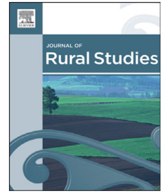
ARTICLE IN PRESS

Journal of Rural Studies xxx (2016) 1–11

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud



Retrofitting rurality: Embodiment and emplacement in disability narratives

Matthew J.C. Cella

Shippensburg University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 July 2015
Received in revised form
29 April 2016
Accepted 19 May 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Rural embodiment
Ecosomatic paradigm
Auto/somatographies
Nancy Mairs
Eli Clare
Simi Linton
Susan Krieger

ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the ways in which people with physical and sensory disabilities challenge normative (even ableist) constructions of the body-environment dyad. Drawing on insight from eco-phenomenologists and rural scholars, I analyze autobiographical narratives by people with disabilities to illustrate the complex entanglement between embodiment and emplacement. Collectively, these disability life narratives present a series of reconstructive strategies – what I call *retrofit tactics* – that address some of the commonplaces regarding normative rural embodiment and that make corrective adjustments to rurality (retrofits) to accommodate a wider range of embodied experiences. In the course of the article, I identify four such retrofit strategies, which include (1) expanding conceptions of rural embodiment beyond normative definitions, (2) underscoring the importance of attentiveness to one's body-in-nature, (3) emphasizing and embracing the interdependency of bodies (rather than an isolationist paradigm), and (4) highlighting the importance of language and narrative in the place-making process, particularly within rural environments that traditionally privilege mobility. I am especially interested in demonstrating how the category of disability both *challenges* and *sharpens* our understanding of what it means to inhabit rural places and to move between rural and urban spaces.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This essay examines disability narratives in order to highlight the role embodiment plays in shaping our interactions with place, particularly rural spaces. This emphasis on the body runs counter to a trope in American nature writing where rural experiences, and the close encounters with the natural word that such experiences typically afford, are often imagined as bodiless. Or, more to the point, within the American environmentalist tradition, rural experience is often celebrated as a catalyst for transcending the body, even if momentarily, as the materiality of the embodied subject dissolves into an idealized state of becoming "one with nature."

Consider, for example, the experience of Jim Burden in Willa Cather's classic farm novel, *My Ántonia* (1918). Orphaned in his adolescence after the death of his parents, Jim moves from Virginia to his grandparents' farm in deep rural Nebraska. While the trajectory of his life eventually carries him away from the country to urban centers like Blackhawk (a fictionalization of Red Cloud, Nebraska), Lincoln, and Boston, his imagination is always firmly rooted in the cornfields and wild prairies of rural Nebraska where he spent his formative years. The source of this attachment can be traced to an often-cited scene that is essentially a rural conversion experience. Newly arrived on his grandparents' farm, Jim settles down to rest in a pumpkin patch near the house. He explains:

> I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is in sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep (Cather, 1918, p. 14).

Here, Jim imagines the erasure of his body where his selfhood is no longer a whole, but instead a part: what Emerson might refer to as his "mean egotism" is replaced by a sense of contiguity with the pumpkin, the field, and sky (Emerson, 1836). Jim aligns himself with the pumpkins basking in the sun and imagines himself as part of a larger, all-consuming natural cycle. This sensation of contiguity allows him to transcend his material being and imagine his place in

E-mail address: mjcella@ship.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.05.007
0743-0167/© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article in press as: Cella, M.J.C., Retrofitting rurality: Embodiment and emplacement in disability narratives, Journal of Rural Studies (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.05.007

the broader network of the ecosystem. Whereas the pumpkins "dissolve" into "sun and air" and become a part of an ecological entirety, Jim imagines that humans, upon death, conjoin with "goodness and knowledge." Ultimately, it is in the realm of the ideal and the immortal that he finds his connection to the larger scheme of the universe. The pumpkins find roots in the ground, but Jim finds his roots, his ultimate dissolution and happiness, in his imagined spiritual connection to his rural environment.

In many ways, Jim's pumpkin-patch reverie – indeed, his whole childhood experience in rural Nebraska – is an example of a broader cultural archetype: the pastoral. As numerous scholars have noted, narratives about the transformative experience of moving between urban and rural spaces, or between built and wild environments, have a deep and rich heritage in Western culture, particularly in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution when the pastoral provided an important tool through which to renegotiate both personal and national identity in an era of unprecedented urbanization The pastoral archetype posits rural space as site that offers an escape from the complexity and chaos of urban life; the rural environment, both developed and wild, invites close contact with the natural world and provides access to moments of reflection, solitude, and the opportunity for spiritual transcendence (Marx, 1964; Williams, 1973; Kolodny, 1975; Alpers, 1993; Buell, 1995; Gifford, 1999; Love, 2003). As it is in *My Ántonia*, the pastoral encounter with rural spaces is regularly imagined and depicted as a transformative experience, one that realigns the pastoral subject's relationship to both the natural world and their urban home. It is because of its potential to reinvigorate human appreciation for the natural world that the pastoral is regarded by many scholars as key ingredient in establishing a more mature and ethical environmental imagination (see especially Buell, 1995; Gifford, 1999; Love, 2003). Indeed, the hallmark text of the American environmental literary tradition, Thoreau's *Walden,* is essentially a pastoral narrative, one that traces his transcendental awakening during his sojourn in the woods on the outskirts of Concord.

