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Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections, by Corinne Fowler, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 324 pp., £19.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781845234829

The hysterical reaction to Corinne Fowler's work among commentators in Britain's notorious tabloid press, not to mention the trolls in the alt-right social media stream, would appear to confirm the central argument of her most recent study, *Green Unpleasant Land*: that the English countryside remains widely – though mistakenly – conceived in the popular imagination as a white idyll, somehow untouched by the entwined histories of industrial capitalism and overseas imperialism, and utterly decoupled from the millions of racialised people whose labour made those phenomena possible in the first place. It was Fowler's work with the National Trust, and more particularly her 2020 co-authored report "on the Connections between Colonialism now in the care of the National Trust" (Huxtable et al. 2020), that first drew the ire of the Tory "Common Sense" group and other high-profile politicians, including the culture secretary, Oliver Dowden. The report touched a cultural nerve, it seems, and *Green Unpleasant Land* is the book that meets this hyperbolic, "culture war" rhetoric with meticulous research, careful argumentation and citation, and a deliberate amplification of Black and Asian writers who have always been aware of the connections between the English countryside and their own lives.

Of course, postcolonial scholars should also already know of the connections between slavery and the English countryside (and it is most often, though not always, the *English* rather than Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish landscapes in such imaginaries) – most likely from Edward Said's frequently cited contrapuntal reading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, or perhaps through the work of Catherine Hall and others at University College London on the legacies of slave-ownership in Britain. These are indeed both key reference points for Fowler's study. But *Green Unpleasant Land* assembles additional ammunition around these examples, combining evidence that is both literary and historical to present a more thoroughgoing explosion of the mutually structuring and enduring myths that rurality is equated only with whiteness, and that by implication Blackness is limited to urbanity.

The book's chapters break down the imagined geography of "the countryside" into a series of digestible chunks. After two scene-setting chapters, Fowler unpacks the notion of the pastoral, and then dissects the racialised histories and spaces of country houses, moorlands, and gardens. Throughout these studies, she switches back and forth between 18th- and 19th-century writings that established archetypes of the countryside, from James Thomson's *The Seasons* through to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, on the one hand, 20th- and 21st-century reclamations of those spaces, on the other, with authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Grace Nichols, and David Dabydeen making regular appearances. In this structure, *Green Unpleasant Land* presents itself as a remarkably traditional "postcolonial" analysis, insofar as it establishes a familiar "writing back" agenda, and makes the core argument that revisionist accounts of empire's reach and effects begin not in history books, but in the literary and poetic writings of authors of colour themselves.

It makes sense, then, that the other implicit – and no less important – argument of *Green Unpleasant Land* is the insistence that creative writing is a legitimate form of history-making. Not only does Fowler demonstrate this in the detail of her chapter studies, but she also practices it herself, including in the final third of the book a short story and series of poems of her own. What results is a refreshingly wholistic view that connects the task of drawing out the historical consequences of slavery and colonialism with the ongoing importance of the disciplinary arts and humanities. In the structure of her book, Fowler thus subtly reminds postcolonial scholars that the advocates of "Common Sense", who cower from the connections between empire and the countryside, are the same politicians responsible for the latest assault on the teaching of

humanities subjects in our higher education institutions – with the vital implication that this is not a coincidence.

Reference

Huxtable, Sally-Anne, Corinne Fowler, Christo Kefalas, and Emma Slocombe. 2020. *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery*. Wiltshire: National Trust. <https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf>.

Dominic Davies
City, University of London, UK
dominic.davies@city.ac.uk