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collapse, creative writing,
colonialism**

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ABSTRACT:

I was driving with my mother's ashes to Shreveport, Louisiana, when I saw a sign for Muskogee, Oklahoma. I decided to stop near there for a sandwich.

On that short drive, several ideas arose, interleaved and referential. Immediately, they felt both significant and difficult to explain. My experience of that drive led me to a deeper understanding of colonialism, climate collapse and what may be useful in contemporary storytelling. This essay uses experiential techniques from my practice in fiction to share these insights.

I relate observation of the landscape, agriculture, country music, giant soft drinks and memory to concepts of history, heritage, climate collapse, ecocide, and the way cultural icons play out in our sense of identity. All inform the always-lurking concern: How can we write hopeful narratives on our dying planet?

The Muskogee Manifesto

I was driving my mother's ashes to Louisiana, when I passed a sign for Muskogee, Oklahoma and decided I'd stop soon for a sandwich. I didn't expect the occasion to trigger insights into storytelling for climate justice – and I didn't anticipate insights on a topic like this would come in such a messy, intertwined way. But before I ate my sandwich, I understood so much more that the experience has changed how I write, teach and talk about writing in a time of climate crisis.

Muskogee is a town of about 30,000 souls. If you can imagine a map of the USA, Oklahoma is the next state up from Texas. It lies south of my home state of Kansas, which forms the geographical centre of the United States of America.

The name "Muskogee" refers to the Muscogee Native American tribe, who were called the "Creek" by British colonisers. We have a saying in my part of the world, "Good Lord willin' and the creek don't rise." It's our version of "Insh'Allah" or "Deo Volente" in that it means plans will only be carried out if circumstances allow. I'd always thought "creek" in this context meant a small tributary or stream, because many Kansas settlements lie along such waterways. Prairieland is liable to flash floods, so it made sense that a planned event could only occur if there was no isolating floodwater.

On this trip, I'd discovered that the saying originally referred to the Muscogee, or the "Creek" tribal peoples and that "rising" meant rebellion. Such risings required "putting down" and I had just driven past signs for Fort Gibson, handily located for that very purpose.

The Muscogee are descendants of the famous mound builders, and had the same social structures of interconnected settlements. They were mis-named for their tendency to settle along ravine tributaries. There's controversy about the location of the lower creeks and upper creeks that formed their territorial lands. What's not controversial is that in the 1830s, about a hundred years before my mother was born, much of their territory was seized by the US government, and they were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma (Tyler 1973).

Oklahoma had been designated "Indian Territory" and the remnants of

several tribes (the "civilised tribes" – much good that did them) were marched to it along the "Trail of Tears" (Nps.gov 2016).

This forced relocation cost many lives due to a brutal pace and lack of provisioning. However, the upper creek territory of the Muscogee seems to have always included stretches along the Canadian river, and this area was retained as Muscogee land when the relocation occurred. I was driving towards it, now.

My maternal grandfather was born in Muskogee and his father participated in the 1889 Oklahoma Land Rush. People had lined up under the watchful eyes of the army. If you went too early, your homestead could be seized because you were a "Sooner." That said, precipitant settlers do not seem to have ever been actually penalised, and much of the first session of the new Oklahoman legislature concerned leniency for people who had occupied land too early. The "Sooners" is the nickname of the sporting teams of the University of Oklahoma and was proudly adopted only eleven years after the rush. The OU website praises their "can do" pioneer spirit (University of Oklahoma, n.d.).

I don't know if my maternal grandfather's father was a Sooner, but we're certain he was in the rush. He was a Wells Fargo stagecoach driver – my cousin Dan has his identification badge – but died young. Two days before I drove past the sign for Muskogee, I'd found that Dan had also done some genealogical research. To his horror, he'd found my great grandmother had dumped my grandfather and his brother Ralph at an orphanage in Kansas City, presumably to make it easier for her to remarry. Mr Hughes, her second husband, eventually took Ralph, the younger son, but did not adopt my grandfather, Daniel Patrick Ritter.

I well remember my great-uncle Ralph – and Elva, his immaculately coiffed and made-up wife. They had been prosperous florists, back when there evidently was such a thing, and always drove Cadillacs with longhorns attached above the headlights. They wore elaborately decorated Western-style suits of the kind made popular by Nudie Cohn (Larson 2004), just like rock stars. As a child, I'd thought them the most glamorous people imaginable. I'll return to the concept of cowboy-ness that informed their aesthetic, but the important thing now is that Ralph, as well as Daniel, was born in Muskogee.