What I want to call attention to regarding Jim's pastoral experience, as I noted at the outset, is how the formula for becoming part of "something complete and great" requires the erasure of the body. Once Jim has his epiphany about how he is one part of a whole that is the biosphere, he then imagines being subsumed into this whole – his body and his selfhood dissolved and blotted out. This is not unlike the famous "transparent eyeball" passage from Emerson's *Nature* to which I alluded to above. Walking in the woods near his Concord home, Emerson describes the sensation of transcending his embodied state: "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (1836). Within this romantic tradition, rural experience – whether in the woods or a pumpkin patch – provides a gateway to spiritual awakening; one's selfhood is realized once an at-one-ment with nature is experienced.

The effacement of the body that Jim Burden and Emerson desire, of course, ignores the vital role that embodiment plays in connecting them to the places they inhabit. In his leisurely stroll through the pumpkin patch, for example, Jim overlooks the role his own body plays in bringing him into his at-one-ment with nature. The very body he imaginatively erases in his dream of transcendence is the same body that allowed him access to the pumpkin patch in the first place. Jim also disregards the hard physical labor that likely went into tilling, planting, and weeding the pumpkin patch. For his grandparents, their hired men, and their pioneering neighbors – those who crafted the farmstead out of the soil of the wild prairies – the pumpkin patch likely serves as a reminder of their labor and represents the vital role that their bodies played in transforming the prairie landscape into working farm. For them, rurality has more to do with establishing physical roots and economic viability than it does transcending the body. It is through the lived experience of the rural – what rural geographers refer to as the performances and practices of bodies in rural spaces – that individuals become enmeshed with the rural landscape (Halfacree, 1993, 2006, 2007; Lorimer, 2005; Woods, 2010; 2011 [especially chapters 6 and 7]).

One of the main limitations of Jim's pastoral fantasy – and this is characteristic of the pastoral tradition as a whole – is the ableist foundation upon which it is based. That is, conventional pastoralism presumes a compulsory able-bodiness. Access to the remote and isolated rural locations, which are so integral to pastoral experience as it is typically conceived, is limited for people with disabilities (henceforth PWDs), particularly those with physical impairments. What happens when someone is not able to get to the woods or to the pumpkin patch? Does the environmental imagination atrophy? Consider the example of Jim's grandparents who eventually have to move to the town of Blackhawk because they are no longer able to keep up with the work of the farm. Does this move to town preclude them from maintaining their connection to the rural Nebraska landscape? The primary goal of this essay is to address such questions en route to developing a more expansive and inclusive understanding of the relationship between embodiment and emplacement, a dialectical relationship that I have coined the "ecosomatic paradigm" (Cella, 2013). I develop the implications of an ecosomatic approach by analyzing a series of life narratives authored by PWDs, particularly those writers whose disability-identity both shapes and is shaped by their encounters with wilderness and otherwise rural environments. Collectively, the sampling of life narratives that I examine presents a series of reconstructive strategies – what we might think of as *retrofit tactics* – that provide the basis for a more complicated and robust sense of rurality. Within the context of disability, retrofitting refers to the process of making adjustments to public services, transportation, and architecture to provide access to PWDs. A retrofit tactic, then, does not wholly deconstruct conventional understandings of rurality, but instead adapts them to accommodate the disabled subject. Notably, the retrofit strategies I cover in this paper are driven from an inside-out perspective, which is to say the strategies are rooted in the experience of disability and articulated by those within the disability community. In the course of this essay, I identify four retrofit strategies, which include (1) expanding conceptions of rural embodiment beyond normative definitions, (2) underscoring the importance of attentiveness to one's body-in-nature, (3) emphasizing and embracing the interdependency of bodies (rather than an isolationist paradigm), and (4) highlighting the importance of language and narrative in the place-making process, particularly within rural environments that traditionally privilege mobility. What my reading of these life narratives reveals is how the category of disability – and the application of a disability studies lens – both *challenges* and *sharpens* our understanding of what it means to inhabit and experience rural places. In foregrounding rather than ignoring the binding relationship between the human body and the rural environment, these disability narratives suggest the contours of a broader understanding of rurality, one that is accessible to and inclusive of a wider variety of mind-body types.

2. Methodology: the ecosomatic approach to disability

In calling for greater attention to the dialectical relationship between embodiment and emplacement, I am building on a relatively recent trend within place studies and rural geography that focuses on how somatic experience profoundly influences the place-making enterprise (Casey, 1993; Brown and Toadvine, 2003;

Please cite this article in press as: Cella, M.J.C., Retrofitting rurality: Embodiment and emplacement in disability narratives, Journal of Rural Studies (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.05.007

متن کامل مقاله ← دریافت فوری

ISIArticles
مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات