from someone else. The root and the rot are not separable; they are the same history, experienced from different positions.⁵

And yet my ancestors did become a people of genuine place-belonging. They learned the prairie. They developed exactly the place-knowledge that Berry celebrates, acquired

⁴ See John Mannion, “Irish Migration and Settlement in Newfoundland: The Formative Phase, 1697–1732,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 17, no. 2 (2001); Mannion, “Tracing the Irish: A Geographical Guide,” *The Newfoundland Ancestor* 9, no. 1 (1993): 4–18; and Edmund Gilbert et al., “The Newfoundland and Labrador Mosaic Founder Population Descends from an Irish and British Diaspora from 300 Years Ago,” *Communications Biology* 6 (2023): 469.

⁵ The reversal is dramatized, with characteristic bluntness, in the television series *Yellowstone*, whose third season opens with an episode called “You’re the Indian Now.” The line belongs to Monica Dutton, a Lakota woman, spoken to her white father-in-law, the rancher John Dutton, as corporate developers close in on the family’s land: “When this land belonged to my people a hundred and fifty years ago, children were stolen and men were killed. Families herded away like cattle. And nothing’s changed. Except you’re the Indian now.” The forces are the same; only the position has changed. That the show lets a Native woman legitimize the rancher’s claim is itself part of the problem it exposes: the dispossessed dispossessor mourns a loss that is real while standing where someone else once stood. The irony deepens when one learns that Monica is played by Kelsey Asbille, an actress whose claim to Cherokee ancestry the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians has been unable to confirm: the question of who truly belongs will not stay inside the story. One could pile up many such examples of the complicated, looped relationships to land and identity. None of this sorts itself out, and it is a mistake to want it to. But the loop is not a leveling; it is the same logic of accumulation exposing itself across different victims, and to see that is already to be given somewhere to stand.

through exactly the process he describes in “The Making of a Marginal Farm,” committed, practical, responsive engagement with a specific landscape over time. But the land they were learning to belong to had already been profoundly altered by the dispossession that made their presence possible. The buffalo were gone; the burning regimes Indigenous peoples had used for millennia to manage the grasslands were ended; the prairie was being broken by the plough for the first time; barbed wire was being strung. Their belonging was real, and it was built on erasure. Both things are true at once.

This layered history matters for how we read Berry, because the tradition he is recovering is itself built on foundations more compromised than it typically acknowledges. The yeoman farmer championed by Jefferson, for example — independent, rooted, ecologically attentive — is a figure whose emergence is inseparable from the enclosure of the commons that made the landless peasant available for settlement, from the forced removal of Indigenous populations and the settlement that made Indigenous land available for the yeoman to farm, and from the enslaved labour that helped build that lifeworld. The agrarian ideal and the colonial project are not simply opposed; they are historically entangled.

We must also observe that a similar pattern, *mutatis mutandis*, appears in the collectivizations of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, and in Mao’s China, where the state expropriated peasants and reorganized rural life in the name of modernization. As Smaje observes, extractivist, profit-driven farming has been, politically speaking, an equal opportunity enterprise: “Enormous productivity over and above the needs of the joint production-consumption household *can* be willingly given, persuaded or forced, as many a local chief, feudal lord, priestly caste, capitalist planner and communist autocrat have proved historically.”⁶ That agrarian attachment has a way of reasserting itself in the aftermath of such experiments suggests that the desire for rooted, local relationships to land is not merely a Western or capitalist nostalgia but a recurring human response to the failures of large-scale agricultural and social control.⁷

Of course, Berry is not unaware of this: his critique of industrial capitalism’s destruction of rural communities is, in part, a critique of the same forces Federici identifies as driving the original dispossession of European peasants, whether under capitalism or communism,

⁶ Chris Smaje, *Finding Lights in a Dark Age: Sharing Land, Work and Craft* (London: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2025), 63.

⁷ On the Soviet and East-European collectivizations as class war and peasant subjugation, see Merl, “Collectivization and Socialist Agriculture”; and Viola et al., *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927–1930*. The clearest recent instance of the reassertion is China’s decollectivization of the late 1970s and 1980s: dismantling the commune system in favour of the Household Responsibility System restored the household as the basic unit of production and revived local markets, village identities, and lineage and religious practices suppressed under Mao. See Victor Nee, “The Peasant Household Economy and Decollectivization in China,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 21, no. 3–4 (1986): 185–203; Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Political Economy of Village Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); and Helen F. Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

and his insistence on the moral priority of those who work and know the land has a democratic, even radical, dimension. But the colonial dimension of the agrarian inheritance remains, in his work, largely implicit, a shadow on the history he is recovering rather than an explicit subject of reckoning.

Berry's most recent and most extended engagement with this precise tension is found in *The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice* (2022). His argument that the antebellum South produced, alongside and inseparably from its catastrophic injustice, a genuine agrarian culture whose virtues deserve to be understood and in some measure recovered, is a most difficult one to read. Agrarian virtues and racial terror, critics have argued, cannot be separated. The leisure, the land, the particular quality of place-relationship that Berry's agrarian ideal partly descends from were available to white Southerners precisely and only because enslaved people performed the labour that made them possible. To attempt to recover the culture while acknowledging the injustice, as if they were parallel features of the same society rather than constitutively intertwined, is not an act of cultural preservation but of cultural evasion. It reproduces, in more sophisticated form, the selective historical vision that has always allowed the whence to present itself as simply beautiful, simply valuable, simply worth mourning and protecting, without reckoning with what that value cost and who paid.

