

019 Possibilities of Rural Belongings – Jade Montserrat, Harold Offeh and Hansi Momodu Gordon

00:00

We're just a bit late, we're still going to allow one hour for this session, which means that we'll cut into what was going to be my final comments. I'll just kind of round up very briefly at the end. But after this session is a series of two performances and the session and the performance is interlinked. So this is our kind of final moment of the day. This session possibilities of rural belongings embodying liminality is a conversation between artists Jade Montserrat, and Harold Offeh and it considers critical approaches and practices from the positions of being black British artists in rural environments. And it's chaired by Hansi Momodu Gordon. We really wanted to host this panel, and we wanted to invite artists who were thinking about this specific question in the British context, in critical ways, in the contemporary moment. So we're really delighted that we can both have the conversation and the performances to think about this question, collectively today. Harold Offed is an artist working in a range of media including performance, video, photography, learning and social arts practice. Offeh often employs humour as a means to confront the viewer with historical narratives and contemporary culture, and interested in the space created by the inhabiting or embodying of history. He's been exhibited widely in the UK and internationally, including at Tate Britain and Modern, Studio Museum Harlem, South London Gallery, MAC VAL, Kulturhuset Stockholm, and the Kunsthall Charlottenborg among many others, and to introduce Jade

Montserrat, the recipient...She's the recipient of the Stuart Hall Foundation Scholarship, which supports her PhD 'Race in Representation in Northern Britain in the Context of the Black Atlantic', a creative practice project, and the development of her work from her black diasporic perspective in the north of England. Jade's rainbow tribe project, a combination of historical and contemporary manifestations of black culture from the perspective of the black diaspora is central to the way she's producing her body of work, including no need for clothing and its iterations as well as her performance work review. And finally, our chair Hansi Momodu Gordon is an independent curator and writer. She's founder of future assembly, a platform for artists development and experimentation. And she was formerly co-curator of the second Lagos Biennial of contemporary art in 2019. And interim program, Digital Content Manager of the Stuart Hall foundation. Recent projects and collaborations include co-curating 'Untitled: Art on the Conditions of our Time', 'New Art Exchange', and curating 'Concerning Symmetry: Selected Artists' Moving Image' from the Emile Stipp Foundation collection, and producing 'Promised Land', which was a cultural and conflict project. And her first book nine weeks was published with Stevenson in 2016. So thank you all for being here with us today. And I'll hand over to you Hansi now. Thank you.

03:02

audience clapping

Hansi Momodu Gordon 03:07

So thank you all for being here and for the invitation for this panel. I kind of thought about the title of this and decided to question it. I think it's something that can be read as the question possibilities of rural belongings embodying liminality or maybe

impossibilities of rural belongings embodying centrality, I don't know. I think there's different ways that we can try to approach this topic. The kind of subtitle to that is from the position of being a black British artist in the rural environments. So that very, definitely positions each of these practitioners from that kind of racialised perspective, which is a kind of a personal narrative, in a way it's the body politic narrative. And to open up that discussion, and to, I guess, allow different kinds of narratives to come out through the discussion, I've decided to just share a little bit about my own background and which is briefly just to maybe, underline why I was invited to chair this, this panel. So the, the images that I've put up here are of different kinds of rural landscapes, and they're rural landscapes that kind of represent me as a black woman in Britain from a number of different perspectives. So on the top left hand side, this is actually St Elizabeth in rural Jamaica, my husband's family are from Jamaica, and this is their kind of rural environments, and the environment which they live in a place where I visited. The bottom, oh sorry the top right hand side, this is the kind of rural landscape in West Africa in Edo state, which is where my father's family are from. The bottom left here, this image and all of these, these three I took from Google and this bottom left is the approach to Tipi Valley. Now, I don't know how many people are conscious of what that is. But it's basically like an alternative community that is technically and actually off grid in rural West Wales. And that is where I was supposed to be born. So I asked my mom, you know, tell me the story about where we're supposed to be born, she said you were supposed to be born in a bender by the river. And that's what this picture is. Fortunately, I think for me, I came early. So I was born in Lister Hospital, which is actually not too far from here. But this is a picture of my, myself, my older sister, my mom, and this is the bender where I spent a lot of my early years. So I just wanted to kind of share that and share these other images, because I want to open up the idea

