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Rural Futurism:
Assembling the Future in the Countryside

Julia Spanier

Utrecht University, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development
j.r.spanier@uu.nl

Abstract

Both growth-based accounts of urban modernisation and critical assessments of an allegedly planetary process of capitalist urbanisation afford the rural no place in the future. This paper responds to the marginalization of the rural. Conceptually based on insights from the diverse economies agenda and post-colonial and feminist urban theory, it studies how the rural is an agent in the performance of the future, and, in fact, in the construction of more just and desirable futures. It introduces 'rural futurism' as a lens to capture these rural performances. The notion of 'rural futurism' is chosen to not reproduce a spatiotemporal externalisation of the rural, too easily done in the term 'rural utopia'. To illustrate the power of this perspective, the paper studies the "*Ferme de la Mhotte*", a collective in the French countryside. The collective's performance of rural futurism is both based on a transformation of the rural towards being heterogeneous and horizontally connected; and on a re-discovery of the rural as diverse and vertically connected (to, among others, the territory)—providing valuable tools for the construction of more desirable futures. The paper ends on an exploration of the disruptions within the performance of rural futurisms, also interrogating the tension between political engagement towards change and a retreat into the rural off-world.

Keywords

Rural futures; capitalist urbanisation; urban paradigm; utopia; diverse economies; performativity

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Introduction

> To [Berger], the country was not a refuge behind nostalgia's wooden doors and comforting cottage curtains, but rather a space of opportunity, more free and less defined than overly controlled and museumised inner cities. One must think of Berger not as a modernity-adverse ruralist, but as a rural futurist. (Maak, 2018:n.p.)

It is now commonplace to say that we are in the midst of the "urban age" (Derickson, 2015), in which the urban condition is a global phenomenon (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). All hopes of the ecomodernist elite are directed towards cities as "innovative milieu[s]" (Hall, 1998:291), guiding our transition to eco-sustainable futures. It seems like the countryside has become a mere subject to invasion, a place of standstill and backwardness, a past-place. Yet not for everyone. The British writer John Berger is not the only "rural futurist" (Maak, 2016). Starting from the observation of the multiple forms of resistance and future-production performed by *zad*ists of the *zone à défendre (zad)*, French peasants, the Tarnac Nine, neo-rurals and commoners in the countryside, this paper is interested in the ways in which the rural is participating in the production and experimentation of utterly different, more desirable, futures. Based on a critique of capitalist practices and institutions, including the process of capitalist urbanization, as socially and ecologically destructive (Feola, 2019a; Moore, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2006), this paper considers desirable futures to be those in which a degree of disruption of capitalist institutions and practices has taken/is taking place (Feola, 2019b).

This paper is thus a counter-performance (Gibson-Graham, 2008) to the singular story of capitalist urbanization. Based on the poststructuralist re-reading of the economy proposed by the diverse economies agenda (Callon, 2007; Gibson, Cahill and McKay, 2015) and a post-colonial and feminist reading of urban theory (e.g. Roy, 2016, 2011), it develops 'rural futurism' as a lens that releases the countryside from its past-off-world status and reframes the future as relational assemblage, assembled by urban, rural and rural-urban performances alike. And while resting on this reframing that emphasises the hybridity and diversity of performances assembling the future, the lens of *rural* futurism guides attention particularly to the rural performances in the assemblage, thus counter-performing the under-representation of rural agency in the studies of the production of more desirable futures.

To illustrate the power of this perspective, the paper explores the case of a small rural collective in central France (the *Ferme de la Mhotte,* abbreviated as the *Ferme*) that the author studied through a combination of informal interviews with sixteen people (nine members of the collective, seven people connected to the collective as neighbours or visitors), six days of participant observation, and the analysis of textual material written by the collective. The *Ferme* perceives itself as a space of experimentation for different futures. Asking how the collective performs different futures and how it particularly makes use of and/or engages with the rural in this experimentation, the paper finds that the *Ferme* re-discovers, on the one hand, stereotypically rural practices as futuristic and, on the other hand, enacts a rural that is different to its stereotypical meaning. Furthermore, the performance of different futures is marked by tensions and disruptions.

Conceptualising a Rural Futurism

In this section, I first describe the current discourse that marginalizes the rural as an agent in the production of the future. Based on this critique, I introduce performativity theory, the diverse economies agenda and post-colonial and feminist critiques of totalising urban theory as starting points for an alternative reading of the futurity of the rural and engage in a first, preliminary reading for rural futurisms in academic literature proposing the rural as an agent for change.

Urban Futures and Counter-Performances

The cultural discourse of Western Europe, from where this article is written, connects the urban to ideas of the future, and the rural to ideas of the past (Woods, 2012). The rural is a mere "passive recipient of modernity" (Shucksmith, 2018:163). Shucksmith (2018) observes a general discrepancy between the amount of scholars imagining "good cities" and those imagining "good countrysides". For example, research on experiments and transitions towards environmentally sound futures is mostly done in cities, understood as places where innovative practices proliferate and from where societal transformations emanate (Caprotti and Cowley, 2017; Sengers, Wieczorek, & Raven, 2019; Wolfram, 2018).

Similarly, in Urban Political Ecology, the concept of urban metabolism (Swyngedouw, 1996; Gandy, 2004) and the diagnosis of a planetary urbanisation (Brenner and Schmid 2015; 2014) both describe the urban as dominating the rural. Urbanisation, a metabolic process, structured through the unequal relations of capitalism, which both produces hybrid socio-natural cities and binds the city to its near and distant surroundings which, in form of flows of workers, food, water, circulate in and are transformed by the urban metabolism (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2012), now encompasses the whole world (Brenner and Schmid, 2014:751). The urban/rural dualism is dissolved by supplanting the rural through an urban that explains every condition at every place in this world (Jazeel, 2018). Both in eco-modernist dreams and in Marxist structuralist analyses, urban modernity overcomes the passive, exploitable countryside.