If you know anything about how the West was settled, white ancestors in the Oklahoma Land Rush are not a source of pride. A few short years after the civilised tribes' forced resettlement in Oklahoma, the Dawes Act attempted to strip those allocated lands from the resettled tribes (Tyler 1973). This was only partially blocked. Although many of the new white settlements were to the west of the tribal lands, forcible seizure of tribal land by white settlers was not uncommon and was punished in about the same way as the Sooners – unevenly or not at all. That my grandfather and my great uncle had birth certificates for Muskogee is an indication that my family participated in land seizure, if nothing worse.

Merle Haggard sang about Muskogee in 1969. By that time, the county residents were more than 78% white. Nearly 17% were black. "Other" races, into which categories Hispanic as well as Native American fell, made up only slightly more than 5% (USAFacts 2022).

The first line in Haggard's song "Okie from Muskogee" (Haggard and Burris 1969) had been bouncing around in my brain since I'd seen the sign. It begins, "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee." I know the entire lyric by heart. I know many, many lyrics to country songs by

heart.

When I began to hum, I reflexively apologised to my mother's bright pink urn in the passenger seat. She'd always hated country music.

Mom had aspirations for my social mobility. Part of her programme forbade the sound of Country and Western (as it was called in the 1960s) to reach my ears. This was difficult to enforce in our part of Kansas City, where necks were red. She managed through unceasing effort. Car radio volume was abruptly turned down before an approved push button was selected, in case my father had rebelled. Records brought in by party guests were firmly policed. My paternal grandfather's guitar picking was not welcome in the family home, and Dad's accordion inevitably left his possession before my sixth birthday. Mom might well have engineered a food budget crisis solely to get rid of it.

So, the first time I heard country music was by accident. I was playing with the girls across the street when I heard Johnny Tillotson's country cover of The Cascades' "Listen to the Rhythm of the Rain" (Gumoe 1963).

I was deeply impressed by the experience. The plaintive emotion of the song went right to my seven-year-old heart. It was an "old" song by then, and the girls did not understand why I became so distracted. When I sang the chorus for my mother, she informed me it was a terrible song and that only low, vulgar people listened to music like that.

I immediately pledged my heart to country music.

In her second marriage, my mother wed a die-hard Hank Williams aficionado and my defection became complete. She must have died a little inside when I moved to London (London! Her dream!) only to write my own column for Country Music International magazine.

Murmuring the "Okie" lyric, I get to the part where Haggard explains that people in Muskogee also keep their hair trimmed short because they like "living right and being free."

In my long connection to country music, I've noted its lyrics nearly always contain a glaring paradox. Let's look at "Okie from Muskogee" again. In the lyrics, "living right" and "being free" are presented as corollaries. Actually, they're opposites.

In the song, living right means adhering to a rigid social code that governs your dress, grooming, sexual mores, and the drugs you use recreationally (LSD bad, illegally distilled moonshine good). It also precludes using your right to protest. What have such tight social constructs to do with the concept of freedom? Young people protesting the Vietnam War – four of whom would be shot dead by the National Guard at Kent State University in Iowa the following year – are, according to Haggard, showing that they do not like being free. To enjoy the right to be free, Haggard suggests, you must give up your freedoms to conform to prevailing norms.

Country often runs into these problems.

One of my favourites is the whole cowboy trope, which leads to some extremely convoluted thinking. I had been thinking about "Cowboy" as a cultural construct since recalling Ralph and Elva's Nudie-inspired suits. Now I brought it onto the front burner of my mind.

Actual cowboys were a historical blip. The long-ranging cattle drives and huge free-roaming herds we associate with the word "cowboy" were limited to a period between two main events. The opening event was the expansion of the railway to the prairie "ranges", after the American Civil War. The railways

transported the cattle "back East" to feed the population centres and make fortunes for the herd owners; providing the economic motivation to raise huge herds of cattle and walk them to railheads (Knowlton 2017). The closing event was the invention of barbed wire in 1870, which allowed effective fencing on the tree-poor prairie. There was increased urgency to do this, after bad collective management of shared land led to poor grazing and millions of bovine deaths in the hard winter of 1886/87 (Love 1916). By 1890, the range was more or less enclosed and there were 50,000 ice wagons hauling beef carcasses from processing plants on the expanded rail network of the great plains. There were still people working cattle, but with fences and local transport, not as many were required. By the turn of the century, there were very few cowboys indeed.

So, cowboys actually roamed the range for around 33 years, from 1867 to 1890.

Cowboys were largely veterans of the Civil War or people who had been displaced by it. Previously enslaved black people were cowboys (Flamming 2009), traumatised ex-soldiers were cowboys (Richardson 2022), recent immigrants became cowboys, too, as did some women – often (again, displaced) war widows. It was hard, dirty, dangerous work and not terribly well-paid, but it was an assured living with board and room provided (or bedroll when riding herd) as well as a wage. If you had been made homeless by the war or its economic effects, cowboying provided a way to save some money and regroup. An initiative to buy "desert" (prairie) land cheap (as long as you promised to irrigate it and raise crops) was taken up by many previous cowboys.