that black bodies exist in rural landscapes in, in a variety of different ways. And obviously, this discussion, you know, we're in England, we're in the UK, so we are positioning it within that context as well. But I want to keep it kind of open. And I just noted down some other kind of points that I wanted to share with you from this individual experience of being a black creative in the rural and then I've asked Jade and Harold to do the same. So they're going to talk about their practice, and then we'll have a few questions as well. So I'm just going to share some of these notes that kind of came to mind when thinking about this topic. So this community was formed, I think in the 70s. And there was a definite movement of people from the cities of the UK out into the Welsh countryside. I believe we've got people here from Aberystwyth University, who are partnering on this project. So they'll be very much aware of this kind of influx of English people that kind of set up in these very alternative communities and that was the context in which I was raised and grew up. And they did that to find alternative ways of living. It was often off grid, often very radical, creative, alternative, wild and possibly free. And I want to interrogate that idea of freedom. I was really interested in something that Gray said, because actually what did happen is that these communities often replicated a lot of the issues within the urban around sexism and racism as well. I also lived in women's only spaces that could only exist because they were hidden in the wilderness. I ran through meadows, blue grass, flicked cow pats jumped in waterfalls, celebrated bluebells, snowdrops, and daffodils. I stood on thistles and slugs, I climbed trees, swam in lakes in March rain, listened to half of my year group talk about the lambing season, or collecting hay. I learned to sleep under a night sky that was pitch black and deadly silence, decorated with flourishes of shooting stars away to the Harvest Moon, where commons meant common lands that one fifth of Wales is mapped as access land where public, where public have the right to access on foot. I got

paralytically drunk at a very young age and helped myself to magic mushrooms growing in my school fields and I think that's rite of passage that lots of people in the rural will relate to. I rode on horses, climbed, camped in tents swam in waterfalls in June, made dream catchers. I was also part of the free party rave scene that ignited in hidden forest clearings by the side of quarries and lakes. A freedom that only and abandon that only the rural allowed. Now this...Wales was in my upbringing was incredibly creative environment. I think Wales as a country has creativity really at its heart and and I experienced that kind of growing up there. And the Aberystwyth Art Center was probably my closest link to that the contemporary art world, but there was space there for this kind of alternative culture to flourish and that then kind of allowed a sense of creativity. So although it wasn't the same, I don't think that...that actually shaped me. I think what shapes me more than anything was my childhood within rural Wales. I put here English Welsh black, because what actually happened is that when I was in Wales, as many of you probably know, it's one of the oldest colonies of England. And that legacy was really felt still in the 80s and 90s when I went to school, and if I felt any kind of prejudice as a foreigner, it was for being Saesneg on which is English. So it wasn't really about my my race, perceived blackness at that time. It was only really my blackness that became apparent to me and became a more kind of political perspective in my life when I moved into the urban environment, which happened in my late teens and I moved into the kind of city environment, I was kind of socialized as black. I think that was probably an unusual experience, but I just wanted to share that because I'd like to actually open up the space to thinking about different kinds of black experience that maybe are not stereotypical or what we might be expecting to hear. And so the first point I wanted to share to both Harold and Jade, but I think we're going to start with Jade is just to talk about their own kind of entry points into the topic, their experiences

of being in the rural and coming to this this question, and share a bit about their practice and also a prelude to the performance that they'll each do. So you can kind of take turns to that. And then we'll have a few questions as well. Which I want to start to...

Jade Montserrat 10:37

Thank you, Hansi. Thank you. So I can move these forward can't I? Is that okay to do that?

Hansi Momodu Gordon 10:45

Yeah, no, that's absolutely fine. You can just control as you as you want.

Jade Montserrat 10:50

This is a performance called 'Clay'. Where I'm digging in the...it's actually near...I was thinking about it last night. it's adjacent to a duck pond that was actually called Jade's duck pond until my mom divorced her ex deceased husband who I lived with for 25 years, who didn't adopt me and then changed the name of the duck pond where I learned to swim to something else. I don't know what it's called now. But this performance was made in a pit that was dug to presumably locate, relocate a water pipe near the dustpan. So I grew up on a on, a shooting a state that I went to live up on when I was three. My mom still lives there, it's completely off grid. And neighbours generated electricity, gas lights, there's no gas lights anymore. There's no gas luckily anymore, which caused...well, it contributed to rising damp and our roof also was leaking. So our house up until about six years ago was kind of bubbling and alive and black and obviously has contributed to some of my REMs? and my sort of respiratory