Rural futurism seeks to counter this paradigm of a vanished rural. At the same time, it does not seek to reconstruct a rural/urban dualism. Social constructionists have long shown that one can reject essentialist dualisms while holding onto the importance of "city" and "countryside" as social categories (Petite and Debarbieux, 2013). Yet, rural futurism goes beyond the possibility of rural futures as a social construction. It aims to empower the rural as a material performance in the present (Edensor, 2006; Woods, 2010), participating in the larger performance of a rural-urban world. The rural is understood as a relational performance of discourses and practices entailing both non-humans and humans. There are multiple rural performances: the rural multiple (after Mol, 2003: "the body multiple; see also Woods, 2009). Rural and urban are not spatially delimited areas (Whatmore, 1993) but fragile, more or less entangled assemblages producing "hybrid sociospatial forms that blur the rural and the urban yet can exhibit a distinctive order and identity" (Woods, 2009:853). The here proposed lens of rural futurism, by guiding attention to the distinctive material-symbolic performances that the rural contributes to these entangled assemblages, helps in capturing how the performance of the future is a more-than-urban, a hybrid, rural-urban achievement.

This understanding is based on performativity theory (e.g. Callon, 1998; MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu, 2007), the diverse economies agenda (St. Martin, Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2015), and feminist and post-colonial critiques of totalising urban theory (Jazeel, 2018; Roy, 2011, 2016a, 2016b). From the perspective of performativity theory, the economy is a contingent performance (Callon, 1998) – by economists, other kinds of researchers (Callon, 2007), policy-makers, activists, humans, non-humans, technologies (Callon, 2009). It is not dominated by a monolithic capitalism, but diverse (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Similarly, knowledge production is understood as political: political economic analyses of capitalism reinforce the monolithic capitalist system by studying its structural logics (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Building on this, diverse economists follow a political project of counter-performing a not-only-capitalist economy, using the tools of "ontological reframing" (ibid.:620) and "reading for difference" (623). They describe disruptions in an allegedly capitalist order by non-capitalist practices that are co-producing a diverse world.

A similar line of reasoning can be applied to capitalist urbanisation, as post-colonial and feminist scholars have long shown. They reject totalising analyses of urbanisation which perform the urban as all-encompassing category and thus "contribute[] to the erasure […] of subjects, subjectivities, and politics that can't be seen in the totalized, unitary or generalized explanatory abstractions" (Derickson 2018: 558). Rather, they advocate for a perspective that pays attention to the "processes that have their own generative dynamics that cannot be collapsed into the capacious logic of urbanization" (Jazeel, 2018: 411). Ananya Roy's refutation of the 'urbanisation of everything' has been crucial in this regard. Elevating the stories of places which "cannot be understood as geographies of urbanization" (Roy, 2016a: 819) but rather as those in which rural and urban histories and practices intermingle (ibid.), Roy has studied the rural as a relevant "constitutive outside of the urban" (ibid.:813) and thus emphasized the "ontological multiplicity" (Roy, 2016a:820) and fragmentary character (Roy, 2016b) of the urban and urbanisation.

Building on this scholarship, rural futurism looks for disruptions in urbanising everywheres. "Ontologically reframing" urbanisation from a monolithic process into an unfinished, hybrid performance, it "read[s] for [the] difference" constituted by the rural (Gibson-Graham, 2008) in the production of more desirable futures. Thus, while based on an understanding of a diversity of rural, urban and rural-urban performances as relevant for the assemblage of a hybrid future, the lens of *rural* futurism puts an emphasis on the *rural* performances in that assemblage – countering the diminishing role of the rural in the future in cultural and academic discourse, and empowering the existing performances that already construct futures in which and towards which the rural has a role to play. These performances are more than bounded laboratories that contribute practices and ideas to be used for the achievement of more desirable futures. They are understood as *already shaping and co-creating* hybrid futures.

To clarify, I neither mean that there is one coherent rural performance, nor that it is determining one coherent future. I am not proposing an alternative general "concept of the rural" (Derickson, 2018; Roy, 2016b). Rather, I use the lens of rural futurism to show rural performances as heterogeneous and multiple. They exist alongside an abundance of other, rural, urban and urban-rural performances, together with which they produce multiple, hybrid futures. Thus, the rural performances referred to in this article are idiosyncratic nodes in the assemblage of the many performances that are continuously producing difference in the production of the future.

Preliminary Reading for Rural Futurisms

Some research fields in human geography already study the political importance of the rural as an agent or environment of change. But, as those are rarely in direct conversation with their urban colleagues, they are assembled here to respond directly to the urbanisation debate addressed earlier. This is a preliminary exercise of reading for rural futurisms.

One research field in which the countryside is an important agent in the future, is environmental change (Woods, 2012; 2009). Food, energy security, climate mitigation and biodiversity conservation will only be achieved through particular ways of developing the countryside. Many discourses around those issues are of a technocratic nature, allowing for little agency of the countryside. Yet, some counter-discourses against these technocratic solutions are inspired by the countryside and ascribed "'rural' attributes[:] solidarity, self-sufficiency and closeness to nature" (Woods, 2012:130, see also Farinelli, 2008). Ernwein and Salomon-Cavin (2014), for example, describe how urban gardening, through producing a sense of community and re-connecting to 'nature', "responds to social problems that are associated with the modern and individualistic city" (ibid.:para.19). Neal (2013) observes that the rural-inspired green urbanite 'buys local' at farmers' markets. And transition towns reflect the "'force' of the

rural" (ibid.:61) through their "ecological-environmental [values and the] concept of the human and non-human, interdependent, place-based community" (ibid.:63).

Renewed migration to the countryside also demonstrates the re-discovery of the rural (Meijering, van Hoven and Huigen, 2007). Surely, rich ex-urban commuters or working class families crowded out of urban centres might not represent rural agency as much, rather representing the process of capitalist urbanisation. Also urbanites who settle in the countryside because they dream of a 'rural life' – e.g. the rural 'hippie' communes in the 1960s (Meijering, van Hoven and Huigen, 2007) – might only reinforce the modern displacement of the rural into a static past one can retreat to and thereby be "out of the world" (Berque, 2011:56): the rural idyll (Farrell, Mahon and McDonagh, 2012). Nonetheless, studies like Gillen's (2016) analysis of rural nostalgia in Ho Chi Minh City or Mercer's (2017) analysis of rurality in Dar es Salaam's suburbs give important insights into the "continued significance of the rural" (Mercer, 2017:20, cited in Jazeel, 2017).