I raise this not to stand above or judge a debate that others are far better placed to conduct, but because I cannot claim the agrarian inheritance while stepping around its most painful instance. The tension is not incidental to the tradition; it is built into it. The Southern Agrarians of *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) championed localism and the small farm against industrial capitalism while minimizing the slave society on which their pastoralism rested, and Berry's book, whatever its intentions, reopens that wound. This is the political dimension of agrarianism, and of localism more broadly: the love of a particular place and its inherited ways can shade, if it is not vigilant, into a defence of the arrangements that produced them. An honest agrarianism has to meet this rather than deny it, ignore it, or skirt around it.

Two writers mark the poles of the tension I feel here. bell hooks, who was sympathetic to Berry and learned from his early *The Hidden Wound* how a white Kentuckian might reckon with racism from the inside, reclaims rather than repudiates the agrarian inheritance. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009) she recovers a Black agrarianism, the memory that most Black Americans were once a rural people, and mourns the severed "culture of belonging" that the land once gave; she can honour, as Berry put it in a conversation with hooks, "the beauty of their intimacy with the material life that they lived," while insisting that any such recovery must confront racial terror rather than romanticize it.⁸ Ta-Nehisi Coates presses from the other side. He is not in dialogue with Berry, but *Between the World and Me* names precisely what a pastoral can be built to conceal: "the Dream rests on our

⁸ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 194. The conversation appears in a chapter titled "Healing Talk: A Conversation," in which Berry also mentions his connection to Wallace Stegner, another reason for introducing Stegner here.

backs, the bedding made from our bodies.”⁹ The whence is real and worth recovering, and it cannot be recovered honestly without reckoning with whose dispossession and whose labour built it.

Smaje has been more willing to engage these troubled histories directly. He acknowledges that any serious contemporary agrarianism must confront the history of land dispossession, not merely as a moral failing to be regretted but as an ongoing political reality that shapes the conditions of possibility for the agrarian vision. His argument for land reform is explicitly attentive to questions of access and equity, to who has been excluded from land ownership and why, and to what reparative justice would require. The homesteader and the settler colonist remain, in the New Agrarian literature, more often adjacent than identical.

What my prairie background pushes toward, then, is a recognition that the moral complexity of agrarian belonging cannot be resolved by appeal to labour, love, and stick-with-it-ness alone. My ancestors worked hard, knew their land well, and developed genuine place-relationship through decades and more of attentive farming. These things are true. The land they farmed was taken from people who had their own deep and sophisticated relationships to it, relationships that the improvement framework could not see and the homestead system was designed to displace. This is also true. Both truths are part of the inheritance, and any honest engagement with the agrarian tradition has to hold them together without collapsing one into the other.

The “Newfoundlander born and bred” motif surfaces here. The distinctive culture that produced that phrase, the locative identity so fierce and so particular, is a settler culture, developed over several centuries on land from which the Beothuk were not displaced but erased: driven to extinction by the early nineteenth century through a combination of violence, starvation, and epidemic disease. The Mi’kmaq presence, more persistent but also marginalized, adds another layer, as does the presence of Innu and Inuit peoples in Labrador.¹⁰ The born-and-bred Newfoundlander, whose belonging is so deeply and authentically felt, is also, in historical depth, someone whose people came from away and whose belonging was built on a prior dispossession so complete it left no one to contest it. This is not a reason to dismiss Newfoundland belonging or the values it encodes. It is a

⁹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 11.

¹⁰ The erasure this paragraph names is not safely in the past. In June 2026 the Innu Nation cancelled its *Innu Pakassiun* exhibition at the Labrador Interpretation Centre (operated by The Rooms), charging that the province had pressed it to present a version of Innu history inconsistent with both the archaeological consensus and the Innu’s own understanding of themselves; Grand Chief Simon Pokue called the province’s position “the erasure of Innu history” and refused to “be told who we are by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.” The power to decide whose belonging counts, and whose history is permitted, remains. See Jesse Staniforth, “Innu Nation Cancels Exhibition of Belongings, Claims N.L. Government Pushed Them to Rewrite History,” *APTN News*, June 18, 2026, <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/innu-nation-cancels-exhibition-claims-n-l-government-pushed-them-to-rewrite-history/>.

reason to understand it in its full complexity, which is, I would argue, the only honest way to understand any act of agrarian belonging in the settler colonial world.

Stegner, Indigenous Voices, and the Grammar of Place

Wallace Stegner knew the Saskatchewan prairie the way Berry knows the Kentucky hills: from the inside, through the body, through the unique quality of light and wind and seasonal change that gets into a person in childhood and never entirely leaves. *Wolf Willow*, published in 1962, represents Stegner's attempt to reckon with and develop that knowledge. Part memoir, part history, part fiction, it is organized around Stegner's return, as an adult, to the small town of Whitemud where he spent his early years, and around the discovery that the place has been in him all along, that it shaped him more fundamentally than any of the more prestigious places he subsequently inhabited. "It is," he writes, "the place where I spent my childhood" (p. 3). The simplicity of that sentence carries enormous weight. It is the place where the self was formed, where perception was first calibrated to a specific landscape, where belonging happened before it was chosen or understood.

Stegner's prairie, like Berry's Kentucky hills, is a place to which the writer has a relationship of the kind that the agrarian tradition most values: deep, formative, place-specific, ecologically attentive, historical. *Wolf Willow* is, among other things, a sustained act of the place-knowledge that Berry celebrates, an attempt to read a landscape's history, ecology, and human meaning with care.