As I drive, I consider that the laconic, emotionally reserved or absent figure of the friendless / family-free lone cowboy hero can be seen as someone alienated

from society because of previous trauma – Cormac McCarthy’s novels perhaps best explore this, but so does the ground-breaking Space Western anime *Cowboy Bebop* (Wanatabe 2019).

Driving along towards Muskogee, thinking about all this, I stop for fuel and do a quick search on cowboys-as-trauma-survivors. One of the most interesting insights comes from a blog by the wife of an Iraqi War veteran with PTSD (Dunning 2020).

When she visited Tombstone, Arizona and went into their recreated saloons, she noted the large mirrors behind the bars that allowed patrons to see behind them, how the doors did not wholly obscure entrants to the space, and the preponderance of tables and chairs against the wall. Saloon décor was an environment tailored for hyper-vigilant PTSD sufferers.

Back on the road with an enormous beaker of iced tea, I think about the huge iconic figure of the cowboy in American society. There were never a great many real cowboys, but there were enough who cowboied and then settled down and owned farms to provide a familiar story of rags-to-(relative)riches success, of the bootstrap-and-hard-work kind beloved by my fellow Americans.

Some of it was fashion. The cowboy “look” – big hat, heeled boots for riding, sturdy jacket, long coat and dashing accessories of belts, holsters, spurs, scarves and chaps – was attractive and much documented by the cowboys’ contemporaries in the new photographic industry (for an example, see Gabrill 1888). Dime novels of fictional (or heavily sensationalised) cowboys were extremely popular with contemporary youth of the late 1880s (French 1951) and remained a hot genre in the emerging magazines of the 1900s.

By 1903, the first Western film was released. Shot in New Jersey, the cost of

making *The Great Train Robbery* was one of the motivations for establishing Hollywood, where cowboy films could be made using natural scenery (Smith 2004).

Now a strange alchemy occurred – perhaps because of the immersive nature of the new technology of motion pictures. Americans who had grown up reading about cowboys and seeing images of cowboys began to believe that they *were* or *had been* cowboys, or had been related to a cowboy, or had cowboys in the family heritage or...

This collective delusion is a result of the powerful cognitive processes of the imagination. Cognitive processes of imagination can occur alongside and simultaneous to the processes of observing and reacting to reality – as Stephen T Asma beautifully explains, we can partially live in stories that capture our imaginations (Asma 2022). Millions of people across the world lived in the story of the cowboy and collectively *became* cowboys, at least in the way they thought about themselves and the way they related to the world.

From there, concepts of the universal “roots” of rural white Americans as cowboys took only two generations. This concept of our universal cowboy heritage is frequently referenced in country music and the opportunity to wear the boots and hat is available to anyone who chooses to “revert” to these “roots” of mythical cowboy heritage fostered by cultural artefacts of literature and film.

I thought again about my great-uncle Ralph. My great-grandmother Hughes chose for her second husband a man from Texas. As I drove towards Muskogee, I carried a suitcase full of everything I am taking from my mother’s belongings – mainly family photographs. One is a sepia of Ralph looking adolescently moody. He’s wearing jodhpurs tucked into

Wellingtons and a large cowboy hat. He’s also wearing a safari shirt. With a topi, he could have been colonizing Africa, but the photo was taken around 1920 in Texas.

We don’t know how Mr Hughes made his money, but we are fairly certain it wasn’t cattle ranching. And Ralph ended up as a florist, as we know, in Navasota. However, Ralph, and later Elva, became cowboys. They wore hats. They put longhorns on their cars, they had pearl-buttoned shirts with pointy plackets, they listened to country and western, they said “dagnabbit” and Elva wore her hair very high. They had clearly signalled their intention to be cowboys – and signalling is all that is required to *become* a cowboy.

When Garth Brooks sings about crashing a wedding, in his 1992 hit “Low Places,” (Brooks, 1991) he says, “Blame it all on my roots, I showed up in boots...” and his intended listeners know that the character in the song lyric is a cowboy and that these were cowboy boots. If they were, say, work boots or Timberlands, they would not have “roots” to blame.

On TikTok the night before, I’d seen a young white man defending a Black man with locs who had been fielding negative comments and racial abuse for wearing a cowboy hat in his recent short film. The young white man said that “country” is about being inclusive, about not judging people by how they look but how they act. He is answering his fellow outraged “cowboys” who felt since the original videographer is Black, he cannot be a cowboy. These are not, they say hotly, his roots.

Actually, about a quarter of cowboys were black. However, in the fantasy version that has endured as a cultural delusion of heritage, cowboys are white and male. Miranda Lambert, in her playful song “If I Was a Cowboy,” (Lambert and Frasure 2022) breaks quite

a few taboos by singing it as a female, despite using all the clichés of the cowboy, including riding off into the sunset while regretted by a “little lady on the front porch” and having a very phallically intoned “six gun” with a “hairpin trigger”. The eponymous line, “If I was a cowboy, I’d be the Queen,” queers the whole cowboy concept.