Beyond this, the rural has been a resource for radical left politics (Neal, 2013). Radical movements have understood the countryside as a source of practices that can be recycled to address current and future problems. This future-orientation is also key in Halfacree's (2007) "radical ruralities" that – opposed to "superproductivist", idyllic or negating visions for the rural – aim at constructing different, non-capitalist futures. Radical ruralities revolve around ideas of localisation, self-sufficiency and eco-friendly activities (ibid.). Similarly, researchers studying postcapitalism look at rural communities when investigating self-government and common property ownership – in community or solidarity economies, commoning, collective living, grassroots organising or 'buen vivir' (e.g. Esteva and Prakash, 2014; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Soto Santiesteban and Helfrich, 2014). While few of these accounts concentrate only on the countryside, many draw on rural communities as role models: De Angelis (2017), Esteva (2014) and Esteva and Prakash (2014) describe the success of the rural, indigenous communities of the Zapatista movement.

Lastly, geographical scholarship on the periphery and the margin – most notably Black and abolition geographies – has contributed chiefly in carving out the political potential of the "edges" (Gilmore, 2007) of social space. hooks (1989:1) describes the "margin as a space of radical openness", which, while simultaneously being a "site of repression" (21), is all the same a "site of re-sistance" (ibid.). McKittrick (2013), writing about the legacy of the plantation, does not stop at the observations of the processes of marginalisation. Rather, she promotes, in relation to the work of Wynter (1971), a perspective that grasps how "the plots of land that were given to some slaves so that they could grow food to nourish themselves and thus maximize profits – […] also became the focus of resistance to the overriding system of the plantation economy" (10). Provision grounds within the rural plantation, condemned by the colonizers, as "uninhabitable" and rendered a place of exploitation for the sake of the production of urban industrial society (ibid.), are re-read as places of Black emancipation.

Beyond Rural Utopias

The authors assembled above help to empower the rural. But not all of them talk explicitly about the future. To make explicit how the rural co-performs the future, I bring 'rural' and 'future' together as rural futurism – inspired by Niklas Maak's (2016) use of the term. This notion aims to circumvent the spatiotemporal imagination underlying the more common concept of rural *utopias*. When critical scholars looked explicitly at the countryside in regard to the future, it was mostly through the notion of utopia (Horáková, 2018): Bradley and Hedrén (2014:13) talk about "intentional communities, ecovillages, or other place-bounded alternative communities [as] form[s] of utopianism". Imagining "what might constitute appropriate visions for rural futures", Shucksmith (2018:164) uses Levitas' (2007, 2013) 'utopia as a method' to envision a 'good countryside'. Boal, Stone and Watts (2012), Soronellas-

Masdeu and Casal-Fité (2018), Horáková (2018), Marsh (2015) and Halfacree (2007) similarly find value in the notion of utopia and present, albeit in different ways, radical alternative projects in the countryside as utopias.

The terminology of rural utopias, however, is dangerously close to spatiotemporal dualisms that deny the agency of the rural in co-constructing the world. Utopia, introduced by Thomas More to simultaneously mean 'no place' and 'good place' (*outopos*/*eutopos*) (Levitas, 2013), is "a construct of exteriority characteristic of a peculiarly Modern spatial imaginary" (Whatmore, 2002:n.p.). Utopia bears similarities to the conventional idea of the rural; while the countryside had initially represented culture in the nature/culture divide, the process of urbanisation "naturalised the countryside" (Berque, 2011:56) and pushed it "out of the world, to the wilderness side" (ibid.). When the city "became the centre of the world" (ibid.:54), the countryside became the "off-world" (ibid.). Both utopia and the rural are thus constructs of exteriority, smoothly fitting together as rural utopias – places outside of the world. And rural utopias are also outside of a time-space we can reach. Within an understanding of a linkage of space and time (Massey, 1999; May and Thrift, 2001), rural utopia is an external time-space (May and Thrift, 2001). The rural future exists in rural utopias only outside of the present-world – in a future-no-place. Present and future, like countryside and city, remain discrete and separate.

Yet, a performativity-inspired project aiming to empower the rural as an agent in the production of the future must reject this spatiotemporal dualism. Rural futurism emphasises the entangled performance of the future through co-agency of the rural in the present, dissolving any present/future urban/rural dualism. Afrofuturism inspires the perspective on the production of the future, and the term futurism adopted here. Afrofuturism, originally coined as a form of speculative fiction (Dery, 1994), engages in 'chronopolitical acts' (Eshun, 2003), fighting against futures in "which blacks play minor roles or disappear entirely" (Kilgore, 2014:561) and re-appropriating anticipations of the global and African future from the white technocratic elite (ibid.; Parikka, 2018; Womack, 2013). The focus lies on multiplying futures and realities to counter the idea of a singular (Eurocentric) time (Parikka, 2018). The past is re-examined to find difference to conventional stories and these re-read stories, with their knowledges and traditions, are projected into the future (Womack, 2013). This performative move inspires us to think futures as multiple and diverse, co-produced by urban and rural stories that are not simply the slower/backward (Massey, 1999) version of a streamlined model for futurity. It inspires conceiving of rural futurism not as a project for constructing a perfect future-world, modelled after 'past countryside life'. It pushes us to allow past-present-future, urban-rural, to become entangled again.

Rural Futurism in France

I analyse this article's case study, the rural futurist example of the *Ferme,* in the context of French radical left thought and politics that have been inspired by or emerged in the countryside.

It is important to not simplify the complex history of rurality and peasantry in France. French imaginaries of the countryside or the peasantry have, throughout history, not generally been radical and the peasantry has not generally been an ally of French left and revolutionary politics. For instance, historically, the peasantry, as Vigier (1991) stresses, played a key role in French politics in the 19th and 20th century. In the mid-19th century, a "rural majority" had the connotation of a majority of reactionary votes adversary to the revolutionaries (Gaboriaux, 2010), a problem that the republicans of that time found important to address. Persuading the peasantry of the advantage of a republic (instead of a monarchy) became a key goal (Vigier, 1991).

It is against this historical background that the French radical rural should be understood. For instance, in Ross's (2015) writings on the "imaginary [of] communal luxury" (10) that endured after the

1871 Paris Commune, she describes the communards, and the (eco-)anarchist thinkers these inspired, as imagining self-sufficient, autonomous local communities “where small-scale industry was dispersed and combined with agriculture” (ibid.:232) and land was collectively managed – an imagination close to that of rural communities. In the commune, Ross writes, the local territory became the scale of reference. Luxury was thought to emerge from the dissolution of hierarchies and separations – of manual and intellectual work, of town and countryside, of those enjoying art and those who cannot afford it (ibid.).