Stegner won the Pulitzer. I love *Wolf Willow*. But I have also read Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a member of the Crow Creek Sioux tribe, a founding figure of Native American Studies, and a critic whose essay title "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner" says, with characteristic directness, what needs to be said about the limits of the tradition Stegner and Berry and Snyder and so many others represent.¹¹ The title does not require an elaborate discussion. Stegner's prairie, like Berry's Kentucky, is a landscape whose human history begins, in the narrative imagination, with European settlement. The peoples who lived in and with that landscape for millennia before the settlers arrived are present, when they are present at all, as part of the backdrop against which the settler story unfolds, as historical context rather than as holders of their own deep and legitimate place-knowledge. The place-knowledge that Stegner recovers and celebrates is real. What it cannot see is the place-knowledge that was already there, that the settlement displaced, and that constitutes a different and in some respects deeper form of the very relationship to land that Stegner and Berry are trying to recover.

This is not simply a matter of omission, of failing to include Indigenous perspectives that could be added without changing the fundamental framework. It is, as Robin Wall Kimmerer helps us understand, a matter of ontological difference, and perhaps of incompatibility. Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) articulates a Potawatomi understanding of the human relationship to the living world that differs from the settler

¹¹ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

agrarian tradition not merely in content but in kind, not just in what it says about land but in what it understands land, and the beings that inhabit it, to be.

The most philosophically precise way to put this is through Kimmerer's observation about the grammar of animacy. The Potawatomi language marks most of the natural world as animate, grammatically and ontologically a "who" rather than an "it." A bay, a mountain, a plant, a river is a being with its own agency, its own gifts, its own needs, not an object available for human use but a subject in relationship with human communities. English, and the philosophical tradition built in and around European languages, renders the natural world as inanimate, as "it," as resource, as the passive object of human productive activity. This is not merely a linguistic difference. It encodes a metaphysical assumption that is foundational to Lockean property theory and, more subtly, to the agrarian tradition that inherits from it: that land is the object upon which human labour acts, the passive recipient of human improvement, rather than a community of subjects to whom humans stand in relationships of reciprocal obligation.

Kimmerer's account of sweetgrass harvesting makes the practical implications concrete. Her research demonstrates that populations of sweetgrass are healthier in areas where they are regularly harvested by traditional methods than in areas left entirely alone or harvested unsustainably. The tending relationship, the careful, reciprocally attentive practice of harvesting, is itself ecologically productive. It improves the plant community, but in a way that looks, from outside, like restrained use or non-use rather than productive transformation. To the Lockean eye, and to the settler agrarian eye that inherits its assumptions, this is land that is not being sufficiently used, land that is available for those who would improve it more thoroughly. The framework cannot recognize the harvesting practice as improvement, because it does not maximize extractable output, does not result in private accumulation, and operates through relationship and restraint rather than through transformation and enclosure.

There is a further dimension here that is directly personal. The Parkland ecotone I described earlier, was not simply a natural feature. It was, in significant part, the product of millennia of Indigenous land management, particularly controlled burning by Cree and Blackfoot peoples. The burning regimes that these communities maintained shaped the composition and character of the Parkland in ways that made it the distinctive landscape it was when the settlers arrived. The landscape that formed my body, and that my son missed when we moved to Ontario, was itself a form of the tending practice that the Lockean improvement framework could not see as management or as belonging. The whence I carry is deeper, and differently owned, than I knew as a child.

Charles Mann's *1491* (2005) extends this argument into historical and archaeological territory. The landscapes that European colonizers described as wilderness, as virgin nature untouched by human hand, were, Mann demonstrates, the products of millennia of intensive human management: controlled burning that maintained the parklike open forests early explorers admired, sophisticated agroforestry systems, complex water management, the deliberate shaping of forest composition across vast areas. The Amazon basin, long held as the paradigm case of pristine wilderness, contains enormous areas of *terra preta*, anthropogenic dark earths created by centuries of Indigenous agricultural

practice, and supported large, complex civilizations whose land management shaped the ecology of the entire basin. The “empty” land of the *terra nullius* doctrine was not empty. It was managed in ways that the improvement framework could not read as management, by people whose belonging to it the same framework could not recognize as belonging.

It is worth pausing here to acknowledge something important about Berry’s own position in relation to these arguments. Berry is not an extractivist. His entire critique of industrial agriculture is organized around precisely the distinction between extraction and reciprocal relationship, between mining the land and participating in its living cycles. When he writes, in “The Agrarian Standard,” that farming must be understood as “the proper use and care of an immeasurable gift” (“Agrarian Standard,” 133), he is speaking a language that Kimmerer would recognize and, I believe, largely endorse. His ecological redefinition of improvement, land is improved when it becomes more fertile, more diverse, more capable of sustaining life, not when it produces more extractable output, is a genuine move away from the Lockean framework and toward something closer to the relational ontology that Indigenous land philosophies articulate.

In the end, I cannot agree with (or perhaps cannot understand) Kimmerer’s most fundamental claim. The grammar of animacy, the ontological assertion that a river or a mountain or a plant is a ‘who’ rather than an ‘it,’ a subject with its own agency and interiority, presses beyond what my broadly humanist sensibilities can fully absorb or endorse. I do not think a river has agency in the morally relevant sense. I think a river ought not to be polluted, for the benefit of every living being that depends on it, human and non-human alike, and that this obligation is serious, demanding, and non-negotiable. But the ground of the obligation, for me, is the interests of sentient and living beings, not the subjectivity of the river itself. A river is not a person. The stewardship tradition, at its best, can arrive at the obligation or relational care without the full ontological move.