problems. So I think I'm mentioning that particularly because it demonstrates something to do with ownership but also neglect of an area. So the property was bought as land for Joe's brother, who was an arms dealer to blow shit up on the, on the land. This is all true, by the way. *audience laughs* But, um, so my introduction to the rural is that it was really very confusing because I had very little exchange with the regular outside world, it was, it still is a really isolated space. And then I was sent away because of...sort of my disruption...I was...I found the landscape a sanctuary, but didn't respond very well to education. So I was what was called a school refuser and went from, to a lot of schools until I was then sent away to boarding school and those children...it was really difficult, because I was very different and I wasn't, at the time, cognizant of class. But I now realize that it didn't really matter that there was this shooting estate that I had sort of found myself in. I was still sort of urbanized for a lot of my life. So it's almost like trying to present who I am and so whilst I grew up, sort of responding really instinctively to the land, like children do, making mud pies, and when I was a beater when I was...I started beating when I was about six or seven years old. And these men, all men who shot weren't very good shots, and they didn't really have the capacity to kill the birds humanely. So instinctively, I recognise how to do that with my hands at a very, very early age. So as I say it was a sanctuary and somewhere I could use to sort of self heal or self soothe in what was actually a really, really traumatic space. So I've come back to this landscape, which is currently been mismanaged since he died. It's been bought by people who are using the land as a sort of theme park for Z-list celebrities who all drive Range Rovers and use this ancient track. And are now eroding pathways. My mom still lives there...a driveway and releasing up to 60,000 birds on a 200 acre estate. So the birds are pecking at each other's bottoms. I've never heard so much gunfire in my whole life. And I think sort of describing those traumas, helps to situate or locate my practice

in both sort of observing the microcosm...and then is that way around, and then I can then branch out to the macro. Because these ways of...I haven't done any work on nonviolent communication yet, apart from what I've learned myself, but all of these strategies that we've talked about today, I think, are integral to how we collectively look at land use and, and how we sustain ourselves. And that there's, I think, what I'm looking for is understanding what collective ownership would be, and, and, like, Grace, a little, I have a lifelong project called the rainbow tribe, which centralizes Josephine Baker at the core because, for me, I'm at one time furious that so many of these charismatic cult leaders, in a way, quote, Grace, allow us, or allow, allow me like Josephine Baker to observe how she formulated this social experiment of 12 adopted children whilst at the same time capitalizing on her body through entertainment to pay for to continue this social experiment, which is...which she created through this idea, well through her wanting to be a mother, but also the idea of transcending race, which of course is an impossibility. So I think what I'm talking about is decolonization within my practice. And so I'll make work in parallel with reading histories that I'm catching up on that aren't exclusive to landscapes and the rural but allow me to understand how what could be considered common land is actually really owned in that sort of violent way. And I've just put in that image the, the ?? properties on a ley line. So these excuse me bastards that have bought up this property, they, they don't know what's coming with tillery?? they're messing about with something on a ley line, so I'll leave it at that. Oh, and then I made this it's playing. This is playing tonight at Art Night so I just made it on the, on the land. I don't know. I don't know if it's gonna play. We can come back.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 19:55

The other thing maybe before we hand over to Harold is do you want to just say a little bit about your performance here?

Jade Montserrat 20:01

Oh, yeah.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 20:02

And then we'll have some time after...

Jade Montserrat 20:05

After, we'll be going up to Amphis where I'll make a new performance called Love Love. And it's conflating I suppose, performances that have come before where I'm doing a repetitive action. But what I've realized that is that whilst I was living in this landscape, but cut off, and I was training, but not consciously, the beauty of the landscape is that it's so seductive, and you want to be out in it and active and, and nourished and renewing that space as well and sharing it, which hasn't been the same since I left here. And what I found is that there's a demand for performances that I make that sort of centre endurance, but that actually sustaining that is impossible, if I don't feel my my body and I don't train and I don't take care of it. So I've used some of my training methods to make this construct, this performance, thinking about caring, and, but also prowess.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 21:39

I think yeah, thank you, Jade. Alright, Harold, do you want to come into the conversation here and kind of share with us your entry point into the topic and a little bit about your work?

Harold Offeh 21:52

Maybe I'll do that by talking through the work a little bit? Well I mean, I haven't got a lived experience in relation to kind of the rural sphere or landscape. So I think part of what I'm interested in is it's partly the idea of what the, the kind of imaginary rural or that kind of the cultural imaginary of, particularly of the kind of English kind of countryside rural idyl. So I think in terms of what I'm going to be kind of presenting later, the genesis of which came from doing a residency here at Wysing Arts Center in 2017. So spending seven weeks over that summer kind of here. And I sort of came in as a starting point, I've been doing this project for a very long time and still am, which responds to a kind of collection of album covers of black singers from the 70s and 80s, which I then re-perform in various contexts, so either live or as photographs. So it's a kind of re-staging and most of the series is kind of focused on figures like Grace Jones, and reenacting these album covers. But there was a subset that I've been wanting to explore for a long time, and hadn't so Wysing had provided an opportunity to kind of sort of do that maybe I should show the context of those. So I've been collecting these album covers of like, sort of male, mostly American soul singers, for this three year period in the early 80s, where they're kind of inhabiting this kind of like, position this lounging, I call it lounging, reclining repose posture. And I'm just really interested in the kind of cultural moment and how, through these album covers, they were adopting this pose and the symbolism of that, and what it might say about kind of masculinity, black masculinity, the kind of politics of representation commercialism, as a familiar album