Less far into the past, one can trace radical rural ideas to Lefebvre’s “revolutionary romanticism” (Lefebvre, 1969, cited in Wilson, 2011), his “respect for the communality of precapitalist cultures” (Wilson, 2011:993), most vividly represented in his “notes on the new town” (Lefebvre, 1960), in which he contrasts the modern capitalist city, produced by “the state, in accordance with a technocratic rationality that divides the organic unity of everyday life into isolated fragments” (Wilson, 2011:996) with the “disalienated everyday life of the peasant village” (ibid.). Lefebvre was one of the first sociologists to not engage with rural communities from a standpoint of studying premodern spaces that, due to the roll-out of modernity, were willingly accepted to cease to exist (Alphandéry and Sencébé, 2009).

In the French collective imagination, resistance against a military camp on the Larzac plateau in the 1970s marked a rupture in popular understandings of the spaces of leftism and radicality. For several years, local peasants and urban squatters occupied the designated land as part of a broader movement against authoritarian state power and globalisation (Guichard and Martinez, 2015). The Larzac became a role model for rural resistance movements in France (Terral, 2011) and produced key figures of the alterglobalisation struggle, like the farmer José Bové who also served as a spokesperson for the second largest French farmers’ union *Confédération Paysanne*.

This nomenclature deserves some attention. The closest translation of the French *paysan.ne* is peasant. Whereas in the UK and North America the word peasant pejoratively connotes an ignorant or unsophisticated person (OED Online, 2018), French agricultural movements – similar to global movements like *La Via Campesina* – have chosen to self-identify as *paysan.ne.s*, affiliating themselves with the peasantry prior to agricultural modernization and openly refusing the productivist and globalized mode of present-day agriculture (Demeulenaere & Bonneuil, 2010). This terminological difference gives an impression of the contextual difference between French and British/US-American rural/peasant politics and resistance. I use the term peasant like *paysan.ne*.

But there is not only peasant-led resistance in the French countryside. In a farmhouse close to Tarnac, the ‘Tarnac Nine’ composed, under the pseudonym ‘the Invisible Committee' (2009), “the coming insurrection”, a text that dismantles the consumerist establishment and calls to disrupt this system through insurrectional struggle. The movement gained widespread attention in the French media when a large police contingent surrounded the farmhouse to arrest the inhabitants, accused of terrorist activity, “amid barking dogs, nonplussed goats, and terrified chickens” (Merrifield, 2010:204).

Police also showed much presence at the *zone à défendre (zad)* in Notre Dame des Landes, where protestors occupied land designated for an airport project for ten years (Mauvaise Troupe, 2018). Over time, the resistance strategy of inhabiting (Barbe, 2005) transformed the *zad* into an experimental space for different futures. The inhabitants put emphasis on the value of local communities and their territory (Jordan, 2018), creating a “new commune for the 21st century” (ibid.:n.p.). The relevance of the *zad* came to transcend its territory. In an edited volume by Lindgaard (2018), a number of big names – Shiva, Ross, Latour – praised the *zad* and its potential for helping us create alternative futures (Despentes, 2018).

Rural Futurism at the *Ferme de la Mhotte*

Set in "a territory for social experimentation in the countryside" (Bureau d'études, 2015:180), the *Ferme* can be seen as rural futurist. The *Ferme*[1] is a collective of twenty people that took over an agricultural civil law association (*société civile agricole*) that had been started by a group of people supporting the anthroposophic initiatives (Encyclopædia Britannica, no date; OED Online, 2018a)[2] of the region in the 1990s. The *Ferme* of today evolved since 2005/6, when new inhabitants arrived bit by bit, each adding different projects. The *Ferme* of today is not formally built on ideas of anthroposophy (Malet, 2018).[3] Its artist/researcher duo *Bureau d'études* is the most active in driving the formation of the *Ferme*.

The *Ferme's* social experimentation should be regarded as radically open, rather than aiming for a precise vision for the future. The future, for them, cannot be grasped in a homogeneous vision, but is rather the coming together of different non-replicable, unscalable parts. For the sake of clarity, we only superficially describe their social experimentation as contributing to the prefiguration and practice of futures in which (1) certain elements of capitalism have been unmade, (2) humans and non-humans live differently alongside each other and (3) human-non-human communities live in stronger connection to their territories and in bigger autonomy from external support systems.

First, aiming to "revitalize social life" (fonds de dotation Terres Franches, n.d.:2), the inhabitants transformed the land into a commons as the seed for a "rural, self-governed economy that assures local social protection", emphasizing that "security for individuals who are not proprietors, [can only be guaranteed if] the development of … activities [does not depend] on the acquisition of land … indebtedness and inheritance" (fonds de dotation Terres Franches, n.d.:2). Removing private property ownership is thus not only an experimental practice in itself, but also a means to facilitate experimentation for more desirable futures. The collective is now governed by an association including all active members. The needed communal cohesion for the maintaining of a commons is created, among others, through communal lunches, the organization of cultural events, in common spaces and meeting points such as their organic shop with café, and, as later explored, through the hosting of German and French eco-volunteers that form a 'social glue' of the collective.

Beyond revitalizing human life, the *Ferme's* experimentation includes, second, the "imagin[ation of] a politics, an economy, a culture common to humans and nonhumans" (Bureau d'études, 2015:172), taking place, among others, in their horse sanctuary, in their biodynamic agriculture that uses horses for ploughing, in their free second-hand store or their sustainable print atelier. Picturing nonhumans as agents of the future goes against a trend that Berger (1980) observed for capitalist societies: "[I]n the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them" (ibid.:11).

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[1] The overview is based on texts by members of the collective (Ferme de la Mhotte, 2017; Fourt, 2017; projet pour la Mhotte, 2016) and on conversations with research participants (Xavier, Gamadir, volunteers).

[2] Anthroposophy is an "educational … system established by the Austrian [spiritualist] philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), seeking to use mainly natural means to optimise … health and well-being" (OED Online 2018a). It is "based on the premise that the human intellect has the ability to contact spiritual worlds" (Encyclopædia Britannica, no date).