This is not a trivial disagreement with Kimmerer. It locates moral agency firmly in human beings, as responsible custodians of a world they did not make and cannot ultimately control, rather than distributing it across what Kimmerer calls the community of beings. It means that a river’s claim on our care is derivative: it matters because living beings matter, not because it is itself a subject that can be wronged in the way a person can be wronged. And it has political implications. The attribution of legal personhood to rivers, which has occurred in several jurisdictions as a development of Kimmerer’s kind of thinking, is a move I find myself unable to fully endorse, however sympathetic I am to the ecological impulse behind it; the can of worms it opens is one I am loath to enter, for I have little appetite for considering the rights of the smallpox virus.

And yet, and this is where the disagreement begins to lose some of its sharpness, the practical ethics that follows from the stewardship tradition and the practical ethics that follows from Kimmerer’s ontology converge more than they diverge. Both resist the reduction of land to a commodity. Both insist on the obligation of care and return. Both condemn the logic of extraction that treats the natural world as an instrument for human accumulation. The difference is in the philosophical grounding of that condemnation, and in what follows politically and legally from the full ontological claim. These differences are not trivial, but they do not prevent the humanist stewardship tradition and the relational

ontology from being, at this particular historical moment, allies in the more urgent practical project: resisting the destruction of the living world by forces that recognise neither human obligations of stewardship nor the subjectivity of other beings, and that are indifferent to both. That Berry's reciprocity is grounded in human moral obligation and Kimmerer's in a community of subjects is a real and consequential difference; whether my own stopping short of the full ontological move is a philosophical or spiritual limitation or an act of intellectual honesty is itself a genuinely open question.

The "Newfoundlander born and bred" motif returns here in a different key. The born-and-bred Newfoundlander's relationship to the sea, the multigenerational knowledge of fishing grounds, seasonal patterns, species behaviour, tidal rhythms, is, in Kimmerer's terms, something close to a tending relationship: developed through long, reciprocal engagement with a living system, oriented toward sustainable harvest rather than maximum extraction, encoded in cultural memory and practice rather than in scientific management plans. It is exactly the kind of place-knowledge that Berry celebrates and that the industrial trawling that destroyed the cod fishery obliterated. In this sense, the born-and-bred distinction encodes a genuine ecological insight: those whose belonging to a place is deep and multigenerational tend, other things being equal, toward more responsible relationship with it.

Crossing and Dwelling: Tweed and the Motif

Thomas Tweed's *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (2006) enters this conversation as a theoretical resource for thinking about belonging differently, not as an alternative to place-based ethics but as a productive complication of its dominant assumptions. Tweed's target is the privileging of what J. Z. Smith, in *Map Is Not Territory* (1978), calls the locative mode in religious thought and, by extension, in cultural theory more broadly: the mode that sacralizes a particular place, establishes a cosmic centre, roots identity in a specific territory, and treats settlement and rootedness as the normative human condition from which movement and crossing are departures.

Against this, Tweed proposes a theory organized around confluences: the meeting of flows, the intersection of movements, the temporary and always provisional stabilizations that we call cultures, identities, and communities. Religions, on this account, and we might extend the argument to cultural identities and place-belongings more broadly, are not primarily structures of sacred space or systems of settled belief but confluences of flows that simultaneously cross and construct boundaries, that are always in motion even when they appear settled, and that produce dwelling as an achievement within movement rather than as a natural or original condition.

This framework cuts across several of the tensions I am attempting to trace. The New Agrarianism, in both Berry and Smaje, is deeply locative in its orientation: it privileges settlement, rootedness, and long-term commitment to a specific place as the conditions under which genuine ecological responsibility becomes possible. This privileging is, as I have said, ecologically serious and morally important. But it also tends to render movement and crossing as derivative, as departures from the properly settled condition rather than as equally fundamental modes of human relationship to place.

Tweed does not simply invert this. He does not celebrate mobility and dismiss rootedness. What he insists on is that the binary itself is inadequate, that dwelling and crossing are not opposites but dimensions of the same process, that the locative and the mobile are equally constitutive of human being in the world. Dwelling is a mode of crossing, a temporary stabilization of flows; crossing is a mode of dwelling, a way of being at home in movement. Neither can be understood adequately without the other.

What makes the Newfoundland case so interesting is that the normative dimension of “come from away” lives in a different mode from the colonial and dispossession examples we have been discussing, even though it shares the same basic structure: the distinction between those who belong and those who do not, and the assignment of lesser status to those who do not. In the colonial examples, the category of non-belonging was deployed by the powerful against the relatively powerless, by imperial states and settler populations against Indigenous peoples, by landlords against tenants, by the enclosing classes against the rural poor. “Come from away” inverts this structure. It is a category deployed by a relatively small, historically marginalized, economically precarious community to mark its own distinctiveness against those who come from larger, more powerful, more economically dominant places, from mainland Canada, and to a lesser extent the broader anglophone world. Newfoundland only joined Confederation in 1949, and that late, reluctant, and continually contested entry into Canada is itself part of the cultural memory the term carries. The “come from away” is, implicitly, associated with the mainland, with the economic and political forces that have not always treated Newfoundland kindly, that have taken its fish, its resources, its autonomy, and its young people, and given back equivocal benefits.

So the normative force of the term is doing something more complex than simple exclusion. It is also an assertion of cultural survival, a way of marking and protecting a distinctive identity, a particular way of being in the world that feels genuinely threatened. The line, “I’m a Newfoundlander born and bred and I’ll be one till I die,” is not primarily an assertion of superiority over outsiders. It is an assertion of continuity, of persistence, of refusal to be absorbed or erased. It is closer to what we might call “resistant belonging,” belonging asserted against the forces that would dissolve it.

