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An Excursion through Fallow Lands

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There is something intriguing about spaces that appear to be marginal, unproductive, or difficult to define. The edges of modernity not only encompass ostensibly unusable sites—such as narrow strips of land that run parallel to infrastructural networks—but also a variety of locales that defy simple forms of categorization or control. Such spaces challenge existing aesthetic categories and modes of interpretation: these are not cultural landscapes in the conventional sense of aesthetic contemplation, and certainly not designed spaces that owe their character to precise forms of human intentionality. The presence of a fallow field lies in tension with the seeming immediacy of productive landscapes, and in particular, with land as a specific kind of material resource that has bolstered the expansionist dynamics of modernity. In this essay I consider the meaning of "fallow lands" not so much as a metaphor, but rather as a series of concrete relations: the idea of fallow is explored as a specific set of socioecological assemblages that have recently acquired a heightened degree of cultural resonance.

The idea of land is closely tied up with questions of designation and demarcation. Individual spaces, plots, or fields lie at the intersection of law, geography, and the biophysical dynamics of matter. Unlike terms such as "wasteland" or "brownfield," an emphasis on "fallowing" points to an active process of "letting alone," or to a suspension of use in which a parcel of land is temporarily "rested" so that its long-term fertility or viability can be assured. Of course, the very idea of rest, and of the resting of space in particular—letting the earth sleep—counters the accelerative and all-encompassing momentum of late modernity.[1]

The idea of fallow land has an ambiguous relation to both conceptions of "wild nature" in the cultural imagination and to more intensively modified fragments of nature such as parks or gardens. Though connected to various notions of the commons, the presence of fallow land tends to be associated with a more clearly defined set of claims over its future use, or at least relatively unambiguous patterns of ownership. Whereas wastelands are frequently associated with the "unusable," fallow land does not typically denote a degree of irreversible devalorization or even contamination. (Nuclear wastelands would not typically be referred to as "fallow" since their state does not result from a temporary interruption in use, but rather from an irrevocable alteration in their material characteristics.) If the wasteland tends to be defined by various forms of absence, as Vittoria di Palma suggests, then arguably fallow lands denote a mere suspension of future promise before fecundity is restored.[2]

The English word "fallow" is deeply immersed in the idea of a "working landscape," to use Raymond Williams's formulation, and denotes a parcel of land that has been deliberately set aside so that it can recover its agricultural productivity.[3] The idea of fallowing land also connects with early observations of the destructive effects on soil wrought by agricultural overexploitation: the absence of fallowing and the abandonment of pre-capitalist agricultural practices was a key element in the classic account of metabolic rift first developed by Justus von Liebig and later elaborated by Karl Marx.[4] The idea of "resting the earth" denotes a temporal frame at variance with the exigencies of capital; there is a "slowness" to fallow land that correlates to biochemical cycles indifferent to human intentionality. And the idea of fallow clearly predates the advent of modern enclosure in a European context, and relates to an array of cultural interactions with nature beyond Eurocentric conceptions of landscape.

The English word "fallow" has complex, and to some degree contradictory, etymological roots denoting both the act of ploughing as well as the practice of leaving fields undisturbed. "I saw far off the weedy fallows smile," writes William Cowper in a poem from 1785, "With verdure not unprofitable."[5] Cowper's observations were made in the pre-chemical age, when parcels of land were set aside in order to recover their fertility, principally by encouraging specific types of plants to grow that could fix nitrogen in the soil. Under pre-capitalist agriculture the use of fallow tied rural communities to intricate modalities of time and place. The English word "fallow" is of Germanic origin, being derived from the Old English *fealh* or *felch* that is related to the Old Frisian *fallach*, the Dutch *valge*, and the Old High German *felga*.[6] There may also be a chromatic dimension to the etymology of fallow landscapes derived from the sandy appearance of fallow fields: there are similarities, for instance, between the Old High German *falo*, meaning "pale"; the Latin verb *pallēre*, indicating "to be pale" or "to fade"; and the Greek φαιός (*polios*) meaning "light" or "gray."[7]

More recently, the practice of fallowing has been used in relation to the temporary suspension of agricultural activity in response to overproduction.[8] In the European Union (EU), significant quantities of agricultural land were removed from production between 1988 and 2008 as part of so-called set-aside schemes: although sometimes couched in ecological terms to protect biodiversity, this centrally coordinated use of fallowing is integrally linked to the exigencies of capitalist agriculture and the power of agricultural interests within the institutional apparatus of the EU. These specific measures to create fallow landscapes illustrate an underlying ambiguity in the sphere of biopolitics at the interface of food production and biodiversity: there is a tension between different strands of intervention to secure life as a commodity, and as a strategic concern within conservation biology.[9]

The presence of fallow lands in formerly productive landscapes has also emerged as an outcome of uncoordinated agricultural abandonment and demographic decline. In these cases the relationship between fallowing and socioeconomic marginalization lies closer to the dynamics of landscape change observed in the post-Fordist emptying out of urban and industrial regions. In vegetation zones with relatively low or intermittent precipitation, the production of fallow lands through neglect rather than by design can have deleterious consequences. In the case of southern Europe, for example, there is now an increased risk of fire produced by the twin effects of neoliberal austerity and the decline in traditional forms of land management: cutbacks in fire emergency services and the build-up of dry vegetation have proved to be a deadly combination.[10]

Outside the Anglo-American realm, in Germany, the word *Brache* is widely used to denote fallow land. The term *Brache* also has agricultural origins and is etymologically related to the Dutch *braak*, the English *brake*, and the Danish *brak*, with roots in the act of "breaking" the soil through ploughing. Unlike the English sense of fallow, however, the German *Brache* has acquired a much wider range of meanings and cultural connotations. In particular, *Brache* is used in relation to a variety of urban and industrial areas that have been neglected or abandoned. In Berlin, the proliferation of *Brachen* at different moments in the city's history, especially in the immediate postwar

1
See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), and Byung-Chul Han, *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* (Berlin: Matthes and Seitz, 2010).