[3] This notwithstanding, some members of the collective are connected to the anthroposophical movement, among others through the practice of biodynamic farming, a type of farming that builds on the principles of anthroposophy. This deserves some attention. Other than in countries like Germany, anthroposophy has been treated with suspicion in France, sometimes regarded as a sectarian movement and called out for its roots in Steiner's writings, his refusal of modern science and technology and return to esoteric understandings of 'nature' (Malet, 2018).

Lastly, as a community, the collective aims at becoming as resilient and autonomous as possible, with two of the members also seeing a pending collapse of global environmental and economic systems as a motivation for this endeavour. During the research in 2018, though, the idea of 'collapse' did not strike the researcher as decisive in the shaping of the collective's course of actions and projects, which could broadly be understood as aiming towards the creation of a post-capitalist, self-governed, mostly self-sufficient community living in entanglement with more-than-human beings. They did not seem to fall into the traps of collapse- and resilience-thinking that were identified by different scholars: the universalising idea of 'one planet' at the danger of collapse which disregards the multiple worlds and historical and present-day collapses experienced by a variety of people (Zitouni & Thoreau, 2018), the power-blind application of natural-scientific ecosystem research in mainstream research on resilience (Wilson, 2018), the reinforcement of neoliberal ideology when emphasising readiness to adapt to abrupt changes as an aspect of resilience (Cretney, 2014) or the perpetuation of the status quo through a focus on system stability in resilience research (DeVerteuil and Golubchikov, 2016).

In the following, I scrutinize how the *Ferme*'s production of different futures is performed as an everyday practice, and how this performance involves or relates to the rural.

Research Design

French rural futurism inspired the choice of a French collective as a case study. The research was designed as a single-site case study of the small, everyday performance of rural futurism. The particular case of the *Ferme* was picked through snowball sampling that started with a broad internet search for commoning projects in the French countryside. The case was picked based on criteria of being a well-established project (running for several years), being based in the countryside, entailing a degree of disruption of capitalist ways of being and doing, as well as entailing a purposeful engagement with the rural as a futuristic force. In terms of practicality, the artist/researcher duo of the *Ferme* was interested in this research project when contacted by the author, which facilitated the research project.

The data collection, performed in the context and time constraints of a Master's dissertation, was a combination of six days of participant observation and informal interviews (while doing manual labour, during walks) with sixteen people. Research questions were allowed to emerge at the *Ferme*, answers to these questions were looked for together with the participants and a draft of this paper was given to the contact person Xavier, who was allowed to object to and amend the textual representation. I participated in different communal activities like weeding the garden, preparing products for the market or 'hanging out' at the collective's shop-café, and participated at the collective's monthly assembly. The embodied experience of being at the *Ferme* was a further aspect of fieldwork, including experiencing communal lunches, the material environment, walking through the surroundings. I also collected textual material: books, magazines and other texts produced by the artist duo based at the collective[4] and the literature that members of the collective referred to.

I engaged with sixteen people: members of the collective, a volunteer at the nearby Waldorf School[5], a visiting instructor for biodynamic farming, residents of the surrounding villages, and an employee of a neighbouring institution for anthroposophical adult education. The participants of this research were all white, and I am a white German woman. This positionality needs to be taken into account against the background of North American and European alternative agricultural initiatives and

[4] These texts are listed in the references.

[5] Waldorf schools are based on Steiner's anthroposophy.

rural movements being most often driven by white people (see Edwards, 2016; Fernández Andrés, 2017). Although there is an abundance of rural performances that currently produce hopeful futures, this article describes a perspective on one – locally specific – rural performance, refusing to produce any generalizable account of the rural.

Gathering a Rural Futurist Place

In the following, I describe the production of more-than-urban, more-than-capitalist and more-than-human futures at the *Ferme* as a performance (Woods, 2010). The *Ferme's* futures are performed both through a 're-discovery' of the conventional rural as futuristic, and through a 'transformation' of the rural to be different to its conventional meaning. Re-discovery and transformation are thereby used as simplified abstractions, both referring to a performance of the rural. As the rural, a fluid assemblage (Woods, 2015), has to constantly be (re-)produced, 're-discovery' does not imply a rural essence to be 'discovered' 'in the countryside'. It refers, rather, to a performance through which conventional meanings of the rural are re-enacted but simultaneously re-coded as futuristic, thereby adding conventional rural traits to the meaning of 'futurity'. 'Transformation', then, refers to a performance through which the rural is enacted *differently* to how it is conventionally imagined, e.g. as having a futuristic trait that is conventionally not connected to the 'rural', thereby transforming the conventional meaning of rurality. This dialectic of re-discovery and transformation then contributes to projects that multiply and connect the rural – two core futuristic practices identified at the *Ferme*.

Transforming Towards and Re-Discovering a Rural Multiple

The key technique for the futuristic practice at the *Ferme* is the *transformation* of the rural towards rural heterogeneity. The *Ferme* is a multiple in Mol's (2003) sense of the "body multiple": Writing about atherosclerosis, she carves out how the disease is not ontologically singular, but multiple – enacted by different tools, methods and actors, in different departments of a hospital. And this variety of enactments of the disease produce a disease that is ontologically multiple (rather than producing different perspectives on an ontologically singular disease), with its multiple enactments hanging together, being translated and coordinated (ibid.). In a similar way, the *Ferme* exists as a multiple. The human and non-human members of the *Ferme* enact it through a variety of different methods of relating with the place. And this *Ferme* multiple performs a rural multiple – a rural that is not ontologically singular but enacted by different methods and practices, thus leaving a radical openness for the rural to be enacted differently, ready to participate in open-ended experiments for utterly different futures, utterly different rurals.

The collective comprises many different, often only loosely connected activities. It has grown into its current form not through an intentional move but through the interaction of parts coming together. The *Ferme* is not a bounded project with a singular objective, its members have multiple goals and philosophies. When I asked for the 'common objective' of the *Ferme,* Simon[6] responded it was "very modern to assume that there is a common vision or objective". This does not mean that the people living together do not share affinities, but the collective allows for diversity and inconsistencies. This multiplicity is understood as key for the production of a resilient community: "We have several activities which are robust, if problems arise in one activity, this does not have an effect on the other activities" (Xavier, interv.).