The born-and-bred Newfoundland identity is, as I have noted, among the most powerfully locative in North America: it sacralizes, in a secular register, the specificity of the place, the irreplaceable particularity of having been formed by this landscape, this community, this history. The song whose line I have been carrying through this paper is quasi-liturgical in its locative force. It roots identity in a place with the permanence of an ontological claim.

And yet Newfoundland identity is constituted by crossing in ways that are inseparable from its character. The province’s history is a history of the sea, of communities whose entire economic and cultural life was organized around movement across water, the going-out and returning rhythms of the fishing life. The outport community is not a settled agricultural community in Berry’s sense; it is a community organized around a form of mobile, reciprocal relationship with a living system, the ocean, the fish, the seasonal patterns of the fishery, that has more in common with Kimmerer’s tending practices than with the yeoman farmer’s cultivated field. The extraordinary diaspora of Newfoundlanders

across Canada and beyond, driven by economic necessity, by the collapse of the cod fishery, and by the resettlement programme of the 1960s that forcibly moved outport communities in the name of modernization, is itself a constitutive part of Newfoundland identity rather than a departure from it. To be a Newfoundlander is, in part, to be someone whose people have always been leaving and sometimes or often returning, whose sense of home is shaped as much by absence and return as by unbroken presence.

The come from away, on Tweed's account, is not simply someone who lacks the locative grounding of the born-and-bred Newfoundlander. They are someone whose crossing has brought them into the confluence that constitutes Newfoundland, who has entered the flow rather than originating within it. And the question of belonging then becomes not a binary but a question about the nature and depth of one's participation in the confluence, about how one's own movements have intersected with and been shaped by the movements and histories that constitute the place.

I find this framework illuminating partly because it describes my own situation with more precision than either the born-and-bred or the come-from-away categories alone can manage. I came to Newfoundland from away. I did not choose it in the way Berry chose his Kentucky farm; I came for work, as people have generally come to Newfoundland, as Newfoundlanders themselves have always gone and come in search of work. I have stayed. I have, to some degree, learned the place: its landscapes, its weather, its particular quality of social life, its humour and its generosity, and its sometimes less than concealed passive aggressivity. I have not and could never become a Newfoundlander born and bred, and the culture is right to mark the difference. But I am not simply a visitor either. I am something for which the binary does not quite have a name: someone whose crossing has become a form of dwelling, whose coming from away has become, slowly and incompletely, a coming to belong.

Stegner, whose prairie belonging was as deep and formative as anything Berry describes, spent most of his adult life in California. He was a come from away in multiple places, even as the prairie never left him. Berry himself left Kentucky, lived elsewhere, and returned; his belonging was chosen and earned as well as inherited. The born-and-bred ideal, which both writers in different ways articulate, is complicated by the actual texture of their lives, as it is by mine and by most lives in the contemporary world. This is not a reason to dismiss the ideal. It is a reason to hold it with more honesty, to recognize that the belonging it names is always achieved within and against the flows and crossings that constitute any life, that some of those flows and crossings have been violently forced, and that the come from away who stays and learns and commits is not failing to achieve the agrarian standard but pursuing it by a different and equally genuine path.

Privilege and Scale: Two Objections

The colonial and ontological complications I have been tracing come, in a sense, from the left of Berry, from the direction of a fuller reckoning with dispossession and difference. There are two further objections, more familiar and more frequently voiced — they emerged in the course of our seminar — and they come from a different quarter; any honest engagement with the agrarian tradition has to consider them. The first is that Berry

is privileged, and that his vision is therefore a luxury. The second is that his agrarianism does not scale, and is therefore irrelevant to the problem of feeding a planet of eight billion people. Both objections contain a truth. Neither, I will argue, is the refutation it is usually taken to be.

Consider first the charge of privilege. Berry, the critique runs, is a white man with an inherited connection to a particular Kentucky landscape, a tenured university position, a distinguished literary career, and the financial security that allowed him to farm marginal land as, in part, a choice rather than a necessity. The local food culture he champions carries the same class signature: farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture subscriptions typically cost more than the supermarket; urban gardening requires space, time, and leisure; the slow food movement has been criticized almost from its inception as a politics of the educated and relatively affluent, of people with the cultural capital and the disposable income to care about the provenance of their food. Berry himself supplies the critics their strongest evidence. In "The Making of a Marginal Farm," he cautions that farming such land "should not be attempted without a source of income other than the farm" ("Marginal Farm," 338), and his own source of income was a professorship at the University of Kentucky. The agrarian good life, on this reading, is available chiefly to those who do not need it to pay the bills.

There is something to this, and I do not want to explain it away. But I am not persuaded that "privileged" is quite the right word, and even where it is apt, I think it settles far less than those who utter it suppose. Berry did not descend from landed gentry; he came from a farming family whose own memory, like that of the ancestors he describes in "The Agrarian Standard," reached back to what it was "to be landless" and "the ancestral memory of serfdom" ("Agrarian Standard," 138). Given a choice between the comparatively easy life of the literary academic and the hard, unremunerative labour of restoring worn-out hillside land that others had abandoned, he chose the harder thing, and he chose it deliberately, farming steep ground with a team of horses long after tractors had made the horses seem quaint. Privilege that is spent, risked, and put to strenuous use looks rather different from privilege that is hoarded or merely enjoyed. To call a person privileged because he had a salary that let him farm without being financially crushed by farming is to describe away a serious agrarian experiment, and to describe it in a way that quietly concedes the very point Berry is making: that under present economic arrangements (industrial, corporate farms), small-scale, place-committed farming has been made almost impossible to sustain on its own terms.