In “Okie from Muskogee”, when Haggard declares that “leather boots are still in style for manly footwear,” we all know what kind of boots they are meant to be – and they aren’t Wellingtons, despite my great uncle Ralph’s teenaged photograph.

Haggard is saying that everyone – everyone that counts – in Muskogee is a cowboy.

But this leads us to the other problem with cowboys – in our cultural imaginations, cowboys do not exist except in relation to their opposites. And these were the people who at the time were called “Indians”.

As I drive, I am passing through or near tribal lands. Some of the names of the tribes are familiar to me. Some are not. I was never taught about the first nations of the Americas in school.

In the 1960s, when I was learning the history of the United States of America, we learned about Native Americans when we learned about the Pilgrim Fathers (mothers were only implied). Emphasis was on the first Thanksgiving – a holiday in honour of a feast prepared by the Pilgrim Fathers (Mothers) to thank the Native American tribes around Plymouth Rock for saving the nascent colony from starvation the previous year.

In my primary school History textbooks, this entire episode was well explained, with the actual crops detailed and much information about why the European crops had not succeeded. The textbook

writers knew their audience: many boys in my Kansas City primary school would leave school in May to go “back” to the farms of their grandfathers or uncles and work the summer getting in crops. Thus, the information about the agriculture of the Pilgrims was extremely interesting to about half my class.

There was also a small sidebar that discussed which tribes might have provided the life-saving corn and smoked venison the previous year. After this sidebar, Native Americans in our textbooks withdrew from historical view for the next few hundred years.

They popped up, here and there, in other books: *Poems Every Child Should Know* (Barrows 1957) and *American School Songs* (Kurzenabe 1904). And then, very excitingly, they returned in History as people who went naked, couldn’t read and massacred people on the Oregon Trail. These evildoers had to be eased from their lawless ways by soldiers in forts and priests in missions. I found the whole idea of them quite terrifying, and with great relief learned they’d been confined to reservations.

Coincidentally, I’d just been deemed old enough to witness these evildoers in black and white on television and technicolour at the drive-in. With my own eyes I saw evil Indians chopping people with tomahawks, raiding wagons and menacing women and children. The white men formed a posse with the new sheriff and rode out to settle things or the calvary trumpeted over the hill just as the plucky wagon circle was about to be set ablaze with fire arrows, but the native population always seemed a bit of a risk to me.

Why the peaceable people who threw away pearls worth all their tribe, sold Manhattan for a string of beads and fed boatloads of total strangers had morphed into horrible killers was a baffling mystery. When asked, my

teacher said they were from different tribes.

My maternal grandmother, who regularly gave money to Cherokee charities and had little tokens of their appreciation scattered around the house, explained. At first, I couldn’t believe it. But then I started paying more attention to the boring bits of cowboy movies and discovered Grandma was right. The United States Government had broken treaty after treaty after treaty. We had stolen the “Indian’s” land.

But even stealing tribal lands hadn’t been enough to finish off the Native American warriors – witness the Battle of Little Bighorn of 1876. There, a combination of Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne and Lakota Sioux warriors formed one of the finest light calvaries the world has ever seen (Powers 2010). Even with the advantage of firepower, and the dastardly trick of attacking a camp of women and children to draw off the warriors from their chosen fighting ground, the US forces were outmanoeuvred, outnumbered and soundly defeated. And this despite the efforts of General George Custer, a supposedly clever tactician.

The only way the US could win against confederacies of tribal people under generals like Sitting Bull, was to, as General Philip Sheridan had declared in 1874, “destroy the Indian’s commissary” by slaughtering the Western bison – the buffalo. An enormous extermination programme began (Smits 1994). The population of the Western Bison was brought from an estimated 50 million to 325 individuals in only a few years.

The Native Americans were not defeated by the military might of the United States. They were starved in one of the first great American ecocides.

Ecocide is not a new American phenomena, only an ongoing strategy for political and economic gain.

Sometimes it’s not a strategy, it’s only an effect of the pursuit of those gains, but the ecocide still occurs.

Take red-winged blackbirds. Driving up through the prairie lands a week earlier, I had noted the lack of red-winged blackbirds. They’d previously been ubiquitous in wheat-growing country, swinging on barbed wire (pronounced bob-wahr in my part of the world) with their cheery staccato song. I hadn’t seen a single one all trip, I realised, and I’d already covered over ten thousand miles.

And then I understood. It was the drones (BirdLife International 2017).