[6] Participants are referred to by their first name; some chose pseudonyms.

Knowledge plurality is another aspect of the rural multiple performed by the *Ferme*. One of the volunteers described the "stark contrast between the life and understanding of the place from the perspective of Laetitia and Damien [horse sanctuary], Benoît and Mickaël [biodynamic farmers] on the one hand, and Leonore and Xavier [artist/researcher duo] on the other hand", explaining that the former experience the place through their daily "work with their hands", which the latter do not. The artist duo is the most vocal about the experimental nature of the *Ferme*, actively developing a vision for the collective. The volunteers comment that this background work of *Bureau d'études* is not seen on a daily basis. Without the daily manual labour of its other members the *Ferme* would not exist – yet neither would it without the abstract work of the artist duo, facilitating discussion, conducting studies, inviting artists and researchers.

The members of the collective simultaneously perform a *re-discovery* of the countryside as already being – in its conventional meaning – heterogeneous and diverse. First, the countryside is perceived as offering more room for trying and doing a diversity of things and activities, bearing fewer constraints: "In the countryside, everything is possible " (local, conv.); "It is also possible to act in the city … but it is easier in the countryside – there is much more administrative issues in the city … It is easier to start long-term projects here" (Xavier, conv.). To some degree, this room for experimentation is the product of fewer professionalised services on offer, making the inhabitants experiment because they have to do things themselves. "In the city, everything is done by professionals, whereas here, it is more about improvising, learning how to do things one is not educated to do. … It is 'wilder' here, not as structured … as in the city" (Simon, conv.).

Second, the countryside is a "multispecies town" (Bureau d'études, 2015:180) where the agency of the nonhuman is more obvious than in cities, a place that motivates direct confrontations between humans and nonhumans. Surely, there is, I agree with Kaika and Swyngedouw (2012), as much nature in cities as in the countryside. Cities are natural. But for the members of the *Ferme*, there is another way of living with, seeing and being seen by nonhumans in the countryside (Berger, 1980). And this facilitates experimentation: The number of actants included in experiments is increased, as is the awareness of the entanglement with nonhumans: "In the city, humans live mostly with other humans and machines. In the countryside, humans live … with plants and animals, with whom one has to learn to live" (Xavier, conv.). This entanglement is also the basis for the experimentation for communities that live off the local environment they are embedded in, which rural performances make particularly possible: "After two weeks without supplies, a town dies" (Bureau d'études, 2015:170).

When asked by a visiting researcher how much wood could be harvested from sustainably cutting hedges, a member of the collective was sceptical, explaining they were not in favour of cutting the hedgerow as it shelters animals. *Bureau d'études* (2009) describe how hedges shelter birds that feed on insects, how they protect farm animals from pathogens. The hedge and its respective landscape, the *bocage*, is for them – like horses instead of tractors tugging ploughs – a "cutting edge technology" (ibid.:2). "The soil and the plants … are otherwise more sophisticated, sensitive and more beautiful beings than the aggregates of plates, electric cables … that most machines are made of" (ibid.:1). Similarly, when several members of the collective discussed seed conservation, one of them pointed to their dependence on seeds that are adapted to different environmental circumstances in the future. Seeds, particularly in their diversity, were valued for their ability to interact and transform. The intelligence that the collective imagines as crucial for the future is more-than-human. Old actants, knowledges and practices building on the more-than-human diversity of the countryside are allowed to leave the past and re-enter the future. The rural multiple is '*re-discovered'* as a futuristic force.

Transforming Towards and Re-Discovering Horizontal and Vertical Connectivity

The *Ferme* also *transforms* the rural to include 'horizontal' connectivity: The countryside, often depicted as remote, disconnected from the processes that 'make the future', is brought into the world and the world into the countryside. The *Ferme* aims to entertain connections to a wider trans-local ecology of initiatives.

> We are connected to several types of networks … We are in several researcher networks[, and] artist networks. We founded … a place in Strasbourg which is still working … And a third type of contact are networks of places [like the *Ferme*]. So, this is just beginning…
>
> [A]nd then there are other networks, agricultural networks, biodynamic farming meetings, meetings on animal ploughing, meetings regarding the relations with horses. (Xavier, interv.)

The collective is building a house to host more guests like scientists and artists with whom *Bureau d'études* cooperates or people seeking advice in developing similar projects to the *Ferme*. Those trajectories crossing the place are both shaping the place and the people who pass. The collective has hosted many volunteers, members, interns who, as a visiting researcher says, had the opportunity to experiment and learn at the place. They then move on, but their experiences show that the collective's impact transgresses its boundaries (Simon, conv.)

Those trans-local connections are central to the experimental design of the *Ferme,* its emphasis on learning, on being in exchange with 'the world', on evolving through co-becoming. The members emphasise their awareness of the flows passing through the *Ferme*: water, electricity, food, gas (Gamadir, conv.), machines, humans (researchers, volunteers, customers, artists), animals, plants, bacteria, news, texts, meanings. A member of the *Ferme* stressed that the "toxic world" was already in all cells, that there was no 'escape'. And that, in fact, 'the state' was in them, too – most obvious through the volunteers who are paid by the government and for whom the government also pays the rent (volunteers, conv.). The *Ferme* is intentionally and unintentionally part of trans-local ecologies. The rural is, through these transformed and re-discovered connections, made to be within the world and its multiple entanglements, again diluting the constructed binary between interconnected, vibrant centres of global transformations – cities – and isolated, off-world countrysides.

Yet, at the same time, the members of the *Ferme* try to choose which kinds of horizontal connections they perform and maintain. They oppose the installation of a smart meter on the basis that people should not be "puppets" of climate governance (Xavier, conv.) – they do not want to be governed by the centres of climate management, do not want to be ruled by these technological connections. So, while bringing the countryside into the horizontal connectivity of the world, they simultaneously *re-discover* the countryside as a less-regularised, controlled space (see above, Simon): A space allowing for more agency, creativity, autonomy in choosing which futures are wanted and how to get there. Connectivity is thus re-made. The rural is made to connect horizontally to allied initiatives, and its horizontal connection to intentional-unintentional flows of materials, ideas and people is re-discovered. At the same time, the rural can, at least sometimes, be more easily disconnected from some places and governance rationalities.