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Vittoria Di Palma, *Wasteland: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

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Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).

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See Matthew Gandy, "Cities in Deep Time: Biodiversity, Metabolic Rift, and the Urban Question," *City* 22.1 (2018): 96–105.

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William Cowper, *The Task: A Poem* (London: Cassell & Co., 1899 [1785]).

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Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "fallow," http://www.oed.com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/view/Entry/67870?rskey=3v0Yn6&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid.

Abandoned olive groves in Catalonia, last cultivated in the 1970s, 2009. Courtesy Matthew Gandy.

Urban wasteland awaiting development, Chausseestrasse, Berlin, 2006. Courtesy Matthew Gandy.

years and in the wake of geopolitical division, has become a recognizable if now rapidly receding feature of the metropolitan landscape. These temporary or transitional voids now form part of a rich debate over the future of urban space, as a diversity of vernacular cultural and scientific appropriations clash with more narrowly utilitarian conceptions of urban space as little more than a patchwork of investment opportunities. The term *Brache* is now embedded in the German cultural imagination as denoting a space of possibility and alternative pathways.[11]

We should be cautious, however, in relying too heavily on etymological nuance as a determining thread in our analysis. The use of specific words in relation to place, space, and landscape can generate associations independently from the specific sites to which they refer.[12] The Derridean term *différance* points to an inherent fluidity in the association between words and material artifacts. More specifically, Derrida's emphasis on absence and "spectrality" marks a significant departure from the bounded corporeal presence in Husserlian phenomenology. A fallow landscape is of necessity an interim space, a sphere of detachment and interruption. Although it may be experienced in the here and now, it is necessarily connected to other discourses and temporalities. There is a peculiarly intense degree of absence associated with fallow landscapes and their connections to other spaces, thoughts, and subjects.[13]

Fallow lands are now a focus of intense cultural and scientific attention. The evolving biophysical dynamics of these "slow spaces" are indicative of distinctive ecological sequences. The temporal dimensions to fallow lands exemplify Gilles Clément's articulation of the "garden in movement" as an endless source of aesthetic and botanical fascination.[14] Indeed, the aesthetics of biophysical spontaneity has become increasingly influential in landscape design. The meaning and purpose of urban design today is in a state of flux: on the one hand, there is a neoliberal impetus towards making public space serve the interests of capital, with new parks acting as a catalyst for real estate speculation and other strategic objectives; and on the other, there is a diversification of expertise with new possibilities for cultural and aesthetic experimentation. And there is an uneasy transition between the noninterventionist dynamics of fallow lands and their eventual incorporation into various forms of "staged" nonintervention as part of a strategy towards their partial retention in the landscape.

The contemporary resonance of fallow lands is derived from a series of dynamic cultural elements: the evolution of language itself, for which marginal spaces have generated a diverse array of terms; the interplay between words, meanings, and human experience, including the multiple lineages of collective memory; and naturally, the material traces of human activity inscribed into the landscape, marked by successive oscillations between use and "nonuse." This is not to suggest that our terminologies are merely arbitrary; on the contrary, it is to locate words and meanings in their precise cultural and historical contexts.

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Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "fallow," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fallow.

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The capitalist use of "fallow" measures in response to overproduction can also be applied to other commodities like housing. For example, see Matthias Bernt, "Partnerships for Demolition: The Governance of Urban Renewal in East Germany's Shrinking Cities," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33.3 (2009): 754–69.

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See Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

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See Marien González-Hidalgo, Iago Otero, and Giorgos Kallis, "Seeing Beyond the Smoke: The Political Ecology of Fire in Horta de Sant Joan (Catalonia)," *Environment and Planning A* 46 (2014): 1014–1103.

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Dieter D. Genske and Susanne Hauser, *Die Brache als Chance: Ein Transdisziplinärer Dialog Über Verbrauchte Flächen* (Berlin: Springer, 2013).

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Kevin Raaphorst, Ingrid Duchhart, Wim van der Knaap, Gerda Roeleveld, and Adri van den Brink, "The Semiotics of Landscape Design Communication: Towards a Critical Visual Research Approach in Landscape Architecture," *Landscape Research* 42.1 (2017): 120–133.

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See Nikolai Roskamm, *Die unbesetzte Stadt: Post-fundamentalistiches Denken and das urbanistische Feld* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2017); and John Wylie, "Landscape, Absence and the Geographies of Love," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34.3 (2009): 275–89.

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See Matthew Gandy, "Entropy by Design: Gilles Clément, Parc Henri Matisse and the Limits to Avant-Garde Urbanism," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37.1 (2013): 259–78.