Drone agriculture is very common in agri-business these days. Agri-business is what used to be farming. Steadily, over the last thirty or forty years, large companies have been buying family-owned farms, targeting locations to create large-scale single crop plantations. The previous owners’ houses were sold or razed and many small farming communities have lost all significant economic activity and become bedroom communities or ghost towns. Swathes of farmland that used to support hundreds of families now employ a handful of people to manage production in centralised, occasionally remote locations (McGreal 2019).

I found the result chilling. Perfectly neat rows of soybeans, or uniformly high wheat crops stretched into the homeless horizon. They were tidy in the way referenced in Emily Male’s excellent picture book, *Tidy* (Gravett, Henry 2018), in which a badger becomes so concerned with making his environment neat that he inadvertently destroys the entire ecosystem of his forest. Tidiness of this kind seems allied to fascism’s need to control... such uniform crops remind me of the sharp uniforms of the Nazi SS. The crops are serviced by enormous drones around the size of microlight aircraft, styled a bit like the old crop-

duster planes of the last century. They swoop and dip over the roads that intrude into the giant fields, monitoring, delivering fertilizer... and pesticides.

Red-winged blackbirds feed on grain crops and are classed as pests. It’s legal to trap, poison and shoot a red-winged blackbird and farmers have been doing so for generations. Like coyotes, however, the more pressure the species was put under, the more young they tended to produce. However, the one-two punch of insect ecocide that has cut their food source with drone-enabled poisoning of their roost trees have finally managed to exterminate much of the population.

The last time I drove this particular journey – Miami to Lawrence, Kansas and back again – was when my daughter was fourteen, so only six years ago. During that trip, every time I refuelled the car I had to scrub insect remains off the windscreen. Now, there was no need. There were few insects left to die (Wagner et al. 2021).

A butterfly had become an event.

Seeing any wild creature was an event. I was driving from dawn and past dusk through rural areas, often miles from town, along waterways... You’d expect me to have seen a great deal of wildlife at the beginning and end of each day’s journey. I saw nothing.

By the time I passed the sign for Muskogee, I’d begun to get excited by roadkill. There had been at least one armadillo around here, I noted with glee as I passed its pitifully curled corpse on the hard shoulder. There once had been at least one red-tailed deer, one possum. I imagined many more, big eyes in the brush along the roadside, waiting to emerge until I’d gone. I found the image comforting in the vast loneliness of monocultures.

I see climate collapse coming towards

me all the time, as much as I'd see a freight train approaching if this car had been stuck on a level crossing, and with the same urgency. The aviation industry was experiencing a flurry of recovery, but I didn't think it was sustainable in its current model and I couldn't imagine liquid fuels getting cheaper. We were running out of the stuff and we were killing our world while we squeezed out the last drops. At home, we drove second-hand electric cars. I knew the problems with lithium batteries and dirty electric power, but it wasn't the same as the amount of carbon I pumped out as exhaust on this long, long trip. But, yes, I am myself part of American society, that part of the world that has caused over 20% (Evans 2021) of fossil fuel emissions, despite being 4.23% of the world's population (Worldometers 2021).

The sheer scale of the waste and bloated consumption of my fellow Americans sickened and appalled me, even as I took part in all their rituals with a kind of hideous nostalgia. I drank a Styrofoam Big Gulp with a plastic straw. I'd pumped artificially deflated priced gas/petrol into my rental car, listening to people blame the President for the fact that the subsidised prices had risen to 300% cheaper than in the UK. I knew there would be no recycling bin, or that there was utterly no point to using it if one miraculously appeared in roadside services, because it was full of non-recyclable items. Staffing was too short throughout the USA for even an optimist like myself to believe anyone would sort out the recyclables in twenty bins for absolutely no commercial gain.

It was nearly the Fourth of July as I drove, Independence Day. Marquees and circus tents selling fireworks had popped up along the road.

Americans spend 2.3 billion dollars on fireworks over this holiday period. I remembered an article from 2014, announcing with glee that the federal

government managed to exceed their 4 billion dollar goal for renewable energy and energy efficiency investments (that goal was eliminated in the next presidency). In 2021, the US government had allocated a little over 5.7 billion for tax relief to ease the transition to renewables for the gas and oil industries. So, a substantial portion of the budget the government had spent trying to wean the USA off fossil fuels, its citizens blew into the air in just one day.

Although I was aware of all this, and had listened with increasing gloom to the predictions of failure for Biden's new green energy bill in Congress, I was also aware that I was passing signs for huge wildlife habitats. Ozark National Forest, Mark Twain National Forest, The Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area and the Shawnee National Forest are nearly contiguous, forming a kind of corridor of island ecosystems that stretched just south of Branson, Missouri (where country singers go for semi-retirement, buying their own theatres and singing every weekend) 450 miles east to Nashville, Tennessee (where country singers work during their peak earning years). That was twice the length of the road from Holyhead to Cardiff Bay, so I cheered myself up by deciding these linked islands of forests stretched well over the size of Wales.