The *Ferme* also performs a vertical connection to its territory, rethinking connectivity as not only reaching outwards (geographically in space) but also downwards (attachment to the literal soil under the feet). The life at the *Ferme,* and how it is depicted by its members, bears similarities to writings by *zad*ists who emphasise "belonging to places … not being indifferent to the things that surround us, but being

attached to them[,] … the opposite of the nightmares of the metropolis where one only passes through" (quoted in Mauvaise Troupe, 2018:122). The members of the *Ferme* refuse or question replicability, exchangeability and scalability. One element of this is a resistance to quantification and statistics at the *Ferme*. When talking to the visiting researcher about his study, based on the quantification of resource flows, he pointed out that the collective did not give a high priority to figures, was rather organised through feeling or sensing – "another kind of truth" (Gamadir, conv.). By refusing quantification, the *Ferme* enacts a different world. Governmentality scholars like Rose, O'Malley and Valverde (2006) and Agrawal (2005) describe how categorisation and quantification are tools to govern and exploit 'nature' by making non-identical things comparable, tradable and extractable – commodifiable (Castree, 2003). *Bureau d'études* (2006) writes against today's "Fordist agriculture" (4) and against supermarkets that are based on the normalisation of produce (ibid.). At the *Ferme,* things are valued as singular, and the *Ferme* itself, as an experimental space, resists comparison. They do not want to be a replicable or scalable experiment (Xavier, conv.).

Dependence on their territory motivates the members of the *Ferme* to work towards a stronger cooperation with neighbouring projects, seeking the right scale for the society they envision. Since its beginnings, the *Ferme* thus "participates in the creation of a zone of social and pedagogical experimentation … with the places it is surrounded by" (Ferme de la Mhotte 2017:6): a Waldorf school, an institution for anthroposophic adult education (*Foyer*) and an adjacent biodynamic farm, form the region of *la Mhotte*. There is awareness that the modes of experimenting are not the same (the *Ferme* is not affiliated with anthroposophism) but that there is a degree of interdependence: "You cannot simply draw boundaries between places and between projects" (Simon, conv.). This local ecology is produced through social and material flows between the places. The *Ferme* cooks lunch for the Waldorf school, the *Foyer* stages their annual theatre play in the *Ferme's* barn, many of the people of the school or *Foyer* frequent the shops of the collective, the volunteers of the *Ferme* mingle with those of the Waldorf school and the *Foyer*.

To some degree, the members of the collective *re-discover* these local connections as particularly rural. The rural provides for them a context for 'vertical' connectivity – connectivity to the local socio-natural territory. The interdependence of everything and everyone seems to be more obvious in rural lives. Simon describes that in the countryside, people live in more precarious conditions, meet more often, cannot hide from each other. They see, in the 'conventional countryside', a predisposition for solidarity, collaboration, observation; for the emergence of a local more-than-human ecology of territorial attachment that sustains a commons culture (Simon, Xavier, conv.). And they observe it to also lie in the architectural remnants of past rural lives – in the way farms were built in the countryside. In their own research on the "materialisation of commons" at the *Ferme*, Bourgne and *Bureau d'études* (2016) observe: "The spatial configuration of the *Ferme* … establishes a certain scale of a human collective … The physical extent of the *Ferme*, which cannot easily be split, invokes an open and shared regime, based on the association of projects" (5).

Beyond the *Ferme*'s contribution to a commons culture, the vertical connectivity that the rural facilitates enables experimentation towards futures in which humans and more-than-humans thrive together. "Learning [relies] on the experience of the body – the hands – and not the brain. [K]eeping warm here is a very conscious act, whereas in Paris it is not" (Bureau d'études, 2015:170). This echoes Berger (1988) who contrasts peasants' unprotected exposure to their environment to the insulated life of a city-dweller. For him, peasant life is about living *with* a more-than-human environment, peasants are affected if their land changes, if resources peak, whereas urban life, for Berger, is about adapting a 'territory' to one's life. And this might be a source of inspiration against the background of the difficulty of sensing exhaustion and self-induced harm within a numb, capitalist world. The futuristic potential of

rural life lies then in its disclosure of our otherwise subliminal precarity (Tsing, 2017), in its obvious interdependence with the territory in which it is embedded.

Again, vertical connectivity is no essential, pre-existent characteristic of the countryside. It is performed. The fund, shared equipment and land, collectively defined rules, assemblies, common meals, a common living room, a common car, celebrations, intentional lack of fences or locks for common space, symbols and maps of the place, brochures or a webpage all contribute to the production of a commons. And it would be similarly highly dubious to assume that any kind of agriculture would automatically and intentionally be about re-discovering precarity. Conventional, large-scale agriculture is rather, in its drive for technological mastery of soil, plants and the impact of weather, a trial for the absolute independence of humans from some disconnected idea of 'nature'. The *Ferme* performs the re-connection to more-than-humans and the re-discovery of humans' precarious lives in re-enacting aspects of remembered and imagined past rural agricultural lives, in transforming them in the form of neo-rurals' experimentation of commons or the performance of modern biodynamic farming.

This performed discovery is not always successful. Community cohesion demands time and effort, which is not always given. The neighbouring initiatives tried to launch a bigger project for *la Mhotte* (Projet pour la Mhotte, 2016), aimed at converting more land into common property. At the time of writing, this had not been realised – the respective land was still owned by externals and there was not enough energy to continue the project (Xavier, interv.).

Disruptions and Fragilities in the Performance of Rural Futurism

The *Ferme*'s performance of the future and the rural is not free of disruptions. These disruptions do not imply a failure of the futurist performance, but rather demonstrate its fragility. Rural futurism is a performance in the in-betweens – if it was well-established, we would not need the project of reading for it.

The performance of the rural multiple is not in harmony with the performance of a commons. The loose structure of the collective makes it difficult to maintain the community cohesion needed for the production of social security through solidarity: "Sometimes, they do not talk enough," as a volunteer said. It is in fact only through the connective work by the volunteers that this is balanced – that the rural multiple is made to hang together. The volunteers are the only members of the collective who simultaneously engage in several of the activities and live in the common house. They are informed about the state of things in most activities and able to share this knowledge among the members. "Without the eco-volunteers, there would be no [*social*] commons" (Gamadir, conv.).

The danger of becoming a 'bubble' when constructing a self-governed, cohesive community is not easily eliminated. "Is it possible for the world to be like this? Is this not a bit unreal?", a volunteer asked. Is the *Ferme,* after all, not a rural futurism, but a rural utopia? Those doubts are important to keep in mind, and they should guide precautionary measures to avoid becoming a sealed-off bubble. But these doubts should not lead to dismissing the project. A member explained how their commons is less closed than a "private bubble" but more closed than "public". "To create a community, one needs an envelope, but a permeable one," he said, clarifying that the pure anarchist goal was a closed bubble, but that the *Ferme* did not subscribe to this: "We are in an administered world, part of the Anthropocene. Sanctuaries are impossible" (Xavier, conv.).

The *Ferme* depends on government funding, especially on the state-funded volunteers. For the *Ferme*, this is a compromise; they use the state for their own ends, as a compensation for the freedom they lose due to their unavoidable co-existence with it. The collective's experimentation is a constant struggle between accommodating and resisting capitalist mechanisms, legal restrictions, financial

constraints; between pragmatist, long-term muddling-through and radical opposition. The consequence of rejecting private ownership of land would be to occupy – not buy – land, but this makes long-term projects difficult (Xavier, conv.). And not all members of the collective can afford living only off the products from their organic shop or biodynamic farmers, which they must supplement by buying at the supermarket.

Such disruptions in rural futurist practices show that rural futurism, like planetary urbanisation, is not a monolithic achievement, but a multitude of small, more and less successful trials. The future the *Ferme* performs is not supposed to be 'like the *Ferme'*. They do not convert a system-A into a system-B. The *Ferme,* one node in the assemblage of multiple rural futurisms, set in a world "contaminated" with capitalism (Tsing, 2017), co-produces difference in constant tension with surrounding performances, contributing to a hybrid, capitalist-postcapitalist, urban-rural, more-than-human world.

Conclusion

This paper developed rural futurism as a performative lens to 'read' for difference created by French radical rurals, thereby demonstrating the role that rural performances play in the production of the future. I have zoomed in on the rural practices defying the allegedly dominant process of capitalist urbanisation. I examined the role of rural performances in the construction of different futures, arguing that we need to part from the bounded spatiotemporal categories in which the countryside and the future have often been trapped. If we keep calling alternative experimentations in the countryside rural utopias – rural no-places, removed in time and space in a future-off-world – we fail to acknowledge their role in co-performing futures. We have to release the countryside from its past-off-world status and reframe the future as a relational assemblage, made up of networks spanning countryside and cities, past, present and future.

The *Ferme* is one small idiosyncratic case of rural futurism in its everyday performance. It tells one story about the rural and its place in the performance of futures. It does not aim to prefigure a holistic vision for the future, rather contributes its small share to making the future differently, leaving radical openness for the abundance of other, different performances of the rural multiple, for plural rural futurisms. The *Ferme* is an experimental place of learning how to create commons, how to live with more-than-human companions, how to live within the confines of local communities, supporting each other in solidarity, making a living not in dependence on a global system of exploitation and overconsumption.

It teaches that some of the ingredients for alternative futures are to be found in the countryside, in rural imaginaries and performances. At the *Ferme*, the countryside is a role model for living in awareness of our entanglement with nonhumans. The collective re-interprets 'conventionally' rural performances as futuristic. These conventionally rural performances include romanticised memories of foregone peasant life in connection with the local environment, community cohesion, a 'natural' tendency towards practices of commoning in villages, and plant- and animal-based technologies like the *bocage*. The rural is understood as an unruly force, the countryside a less regulated, less governable space that can be mobilised in the resistance against a 'capitalist state' and that provides room for creativity, experimentation, autonomous agency. The *Ferme* ultimately empowers rural dwellers as agents in defining what 'futuristic' means.

Yet, through the example of the *Ferme*, we also see how none of this futurity of the rural, how none of this rurality, is simply "there", objectively given, waiting to be re-discovered. The rural and its futurity are a constant performance, a fragile assemblage (Woods, 2015). The rural's futurity is achieved

both through performances that re-enact conventional imaginations of rurality and re-code them with novel meanings, such as futurity (‘re-discovery’), *and* through performances that enact practices conventionally thought of as non-rural and/or urban in the countryside and recode them as rural (‘transformation’). These performances are enacted by urbanites and rural dwellers alike. The futures performed at the *Ferme* are thus the outcome of an entangled, rural-urban, even postcapitalist-capitalist, local-trans-local assemblage. The small performance of the *Ferme* is webbed into the relational performance of the world, shaped by networks spanning countryside and cities, a multitude of sometimes contradictory activities and goals.

This has two important consequences. First, rural autonomy does not equal a retreat into the private. The world is co-produced by rural collectives as rural collectives are co-produced by the world. This writes the rural into the processes of future production, dismisses the depiction of rural collectives as unpolitical withdrawals from the world. Capitalist urbanisation is fought by counter-constructing key elements for alternative futures that go beyond a dualism between rural idylls and capitalist metropolises but that are plural, multiple, hybrid. When we stop dismissing remote projects in the countryside as off-world retreats, we gain additional allies in the struggle for postcapitalist futures. Urban activists, squatters, politicians – all fighting with other concepts of what it means to be political – are joined by radical rural farmers ploughing their fields. This sentiment of accepting a variety of techniques of resistance has also been a theme in writings about the *zad* (Mauvaise Troupe, 2018).

Yet, second, this also has consequences for the future visions of the *Ferme*. No matter how much the collective is based on ideas of autonomy, it is interlinked, made up of the world that runs through and sustains it. I am not only talking about its yet-to-be-achieved self-sufficiency and its dependence on government funding through volunteers. Even when these contradictions are solved, the *Ferme* will still be within-the-world. The collective, by looking for local and trans-local networks, is aware of its embeddedness in the world, its interdependent existence; aware of the fact that its project of resilience depends on embracing interdependency. What potential is there to make connections to other groups of society, particularly those that tend to be less represented in alternative European rural movements? How can the Ferme’s rural multiple join hands with other struggles – those of unemployed, homeless, immigrants or refugees, as it started to happen at the *zad* (Mauvaise Troupe, 2018)? The *Ferme* must continue webbing its networks of solidarity outwards, connecting with all those others whose agency as architects of the future had been neglected for too long.

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