cover functions as this kind of, you know, because now a cover's purpose is to represent an identity and to communicate music. So yeah, anyway, so very simply, I sort of brought that into this space of Wysing. And so part of that was...so there's a specific post by Teddy Pendergrass, who was in the other image of an American Soul singer a very Uber masculine, kind of like, sexy music, you know, music to make babies to, as kind of like a sort of Barry White contemporary for those of you that don't know. And again, I was really interested in this kind of like this pose that he adopts and then so one of the things was to kind of like repeat this image and place it within this kind of like the landscape here. And taking it and placing it in a different context as a way of thinking about, not only the gesture and the pose, but suddenly it dawned on me this idea of, like inhabiting the landscape and a whole history of particularly within kind of the Western canon of A: that pose as a way of representing the body, whether that's in antiquity or within kind of modernist Manet, you know, various other Henry Moore we might think of as well. Yeah, so just thinking about the kind of cultural kind of loading of that. And I think, for me, what was really interesting coming into the space, I think, often how residences and retreats kind of work for artists is that kind of having to kind of confront a completely different kind of context. And often, you know, the residency as a kind of space, as you know, can be seen as a kind of an escapism from that kind of urban kind of context. But, but for me, it allowed me to kind of really think through a whole series of concerns. And cliches, often I like to kind of just directly engage with the kind of cliché. And so for me, the idea of the kind of like, landscape, particularly the English landscape, which is kind of like there's this conceit at heart of the kind of English landscape of kind of naturalism when it's a really manufactured kind of landscape like heavily heavily constructed and shaped, and authored and manicured. Obviously, it's industrial, it's a working space. But I guess I'm most interested in the kind of

romanticism that is invested in the kind of English kind of rural idle batch cottages kind of warm beer, whatever. Which is a kind of sort of myth that kind of like, you know, I think, you know, most states or most nations have a kind of like, foundation myths. And I remember a few years ago reading Simon Schama landscape and memory and there's a whole chapter about kind of Arcadia and hearts of oak and the kind of relationship of Englishness to kind of the landscape and how that's been heavily kind of sort of shaped, and, you know, manufactured, and to the point, I think of a kind of, yeah, it was a kind of complete submersion into into the kind of fantasy of it. So I think, when Lotte invited me, we were having various conversations about kind of responding to the wider context of the rural assembly, I was kind of aware of like, Oh, I think my entry point to it is not as is not a lived experience. But I think thinking through this kind of imaginative space was kind of important. I should just kind of so yeah, the lounging project, I just finished talking about that. It's kind of gone on to various other iterations. So yeah, I've been placing it in these different contexts. So this was a performance I did for 154 the African art fair at Somerset House. So it's kind of 2 person performance with Evan, who's going to be performing with me later as well. And again, it was kind of more of a kind of choreography of these kind of poses and gestures, and embedding ourselves within the screening space, in relation to the original images. And then again, this is again at the Tetley in Leeds, for another exhibition. Mr. Samaras??, another performer that I'm working with collaborating here. And again, it was about, again, putting that pose in, in occupying space, that kind of gallery space, and performers just inhabiting these these kind of poses. So yeah, talking to Lotte of is really thinking about how to kind of respond. And I really wanted to kind of take on a series of gestures and think about, I guess, representations of the black body in the English landscape. And the initial images I was finding were very much. I think there's a whole history of kind of like the black

body being working and labouring within, certainly within the kind of Western canon. And I wanted to think about this other space. And the possibility of occupying the space in terms of kind of leisure and thinking about somehow kind of like encountering the romanticism that is often there. So just thinking about like, so what I've been doing is kind of looking at, often how black people and people of colour representing themselves, like. So I've been looking through a lot of travel blogs, and people taking photographs while they're on European tours as the kind of fashion images, the popular cultural, also thinking through music videos, so people like Solange Knowles as really revisiting Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings of these kind of figurative images of these black figures, often in landscapes, nondescript, non specific landscapes, but there's the kind of like, pleasure, often they're dancing or inhabiting the space in a way that isn't about a discourse of kind of labor or suffrage or work. So, yeah, the performance that is happening later is partly trying to kind of engage with this. So a lot of these poses and gestures that we're presenting, come from looking at these various sources, but also taking on some of these kind of cliches of the kind of romantic and, and how one engages. So I mean, there's the kind of classic Caspar David Friedrich kind of high Northern European romanticism looking out, and the kind of mastery of that, which is often represented in a lot of these images of these kind of people of colour. It's become a trope, that that's how we kind of engage with the space like these vistas. So I wanted to kind of engage with that. I'll just finish off by talking about the music. So actually, the performance is kind of framed by this kind of symphonic piece, which is something I discovered through another project early this year I was working in Croydon in South London and came across a composer called Samuel Coleridge Taylor, not to be confused with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English romantic 18th century poet, but it's interesting, that one is named after the other. So, my person the composer, Samuel