Developments and permissions vary from National Forest to National Forest, and state parks to recreation areas, etc. But I know some things would remain the same: hunting and fishing would be tightly regulated, although policies would be skewed towards providing enjoyable experiences for hunters and fisherfolk. These were not wildlife reserves or protected wilderness areas (although after human management of "wilderness" for over a hundred years, even wildernesses are not "wild") but land held in common for the use of citizens. Grazing has always been permitted in Western national forests

and grasslands: for less than \$2 per head per month, you can keep your cow/calf herd in clover on federal land. If you get the permit, that is, and these processes are sometimes not as transparent as emerging cattle ranchers would like.

In my short but interesting time as a Montana cowgirl, I had participated in a National Forest round-up on horseback. It was chaotic and drunken, but ultimately effective and much better for animal welfare than pushing calves into a feeder unit at one month of age. That this industry use of National Forests prevents predator re-introduction and harms the efforts to establish natural predation in contiguous National Parks remained an unsolved problem. There is evidence that wolves, large cats and even bears have been lured outside of protected space for trophy hunting that is couched as "herd protection" in National Forests. In my experience, herd predation is much more likely to occur due to the equally drunken city deer hunters. Even when a friend whitewashed C-O-W on the side of her breeding Herefords one season, two that grazed near the National Forest were shot. They were brown. There were trees. They looked like deer to the hunters, as does any person or thing not wearing neon hi-vis - and even some people who are.

When I saw a sign for the Oashita National Forest, I once again noted how many wild spaces there are in the USA and began to wonder, for the millionth time, if I am doing the right thing by remaining in the United Kingdom as climate catastrophe nears.

I know the maths by heart.

The population density of the United Kingdom is 278.67 people per square kilometre. Eliminating the part of the United Kingdom unsuitable for growing food, it gives us less than 0.90 hectares of arable growing space per person. Unfortunately, for a moderate vegetarian

lifestyle, with access to milk, eggs and grains, 1.50 hectares are needed per person, per year. Much of the UK has a more lavish lifestyle (although about a quarter of the population are currently in or near food insecurity), and our farmers were going out of business, largely due to lack of secure EU subsidies and the cut in their labour source and export potential due to Brexit (Farmers Weekly, 2021). We're also zoning agricultural land for housing - a much more lucrative income stream in the short-term. This is why we in the UK are so dependent on imported fresh fruit and veg - a risky strategy given the inevitable increases in fuel prices and the problems associated with importing from Europe post-Brexit. But Simon Fairlie thought it was possible in 2007 (Fairlie 2007).

In contrast, the United States of America has a population density per kilometre of 36 souls - plenty of space for the 1.50 hectares per person. Unfortunately, the cultivatable space is not as high as you might think, and the business models are poor: if the USA continues business as usual, sustainability outlooks are grim (Beltran-Peña, Rosa and D'Odorico 2020).

Looking ahead to self-sustaining lifestyle possibilities is somewhat jumping the gun, however. We will all be much more likely to die of disease or violence than we will starvation. Research for a novel had me slogging through death rates post-Katrina, as the New Orleans infrastructure failed and the state police and National Guard blockaded survivors from crossing out of the city on the bridges across Lake Ponchartrain. Post-Katrina NOLA had all the problems we can expect with the United Nation's predicted (United Nations 2022) social collapse (raw sewage, dirty water, lack of power, lack of access to medical help and supplies, looting, hoarding, raiding) and I took the Federal Emergency Management Agency statistics and drew the graph trends for death and disease

past the point where people were finally relieved - to see what would happen if relief and evacuation had never arrived.

It will be one thing to grow food (and most of us are not very skilled at doing so). It will be a whole other thing to retain that food once you've grown it. Some of the most able people at the first task (older, experienced gardeners) will be extremely vulnerable to theft and raiding.

I have relatives who have settled in a semi-abandoned farm community in South-East Kansas, where housing is cheap. They have crops, cows, chickens... and an extensive underground arsenal. Two other members of the family have bought property nearby, and my many cousins eye up the Zillow listings in the area when climate news is released.

Their area is also more adaptable to self-sufficiency than my terraced home in the southwest of England. I live between Bath and Bristol. Our polluted rivers will not be fit to drink and we have no well. When the sewers fail, as they rapidly will, the rivers may well grow even more polluted than they were as I drove through Oklahoma, when water companies had been enabled to release raw sewage. We could currently rely on rainwater run-off for much of our needs if it comes to it, but not if we also have to water crops, and especially not if there is drought. It was worrying.

And yet, I continued to drive away. I suppose I was going home to the UK on the off chance that we, as a species, can actually arrest our destruction enough to avoid the entire breakdown of human social order. It's not a big chance, but I wanted to be part of the effort, to try and make it happen with the skills I have.