Grant, for the sake of argument, that Berry is privileged. The morally serious question is not whether one has advantages but to what use one puts them. A person of standing can use it to insulate himself, to accumulate, to defend the arrangements that produced his advantage. Or he can spend it in the service of those who have none. As far as I can tell, Berry has spent his, without evident reservation, on the side of the powerless: the small farmer driven off the land, the rural community hollowed out by consolidation, the soil and water and air that have no voice in the markets that dispose of them. His work is a sustained attack on the powerful, on the "consolidators and exploiters of the land and the land's wealth" ("Agrarian Standard," 138), on the agribusiness corporations that have "submitted not quite reluctantly" to an inevitability of their own manufacture ("Agrarian

Standard," 141). Privilege turned outward, toward the defence of what privilege usually tramples, is not the vice the objection implies. Pressed too far, the charge of privilege becomes an *ad hominem*: it impeaches the messenger's standing and leaves the message entirely intact. The relevant question about *The Unsettling of America* is not who its author was but whether it is true, and Berry's own bitter hope, that it might have been "disproved or made obsolete" ("Agrarian Standard," 132), has gone unfulfilled for half a century. I should add that this is not a critique I can level from a safe distance. I write these words at a borrowed table in the Ticino, a tenured professor able to afford the leisure of reflection; whatever privilege attaches to Berry attaches, in its measure, to me.

The second objection is that agrarianism does not scale. Small, local, low-input, place-adapted farming, the critics say, cannot feed eight billion people; it is a boutique solution, charming but marginal, incapable of delivering the aggregate productivity the planet requires. This is the objection I take most seriously, and I think it is a half-truth, which is to say it is both partly right while also misleading. It may well be that relocalized, small-scale agriculture cannot, on its own, generate the sheer tonnage that the global industrial food system produces, though even this is less obvious than it sounds, since small farms are frequently more productive per unit of land than large ones, once one counts total output rather than the yield of a single mechanized crop. But suppose the objection is granted in full. Suppose small-scale local production cannot match industrial output. That is not, by itself, an argument against it. It is only an argument against it if one has already assumed that the correct measure of any way of farming is its capacity to be scaled up and rolled out uniformly across the earth, and that assumption is precisely the industrial habit of mind that produced the crisis in the first place. As Chris Smaje observes, quoting the human ecologist Philip Loring, "only in the industrial, colonial way of thinking do solutions for producing food or managing environments need to be uniform, scalable and deployable to all corners of the map" (*Finding Lights*, 91).

Berry anticipates Smaje here. The industrial "solution" for any local system, he writes in "The Agrarian Standard," is always "to increase the scale of work and trade," to bring "Big Ideas, Big Money, and Big Technology into small rural communities, economies, and ecosystems" ("Agrarian Standard," 135). And the result is not solution but displacement: "problems correctable on a small scale are replaced by large-scale problems for which there are no large-scale corrections. Meanwhile, the large-scale enterprise has reduced or destroyed the possibility of small-scale corrections" ("Agrarian Standard," 135). To demand that agrarianism prove itself scalable is to demand that it justify itself in the terms of the very system it exists to oppose. Berry refuses the terms outright, and reframes the question. "The primary question for the corporations, and so necessarily for us," he writes, "is not how the world will be fed, but who will control the land, and therefore the wealth, of the world" ("Agrarian Standard," 141). Scalability, on this account, is not a neutral yardstick but the signature of a particular political economy, one that has consistently answered the question of who controls the land in favour of the few. And the agrarian standard, "inescapably," is "local adaptation," a standard whose questions "necessarily" have "many answers, not just one" ("Agrarian Standard," 142). A single, scalable, everywhere-applicable method is not the agrarian aspiration that fails to be met; it is the industrial fantasy that agrarianism rejects.

This is the terrain that Smaje's *Finding Lights in a Dark Age: Sharing Land, Work and Craft* (2025), the culminating volume of a trilogy that began with *A Small Farm Future* and continued through *Saying No to a Farm-Free Future*, takes up most directly. Smaje's argument is that feeding a population from a relocated, small-farm agriculture is difficult but feasible, that the per-acre productivity of small mixed farms is often higher than that of industrial monocultures, and that the "won't scale" objection mistakes a contingent arrangement of political economy for a law of nature. The inaccessibility of the agrarian life and its supposed unscalability are not, on Smaje's account, refutations of the agrarian vision; they are symptoms of exactly the forces, land consolidation, the destruction of rural livelihoods, the capture of agricultural policy by economic elites, that the tradition identifies as the disease. Land reform and investment in agricultural infrastructure are therefore part of the agrarian programme, not preconditions that someone else must first supply. This is a serious response, and I find it largely persuasive. It does not dissolve the tension so much as relocate it, from the domain of natural or economic law, where the objection wants to place it, into the domain of political possibility, where it belongs and where it remains genuinely open. Whether a society will choose the reforms that would make a small-farm future viable is a real question. Whether such a future is possible in principle is a question the objection has not, in fact, closed.

Sitke and the Dilapidated Farm

The farm near Sitke where the FANE seminar was held is in a state of considerable disrepair. Buildings are deteriorating; fields that were once cultivated have gone back to rough grass and scrub; the infrastructure of a working agricultural life, the fences, the outbuildings, the equipment, has been allowed to fall into disuse. It is, in Berry's terms, a marginal farm: land that has been abandoned as economically unviable, that carries in its landscape the marks of a broken connection between people and place.

