

CONSERVATION'S RADICAL CENTER IN GEOGRAPHY

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Fieldwork is reading a landscape to make certain it persists. That statement came to me during a graduate seminar as I was trying to explain a vision I held of geography. Of course, not all landscapes can or should be sustained or conserved. Unjust, ruinous terrains should be transformed, and we must not grow nostalgic for the false glories of an imagined past. But much of the time we study disappearing places that uplift or fascinate, that ennoble the earth or hold it together. Lost landscapes haunt us. In much of today's trendy geographical scholarship lurks the musky scent of deconstructive sadness. Beyond theory, intellectual cuteness, and wordplay, too many of us have retreated from personal involvement to become maudlin writers. "Radicalism" in academia too often amounts to the mustering of high-octane words, innocent of meaningful deeds. Today fieldwork and action geography are radical, and many times they come from the "centrists" who elect to change things on the ground rather than forging frippery in the literature.

Fieldwork offers the best hope for retaining empathy of heart and clarity of mind. In fieldwork is our strongest chance to fuel geography's rise as an instrument of vital change instead of devolving into the crafting of intricately involuted geographical obituaries. Perhaps the most important thing fieldwork does is move us beyond mere mouthing of others' words and into our own hearts.

BIAS AND LOVE

I love the landscapes of rural and wild places. That is a bias. In the 1950s my hometown of Winterport, Maine, was a farming and port village of fewer than 800 people. The Penobscot River entered the sea at the bottom of stair-stepping terraces. White potatoes raised in Aroostook County were trucked south to the town's docks and loaded onto freighters bound, ironically, for Ireland. I grew up in this country on 16 acres of old pastures and woodlots with endless rows of vegetables to hoe. Deer ran everywhere. Native trout teemed in Lanes Brook. Our house was built in 1790 and smelled like old hardwood beams. Owls and half-wild cats hunted mice in our barn. My mother planted mint beside the doorways and lily of the valley beneath the pines. Winterport had no police, movie theaters, restaurants, or traffic lights. The town had a small Carnegie Library built of rounded rocks. Houses were never locked, and car keys were left in the ignition. Much of that is still true.

In the 1950s Winterport also had its share of alcoholism, battery, divorce, racism, and child abuse. The latter wounded our house—through a neighbor—and made the woods a refuge. Despite this leavening truth, my rural bias came from the geography of my childhood. I prefer places where nature can still be felt and heard.

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