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—counts 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 “unserviceable,” 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 interregnum in use, but rather from an irreversible 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.

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. The idea of fallowing land also connects with early observations of the destructive effects on soil wrought by agricultural overexplotation: 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. The idea of “resting the earth” denotes a temporal frame at variance with the exigencies of capitalist agriculture and the power of agrarian 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.

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 emptiness 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.

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 brak, 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...
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.

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. 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.

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. 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 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 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 meanings in their precise cultural and historical contexts. The use of specific words in relation to place, space, and landscape can generate associations independently from the specific sites to which they refer. 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.

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