My "prepper" family have told me I have no valuable skills. But I know how to tell a story, and how to help other people tell theirs. And this is what I

hoped to contribute in the last-ditch effort to save us all from horrific suffering.

After COP 26, I grew very despondent. If we are stuck on the level crossing, with the train of climate catastrophe coming towards us, COP 26 told me that the societal car we were sitting in will no longer start. And the doors won't open.

We're going to be hit by the climate collapse train.

I mainly write for children these days. I don't have the luxury of creating narratives of despair. How do I write stories of hope, from the front seat of that car on the level crossing?

I reached out to friends about this; academic colleagues and other writers. We had spent far too long telling stories to try and avert the destruction of other species' habitats. We'd largely failed.

We'd tried to warn people about the coming climate catastrophe. That hadn't worked, either.

Now, in these last possible moments for action, we felt that we need to prepare for the impact of the problem and shield the most vulnerable. We need to learn the lessons of Katrina, Grenfell, Lesbos, Uvalde. We need to radically rethink the balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. We've pooled our expertise in a research group: Storytelling For Climate Justice (Storytelling for Climate Justice n.d.).

My own storytelling now is about accepting difference, working together, dealing with the needs of other people. As I drove towards Muskogee, I wondered what Katrina might have been like if people weren't corralled into easily controllable spaces, but had been empowered/allowed to help themselves. I imagined parents storming the doors of the school in Uvalde,

disarming the shooter. I imagined the tenants of Grenfell, who had complained about the dangers of the inflammable cladding, collectively withholding rent to finance its removal, before we lost them to the flames. I imagined a world where these possibilities were more readily explored, a world where the paradox of rugged individualism and neat conformity wasn't embedded in our interior conceptual landscape.

Our governments are in thrall to the machinery of consumption and profiteering. To survive the coming catastrophe, we will need to somehow step outside the systems of our society, and create something new, based on cooperation. As I write, as I drove, it is and was unthinkable to imagine how this might happen. That's our job - to imagine this unthinkable power to cooperate and survive.

That day, it seemed easier to work cooperatively in a country where folks haven't already prepared underground arsenals. So, I accelerated away from my home and biological family, towards my house, my immediate family and my colleagues and students, thinking about what kind of stories we need now.

"Cowboys" and "country" embedded themselves into the American consciousness in 100 years. We can help shift public consciousness in the twenty to thirty years we've got on this level crossing. We just need the right stories, with the right shape. We need the kind of story that can be told again and again, that can develop attractive tropes, that has something addictively dashing in the pictures it makes in our minds or on our screens. We can make stories to live in and towards as the planet is destroyed by greed.

I celebrated this insight with a wee at a gleamingly clean rest stop. Those Big Gulps. Very hydrating.

As I pulled back onto the long ribbon of

road, I found a good country music station that wasn't on the Fox news network (my tolerance for the ravings of the right wing only extends so far) and resolved to stop soon for a sandwich. Just then, a song came on the radio that was so freakishly *wrong* about the world that it distracted me. LoCash sang about how the whole world is actually one big country song (LoCash et al. 2019), because we all wear jeans with holes, work during daylight hours, fall in love from a first kiss on Friday night, own a dog, drink alcohol at five pm and various other activities associated with a very particular American experience.

This particularity turns the song from a celebration of commonality to, at best, an insistence that the entire of humanity's experience is - or should be - exactly like the writers' lives. At worst, the particularity excludes all other kinds of people from humanity. The chorus challenges "tell me I'm wrong" as if there is no possible rejoinder. It made me think about the concept of "country".

Like "cowboy", "country" relies on costuming. Gimme caps (which are baseball caps which agricultural suppliers once gave away for free to local farmers) are interchangeable with cowboy hats, and a great deal less expensive than a Stetson. Jeans, boots (these can be work boots), t-shirts and flannel overshirts feature highly. For women, cut off shorts and cute skirts and sundresses are options as are tight jeans. Recent songs mention ponytails and messy buns... as in "Okie", the norms are fairly prescriptive.

Pickup trucks are very country. As Raelynn sings in her recent hit (RaeLynn and Shelton 2021), you can haul both ass and hay in a pickup truck and the lockboxes are handy for your tools. There's also a great deal about John Deere tractors. Tractor sales are healthy in the USA (Miller 2022) - particularly for the two-wheel-drive versions more

useful for large gardens than field work, but autonomous harvesters were by far the biggest growth items, up over 37% last year. It's unlikely, however, that a country fan or singer has actually spent time on the seat, in the air-conditioned cab, or on the software controls of a tractor – agricultural work makes up only around 1.3% of US employment.