Coleridge Taylor was a late 19th century early 20th century classical composer. His father was from Sierra Leone as a doctor. His mother was English. And he grew up in London, in Croydon. It's a well known figure in Croydon, but not outside of Croydon, very much. And in the late 19th century, he was this kind of really, incredibly successful black British composer, who was particularly successful in America, played to Theodore Roosevelt, met Theodore Roosevelt, and went on extensive tours was a contemporary of Elgar was considered the African Marla, this is kind of like how I kind of, I don't know, Matthew trajectory and career that he had, unfortunately died in 1912, age 37. And so there was a kind of limited kind of sort of body of work that he kind of created. But the piece that is sort of framing the performance, is his symphonic variations on an African Air, which is the piece that he created, really was really influenced by kind of African American folk spirituals. And the piece is also an attempt for him to, I think, engage with the kind of imaginary space of Africa and because he never got to go to Sierra Leone, where he started was originally from Nicaragua to go to Africa. So the kind of broad spectrum of this symphonic piece is about the imaginative space of an African Air. But it also exists very much within the kind of classical European kind of romantic symphonic canon as well. So it's trying to think of, in some ways, the way that that that work operates and the way that he was trying to operate in terms of bringing those things together within that.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 21:55

Yeah, however you want to. Thank you. Yeah, I also wanted to pick up on music and and when I kind of first saw these, these new images from this kind of evolution of the cover series, it does feel quite incongruous to see you know, you lounging in these kind of rural environments, but as you were speaking them, I started to think about the the

music that would have been on these records. And actually the possibility that, you know, if we're talking pre internet, maybe this was actually an introduction of these black figures into the rural environment, assuming that, you know, there are possibly fans of these music. And it was in a form of communication that was kind of circulating in the rural, people having access to those, those images.

Harold Offeh 35:26

Yeah, I think I mean, what's so interesting about the kind of context of those records is that they come at a point where a lot of those artists are trying to kind of cross over into main mainstream, I mean, with white audiences extensively, for coming out of a kind of r&b. I mean, American music is still incredibly segregated. But when it comes to radio and stuff like that, but there's definitely a kind of play to a sort of broader mass market, kind of white mainstream pop audience so the, somehow the embodying of that position is, feels like a way into that, that space, you know, in terms of challenging those tropes of black masculinity. Because like, if by the 90s, with like, sort of like rap and NWA was completely different. Yeah, discourse of presentation.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 36:19

But I also think that it is often the entry point to the black experience, music album covers as well, so just thinking about that is quite interesting. Lots of different kinds of questions that I want to start to open up with you one of the things you, you touched upon already, and this relates to your work as well, Jade, we were talking about this idea that the rural being landscaped or kind of manicured or manufactured. And there's a number of different kind of dichotomies that come out through the discussion but I wanted to open up this idea of the kind of wild versus tamed. Thinking about the

colonial garden, which is planned and exists, you know, in different contexts globally, but also thinking, beyond the kind of the kind of conceptual conceptualizing of the landscape thinking about land art and conceptual practice. And actually, what you're seeing there is the kind of the action of the mind on the landscape. As opposed to a kind of rugged, wild west where, you know, the type of place environment that I was kind of brought up in, which maybe has the illusion of being wild and free. So I don't know if you want to kind of pick up any of any of that Harold.

Harold Offeh 37:52

Yeah.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 37:56

I mean, there's a few different ideas in there. And one of the things we touched on already, is this idea of kind of planned landscape.