But the dilapidation of this particular farm is not the result of simple economic logic. Hungarian rural life has been organized and reorganized by external political and economic forces with a frequency and brutality that make the disruptions Berry identifies in twentieth-century American agriculture look almost gentle by comparison. The feudal land system concentrated land in aristocratic hands while the rural majority lived as landless labourers or precarious smallholders. The catastrophic violence of the two World Wars passed directly through this part of central Europe, with consequences still visible in village demographics and abandoned buildings. The postwar communist collectivization was forced, rapid, and organized with complete indifference to the relationships between specific farming families and specific pieces of ground that Berry identifies as the foundation of responsible stewardship. The post-1989 decollectivization dissolved the collective farms without creating conditions under which small-scale farming could re-establish itself viably, and has led to the consolidation of much agricultural land in the hands of new large owners, including politically connected investors whose relationship to the land is as extractive as anything Berry criticizes in the American industrial food system. Hungary's current political moment has only intensified this consolidation, with land policy serving the interests of economic elites in ways that Berry would recognize immediately as the enemy of everything he values.

The dilapidated farm at Sitke is, in this sense, not merely a venue but an argument, a piece of landscape-evidence for precisely the thesis that Berry and Smaje are developing: that the repeated breaking of the connection between people and place, driven by political and economic forces that treat land as an instrument of power and accumulation rather than as a gift requiring care, produces exactly the kind of ecological and cultural depletion visible in its deteriorating buildings and uncultivated fields. It is Berry's nightmare made architectural.

The history is written into this ground in a way one can walk. Some of us at the seminar are lodged in what was once the castle of the local nobility, now a hotel; the community project, with its old houses and stables and barns, lies in the lower village, beneath the castle, on the ground where the people who worked the estate once lived.¹² Under communism the land became a collectivized state farm and the old hierarchy was officially abolished, though the peasants remained where they had always been, working ground they still did not own. Now, with privatization, the land is passing into private hands again, and one can feel the older shape threatening to return: the risk, once more, of a class difference around the control and use of the land, a few owners above and the labour of the many below. I want to be careful here. I am a guest in the castle and a stranger to this history, in no position to pronounce on it. But the pattern is one Berry would recognize, and it is the same pattern the collectivizations enacted from the opposite direction: whoever controls the land controls the wealth, and the people who actually know and work a place are, again and again, the ones with the least say over its fate.

And yet, walking that lower ground, I saw the beginning of a different story. The old farm buildings below the castle are being brought back, one of them beautifully restored as the family's home, another holding the Valentin Tomberg archive,¹³ on land the family had lost to the state and bought back, plot by fragmented plot, through the compensation scheme of the 1990s.¹⁴ The work being done is clearly patient and long in its horizon, remaking not only a farm but a place to live and to think. That such a belonging has had to be reassembled out of confiscation and coupons, on ground that changed hands first by force and then by auction, is not a tidy ending; it is one more turn of the same wheel,

¹² Alexander Batthyány, "Community Project in Sitke," accessed July 2026, <https://sites.google.com/view/alexanderbatthyany/start/community-project-in-sitke>.

¹³ Valentin Tomberg (1900–1973) was a Russian-born esotericist who moved from Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy to Roman Catholicism; he is best known for *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, composed in his final years and published posthumously and anonymously (English translation by Robert A. Powell). The archive at Sitke, a library established on the Batthyány family's land to house Tomberg's papers, opened in 2025. See Batthyány, "Community Project in Sitke."

¹⁴ Following the collapse of communism, Hungary's Compensation Acts of 1991 issued interest-bearing vouchers (*kárpótlási jegy*) to citizens whose property had been confiscated between 1939 and 1987, including under the 1945 land reform and the 1950s collectivization. Holders used the coupons as currency at land auctions through the 1990s, allowing descendants of former owners to in effect buy back plots of agricultural land.

dispossession and return. I do not know whether it comes out as the deep thing Berry means. I hope it does.

And the seminar is being held there. People are coming from away, from various European countries, from North America, from different disciplines and traditions, to think together about environmental ethics, about the relationship between people and land, about what a more ecologically responsible and morally serious way of inhabiting the earth might look like. The irony is worth naming directly: a seminar about place-based ethics constituted, necessarily, by the movement of people across borders to attend it. A gathering of come-from-aways thinking about the moral significance of belonging to a place.

But perhaps this is not irony so much as necessity. Perhaps the seminar at Sitke is itself a small example of what Tweed's framework describes: a confluence of flows, a temporary stabilization of crossings in a specific place, producing something, a conversation, a thinking-together, a shared attention to questions that matter, that neither the place alone nor the movement alone could have generated. The dilapidated farm is the locative anchor; the movement of people toward it is the crossing that makes the confluence possible. Dwelling and crossing, not as opposites but as dimensions of the same event.

At Sitke over the course of those few days we were a confluence in Tweed's sense: a forester, devotees of Krishna who sang over lunch, members of the Cenacolo community, anthroposophists: these locals warmly welcomed a few academics and students — come from aways travelling to a place none of us was born to. We heard hard stories of Hungary's political past, ate delicious unhurried meals in the garden; we sang and danced with the awkwardness of people who had not grown up in the songs or steps, uneasy with but open to the intersection of academic and what was at times felt to be 'new age' sensibilities. A beautiful week among congenial strangers on a restored estate is exactly the sort of thing the comfortable can afford, and I am wary of mistaking a good retreat for the deep belonging Berry means. But something in it asked to be taken further. We mean to return next year, and this time to put the half the talk down and take up more work: the repair of the buildings, the tending of the land. If belonging or at least connection is achieved rather than inherited, it is achieved like that, by coming back, and by the hands as much as the head. Whether ours will amount to much I cannot say. It is the only way I know to answer Berry honestly, which is not to always agree with him but to go and do some of the good work.