Harold Offeh 38:03

Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. I mean, I hope I'm not dodging the question, but I was just thinking about I have sort of done various projects that like my entry point, always, in the idea of the rural and has been through kind of specific art projects, like I've done a project for the National Trust and I did another project in a big sort of stately home in Leeds called Temple Newsam, which has the Capability Brown kind of landscape kind of garden, which is kind of responding to so. Yeah, I spent a lot of time really thinking about the kind of histories of these spaces, and for me, I've always come back to this idea of Arcadia. And, and in England as a kind of just an extensive garden cultivated kinds of garden. And the, the idea of civilization that comes with like, the classical notion

of Arcadia. And so, and I think it's interesting that that that that is, becomes also a tool to kind of colonialism as well in terms of kind of being kind of exported, in terms of this is a bit of an anecdote, and I've been trying to kind of like, unpack it a little bit. So there's this notion of like hearts of oak, which is the kind of sort of for the white Albion again, they're all kind of English, romantic, kind of like, sort of tropes. But in Ghana, one of the biggest...I'm of Ghanian heritage, was born in Accra. One of the biggest football teams is Hearts of Oak. So I was grow up grew up with this idea of hearts of oak and my dad supports Hearts of Oak ???. And, and I never really understood where that kind of came from. And it's so rooted in a kind of Englishness and obviously, the British kind of brought, you know, football to kind of, to Africa, to the world, whatever. And that those kind of sort of values were kind of sort of transported. So yeah, I mean, I don't know. I mean, I'm always thinking through these kind of histories, and the kind of imaginative kind of cultural space that we don't necessarily kind of question enough back, never really and have this within that there is always a very standard narrative that excludes. Like I was really interested in the history and David Olusugah??? who did this, like history of black Britain, British black people, going back to Roman times. And finding like, the, you know, obviously, the Romans were very multicultural, diverse, as part of the Empire. So finding the bones of this woman from Africa, in I think Surrey or Kent or somewhere, like, pity that there's a kind of place here for 1000s of years. What's kind of really, I don't know, I'm just, I'm rambling a bit, a little bit, maybe, but... Not at all I think it's definitely... ...you scratch the surface and actually there's more there...

Hansi Momodu Gordon 41:30

Well, that was kind of one of the questions I wanted to ask again, which is this idea around kind of ownership and propriety. And thinking about whether people of colour in the UK can ever kind of have a legitimate claim of ownership on the rural?

Jade Montserrat 41:47

Yeah. Do you mind?

Hansi Momodu Gordon 41:49

Yeah Jade.

Jade Montserrat 41:51

I think what I'm noticing is that, inadvertently, we recognize that our landscapes are incredibly important to our health and well being. But it's almost this almost like a safety valve. So you might go to a festival and release your tension in a very controlled environment and I think what I've learned sort of, empirically, is that I, it's so rooted in in class, so the ownership of land in the UK. So I think it's really interesting thinking about, do you remember the black farmer? Yeah, yeah. And I made a pilgrimage to go and see the black farmer, when I was about in my mid 20s, or something I driven in a Land Rover that I also used to have to get out every now and then and bang it with a hammer underneath. I can't remember why. And I think the break it was really dangerous anyway, me driving there, but I got there. And there was no entry point for me, I felt. It could have easily been my attitude. But I, we weren't a meeting of minds because the black farmer is so invested in the structures that allowed him to enter into being a black farmer by exploiting his blackness for the Conservative Party, essentially. And so and also thinking about this, what you were talking earlier about wildness and

taming so what i'm also noticing is that and yeah again, the people who are trying to control landscapes or make them work the way that the local town or village would work, and it erodes the magic of the landscape itself. So I am certainly seeing that people who have the money, which is again a class, and a symbol of status to be able to use that space and determines who can use that space and who has access, yeah.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 44:47

So both of you work in a kind of performative way. And I wanted to touch on this idea of hyper visibility and and wondering whether being a person of colour in a rural environment is always by necessity a kind of performance.

Jade Montserrat 45:05

Yeah, so I was introduced to these shooters as a daughter who looks like the way I do because I was that I would I was brought up in a coal shed. So it was it like, all my, my it's like, I was thinking about it earlier that I'm melanin. And that for everyone else is different. But for me growing up, there was nothing to hinge that on because at the same token, I thought that Eddie Murphy might be my father, because I hadn't seen any other people of colour. We didn't have a television and there certainly weren't any people of colour in my vicinity or in my...so I think it's everyone else's perception. That is othering in the landscape, as opposed to something that's rooted inside? Yeah. So sorry, what are you asking? About performativity?

Hansi Momodu Gordon 46:13

I related to what you're saying because something that I've experienced is from going from feeling like absolutely at home in it in a tiny little village in the middle of nowhere,

and you know, running free, to having spent a lot of time in the city and now actually feeling very self conscious when I would go back and visit you know, my home village and and that's an awareness that I probably gained at a later age about my my visibility as a black woman. But I do you know, I personally think that there's always an element of kind of performativity that comes with that.

Harold Offeh 46:45

Yeah, I think this this thing of hyper-visibility, I'm falling back on anecdotes again, but early this year, I was doing a residency in Japan, and which involved meeting people that have lived in Japan, migrants settled migrants, including some black farmers, actually. But for me, that experience has been framed by while I was out there, reading James Baldwin's 'A Stranger in the Village', which is about his experience in 1950s, going to a Swiss village. So he had a Swiss lover, and I think every summer would kind of go to this village where his lover was from. And yeah, it did notes on a native son. And he just talks about that othering experience and the gaze that he's kind of subjected to by the kind of villages, and it's really good. For me, even though I didn't necessarily have that kind of oppressive experience in Japan, but just being aware of your hyper-visibility, and, you know, they gave me a bike so I could cycle around and *laughs* there was, there's quite a few times when people I remember like this, this woman with a child stopping in the street because I cycled by. And it's like, because it was just like a kind of kind of curiosity. So I was aware of that kind of sort of spectacle of that. And in a way, I was kind of playing up to that in sort of these behaviours of exhibitionism. And my, one of the ways I was dealing with that was by directly like, if people were looking, I would say, Hello, hi. Kind of engage with them directly.

Jade Montserrat 48:38

Also I found that a lot of times where I'm trying to demonstrate that I'm here and I know something about being here. Not just plonked.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 48:53

Do you think having a kind of performance practice helps you work through some of that experience?

Harold Offeh 48:59

For me definitely. Yeah, absolutely.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 49:04

So but we can obviously take some questions from the room. But there was one other question I wanted to, to ask you both. And whether and this is, I guess, yeah, this is a, you know, a loaded question. I probably have my own answer, but I wanted to and it's something that was just like a reaction to thinking about the title and topic and the framing of us three in the conversation, but it was also just wondering if a person of colour in the in the English countryside can ever have an experience of the rural that's not mediated by race?

Harold Offeh 49:44

I think it depends what perspective you're looking for. I mean, my experience has never been **??** by race in terms of just the experience of being in a space. I mean, it's also but it is also, when I...it's filtered through...when I think about the kind of context or I'm thinking through how I'm positioned more broadly, but in terms of just an experience

and embodied experience in the space, it's not, you know, it's not, not consciously always thinking about your blackness.

Jade Montserrat 50:19

Yeah, yeah.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 50:21

That was one of the things that we discussed earlier on. And one of the things that prompted me to share some of these other images of the kind of rural black sites of rural blackness globally, because there are many of them, but Harold you were then also thinking back to growing up in Ghana, and actually that being a very kind of broad experience, as well. So yeah, again, just thinking about ways of opening up the positioning, is there anyone else who has a question that they want to put to the panel?

Audience Member 1 50:50

I've got a question for Harold, I wanted to ask – Who do you think benefits from this upkeep of this image of English, the romantic English landscape?

Harold Offeh 51:01

Could you say...

Audience Member 1 51:02

Who do you think benefits from this upkeep of the image of the English rural landscape as romantic?

Harold Offeh 51:09

Oh, well, I think, I think conservative forces, I mean, I think, you know, I think Jade touched upon it. I mean, you know, it's still incredibly feudal...Britain, I think, in terms of kind of ownership, and class politics. And I think, to kind of really be invested in a kind of sort of this kind of English idyll that's devoid of diversity in the imagination, although the reality is often different, you know, plays to, you know, white supremacy and, and, you know, I don't know, these kind of misguided, nativist kind of tendencies. But it also does that in a way that, you know, there's that...it reinforces an exclusion like, this doesn't belong to you, or, like, I remember, I mean, I went to school in Harringay in the inner city, and we got sort of taken out to a farm, a city farm, and there was only white one white English person in my class of 30 people everyone was from all over. And and that was meant to be our kind of exposure. For a lot of the first time we actually went into, like, the ?? outside of London into that kind of sort of space. And it was just really deeply uncomfortable. I remember the awkwardness of that. And I feel like a lot of that those that kind of cultural history and collective memory or amnesia it is actually is still about excluding.

Audience Member 2 53:04

Just following on from that, I just wondered how how it would be...Have you got an idea of how to connect the urban back to the rural, particularly from your own perspective, in a way that doesn't do that, that is more authentic and doesn't feel like you're just being transported into a kind of Zoo that's outside of the city? That's kind of how it came across it as as sort of an othering experience again, of some other place, you know, how do you connect those two things up? I'm really interested in that and in

relation to how, how distant people are becoming from that from the from nature. I suppose.