What drove Alexander to invite us and what pushed and pulled us to go? A community that only turns inward dies of its own purity; the local, to stay alive, has to reach outward, trading not just goods but ideas and sympathies and hope with other local places attempting the same difficult things. Berry knew this, and named it better than I can. The community at the heart of his literary fiction is not a village or a farm but "the Membership," the word taken from Paul's letters in which the many are called one body and each of them a member of the others.¹⁵ It is a picture of connection without a centre: a

¹⁵ The community at the heart of Berry's Port William fiction is "the Membership," a term he takes from Paul (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:5). Its clearest statement is Burley Coulter's, in the title story of *The Wild Birds*:

scatter of small, rooted, often quarrelsome congregations, each planted in its own ground, held together not by an ancestry, wealth, or a state command but by letters carried back and forth, by emissaries. Paul, it seems, never settled; his dwelling was the crossing. That, when I am feeling grandiose, is what I think the gathering at Sitke was, and what FANE is: a slender thread of correspondence between communities, Newfoundland and Hungary and the home ground of everyone who came, joined by little more than sympathy and hope and the willingness to return and take a hand in the work. I hold the image warily: the edge between solidarity and mission is sharp is a knife. What I hope for is the first, not a movement to be scaled but a membership to be joined, visit by visit, until the small places are no longer alone.

The Entangled Inheritance

The tensions I have been tracing are not problems that have solutions; they are, as I said at the outset, tensions to be inhabited honestly, thought through carefully, and carried forward without premature resolution. The ecological and moral significance of dwelling, of long-term, committed, attentive relationship to a specific place, is not diminished by the historical complexity that surrounds any particular act of belonging. The born-and-bred Newfoundlander's multigenerational knowledge of the sea, my ancestors' intimate familiarity with their specific sections of Alberta prairie, Berry's own decades of attentive farming on his Kentucky hillside: these are real achievements of real value, and the forces that dissolve them are, as Berry argues, genuinely destructive of both ecological health and human community. Smaje is right that the convergence of ecological crises makes this insight not nostalgic but urgent. The relocalization of food systems, the recovery of place-specific knowledge, the rebuilding of the connection between communities and their landscapes are not options for the ecologically minded but necessities for a civilization that wishes to remain viable. The objections from privilege and from scale do not overturn this. They caution against a certain complacency, and they return us, each in its own way, to the domain of political possibility, where the real work of making the agrarian vision available to more than a few must be done.

Time deepens belonging without necessarily purifying it. The descendants of the Cupids settlers of 1610 are not settlers in any meaningful active sense; the word, applied uniformly across four centuries of descendants, begins to lose its analytical precision and its moral force. "Settler" is most exactly a relational and historical term: it describes a position in a moment of colonial encounter, structured by power, displacement, and the frameworks that justified dispossession. Applied to the generation that arrived, and to the legal and political structures they established and their descendants perpetuated, it is precise and necessary. Applied without differentiation to everyone of European descent in a place where settlement began four centuries ago, it risks becoming a permanent ontological category, a mark of original sin that no amount of time, commitment, ecological attentiveness, or genuine place-belonging can redeem. This is not only historically

Six Stories of the Port William Membership (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986): "The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything." The ethic is worked out in several of Berry's novels.

imprecise; it is its own form of erasure, flattening the hard-won, ecologically serious belonging that communities like the Newfoundland outports have developed over centuries into something permanently provisional and permanently illegitimate.

And yet the limits of the settler category do not dissolve the claims it was developed to name. The belonging that four centuries of continuous habitation and ecological relationship have produced in the descendants of the Cupids settlers is real and deserves to be honoured; but it does not override the claims of the Mi'kmaq, whose relationship to the island is at least as old, differently constituted, and carries specific rights that no accumulation of European generational depth can supersede. What is required is not a competition between these belongings for the status of most legitimate, but the honest acknowledgment that they are different in kind, coexisting in the same place with different histories, rights, and responsibilities. At what point does one become “native” to a place? This is the condition, in various degrees of temporal depth, of most people in most settler colonial societies. It calls not for the permanent application of a label whose precision diminishes as the generations accumulate, but for something harder: the ongoing acknowledgment of the prior claims that settlement displaced, active political support for Indigenous resurgence and land rights, and the willingness to understand one's own belonging as genuine without being exclusive. The Tillichian formulation holds here too: the whence of the four-century Newfoundland community is real, and it is not sufficient. The whither demands that it be held open, oriented toward a reckoning with what it cost and a responsibility toward those whose prior belonging it has never fully replaced.

My ancestors were come-from-aways who became, within a generation, people of deep place. I am a come-from-away who is, slowly and incompletely, becoming a person of Newfoundland: not born and bred, but staying and learning and trying to care, which may be the form that belonging takes for people whose lives are constituted by crossing. The Ticino kitchen table is not my place, but I can see, from it, what my place is.

A fully honest place-based ethics would hold Berry's insights and these complications together, and would answer the gap he leaves not with a better theory but with a practice: staying, joining, taking up the work, and keeping the small places in speaking relation with one another.

- *Miglieglia, Sitke, and St. John's, Summer, 2026*

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