Jade Montserrat 53:49

It's that political though, isn't it? In terms of like our transport routes are so crap, so if we haven't got a functioning transport service, it's isolating people. I'm sure that people...I'm worried for the young people in Scarborough Town because I don't believe that they can afford welfare like I could bunk off when I was a kid, when it was getting too much and I needed to to be away I don't believe that they can that they have that same opportunity. Our bus buses are cut so that there's like, I think, I think there's one a week maybe in Hackness. I've never been able to catch the bus from Hackness it's been totally isolated. But all that actually helps to connect because at the same time towns that have lost their industry like Scarborough or Bridge?? or wherever it is Lowestoft, Yarmouth. They're the end of the line you can that's just my understanding of how a simple way of connecting us all in any event.

Hansi Momodu Gordon 54:58

One of the things I was thinking about is the kind of myth that black is urban as well. And there was a moment in time where being from Africa meant you were primitive and actually entrapped by the rural. So I was interested in what place or point in time we then got stuck in the urban, actually, maybe that connection is breaking that myth that the black experience is only urban. And actually, quite often, when people come to the UK, they will end up in urban environments. And so that is their initial experience, but possibly before arrival, their experience may well have been rural. So I think it's just remembering that in the kind of public discourse as well.

Audience Member 3 55:46

Hi. Can you hear me? Yes, okay. I've...you wouldn't know this, but I have Scottish and Irish parents. So you could say I'm an immigrant. And I've grown up in Bedfordshire. Now, that's only 27 miles away. And in my lifetime, you know, Bedfords is a community of Caribbean people, Italian people, Polish people. This has all happened in 50/55 years. So I'm not yet 60. So in some ways, this feels like yesterday. And I think there are people who are younger, who see the world as being something very cosmopolitan, I think this is a sort of a gradual, in tandem thing, that that is happening. And we're all finding our own places in our own world. And something that I've always felt, and the maybe I may be vilified for this, but I have in my lifetime grown up, as I say, the Scottish Irish parentage. So we're talking about Great Britain, or the British Isles, you know, going out and beagling?? And there is a distaste for all sorts of things like this and there's obviously been the hunting bill, etc. And I was saying to the friend, who was the one who suggested we came to this together, that I've always thought, because I have I have access to London, how displaced the person who is the immigrant, is in the cities. And if you go John Major, who only, you know, his constituencies was just up the road. He's the one who did Sunday trading. Now, if you're wandering around London, or any city on a Sunday, it's full of all the immigrants because they haven't got anywhere to go to they don't connect with the land and the geography. And I've always thought the hunting shooting fishing community should be the ones who have cameras on their hats. So they can explain to people why this is happening, what they do and it then actually go to communities and say, how do you historically or nowadays, use your land? And actually have a communication and a conversation about this? Because I think, and I think what you were talking about, you know, you will beating, and all these other

things as a girl. I mean, I can communicate with that. And I think there's a huge dialogue and a living together that could come about.

58:10

Is that something you want to respond to or should we move on to another comment?

Hansi Momodu Gordon 58:14

I'll just respond briefly. I think that the the point that we need to better understand each other, I kind of agree with I think that the point at which I we would need a whole other seminar to unpack is the idea of this kind of like a single idea of the migrant and then not having anywhere to go to but as the being the basis for this communication between these groups. So I'll just mention that because we would need more unpacking that we don't have time to do here.

Jade Montserrat 58:48

I've got to do my performance!

Hansi Momodu Gordon 58:49

Yeah, but is...are there any other final kind of points or questions that anyone wants to kind of share with the room.

58:59

I just might make a final point. We're almost at half past and I was gonna say a few comments. Anyway, we don't have time for like a whole roundup of the whole day. But I would like to say, you know, I think it's fantastic that we could have this session, also at

the end of the day, because yesterday, we ended the day with a session called decolonizing the rural, which was looking at a very specific case study, which was the Sami communities in the north of Norway and Finland, Sweden. And I just think that this is exactly the conversations that need to be happening, new conversations around this question, and particularly now in the British context, as well. And you've talked a lot about the politics of visibility. We've talked a lot over the course of the the two days in different sessions around the violence of the rural and all of those questions, I think, have come up again in this session. And I think what's really fantastic is that now we're gonna go and spend some time watching your performances and thinking about what this...how art and performative practices, and experimental open practices that go beyond our assumptions about what can happen in the rural and how it exists, that we're going to have some time just experiencing that together. And hopefully it will bring us down into another kind of space before we head back into the city and can reflect on all of the different conversations and so for me, having this session and your thoughts on everything that we've talked about is has been really valuable as a way to kind of end the discursive part. And so I'll now say we can head over to Amphis, where Jade's performance will happen. It is a small enclosed space, so there is a sort of limited capacity for inside but it opens out so you can just sit around and listen to the performance which has a sonic element, and then after that we'll head down to Harold's performance which at the farmhouse. We'll show you where to go. But a huge thank you to everybody.

audience applause

1:00:44