Hunting, fishing and drinking alcohol are approved recreational activities and it is not "country" to get too above oneself. We are content with the fruits of our labour when we are country, and if that means living in a doublewide trailer rather than an actual house, we can make it work – although much is made of buying land, if possible. We also have basic competency in tasks essential for rural life. Lainey Wilson outlines these neatly in "Things a Man Oughta Know" (Wilson, Nix, Singleton 2020), singing, "I can hook a trailer on a two-inch hitch, I can shoot a shotgun, I can catch a fish/I can change a tire on the side of a road."

But one can still be country without any of those things, because "country" is more about class and culture than location, occupation, wardrobe or manual skills. Kinky Friedman, the alt-country outlier from Texas, paraphrased David Allan Coe's song "If That Aint Country" (Coe 1977) to argue his Jewish family had "four rusted Fords sitting deep in the grass and if that's not country, I'll kiss your ass." It was a valid argument thirty years ago and it still holds true. But country and cowboy have a strong common denominator: an assumption of northern European white ancestry.

There are, of course, black country artists. Charley Pride was a huge star in the 1970s and several core country and hip-hop crossover Afro-Americans are in the country charts today. But their lyrics conform to the same pick-up truck, beers with friends worldview of other country songs.

And this is the problem. LoCash's utopian vision of the whole world being a country song attempts to embrace otherness, but fails to imagine difference. Like the Muskogean in "Okie" fifty years ago, what is acceptable is so narrow that the yearning towards universality relates to a uniformity as severe as drone-grown soybean rows.

I was hungry as I drew into Okmulgee, and realised I was again on tribal land – in fact, Okmulgee is the capital of the Muscogee tribe. I pulled off the road and into a drive-through Subway sandwich shop.

I still think of Subway as a healthy choice, even though their bread contains so much sugar that the Irish supreme court decided it was cake (BBC News 2020). I ordered pepper cheese on nine grain wheat and hoped for the best.

It was a computer terminal – you didn't actually have to speak to the person making your sandwich. You just dialled all the ingredients and then drove around to pay. I paid the young woman and waited while she made my order.

She had brown skin, brown eyes and thick, glossy black hair. I wondered if she was Muscogee, but I didn't ask.

A few years ago, I'd written a historical novel set in seventh century Kazakhstan, and my university sent me there for some research. I'd loved that book, but it will never get published because I wrote about a multi-racial society, and wasn't a descendant of any of the races I wrote about. At the time, this had seemed absurd, but I'd learned a great deal more about spaces and story ownership and by the time I drove through Subway, I got it, and had a sense of shame that had taken me so long to understand.

In any case, in 2018 I was in Kazakhstan, driving a long distance across country.

Actually, my husband was driving. He is

a much more careful driver, especially useful in the sometimes challenging conditions of Kazakhstani road repair season. The center of Kazakhstan is many miles from the sea and has large wheat fields – it forcibly reminded me of Kansas.

As we travelled, I saw an old Soviet-style combine harvester, stuck in a field near an culvert, jammed up with Johnson grass. Nobody uses trailer combines anymore back home, but I knew what it was and how it worked, because I remembered the American versions, which had been old in the 1960s.

I only saw it for an instant, but I understood as clearly what had happened as if someone had told me the story: they'd either not been able to afford enough herbicides or had attempted to harvest too close to the edge of the field by the culvert, where grew tall stands of thick-stemmed Johnson grass. The combine had jammed on the Johnson grass, maybe broken a tooth or popped a belt. When they'd gone to get the part, it had rained. There had been a flash flood and the culvert had overflowed.

Now the wheat was going brown and the combine was stuck up to its axles in the hardening mud, still jammed to hell with Johnson grass. Nobody was going to do anything about it soon – no need. The crop had been lost.

My heart went out to them. I may live in England, now, work as a lecturer, and drive an electric hatchback. But I could tell a farming disaster in one glance. And if that's not country, I'll kiss your ass.

In the west of Kazakhstan, the Kazaks lived. They had brown skin, dark eyes and rich dark hair. As I drove through their world and saw them meeting friends in the shade of underpasses, cooking on fires on the side of the road and moving cattle on horseback, I

suddenly knew why they seemed so familiar. To me, they looked like Native American tribal people from the plains.

It had been summer, so some were living in yurts, working herds of cows and horses. It was more of a social, cultural activity than an economic one. It reminded me of when the Cherokee kids in my primary school would go "home" to tribal lands in Oklahoma, to be with their grandparents in the long summer holidays.

Studies have recently changed our idea of how the first people arrived in North America. We thought they came from Siberia across a temporary land or ice or combination bridge across the Bering Strait, but there may have been waves of immigration. The DNA of the plains tribes of Native Americans have more in common with contemporary populations from what is now Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan than Siberia and there are active studies establishing the link – even one from Kazakhstan (old.qazaqtv.com 2018). When I heard this on BBC Radio Four, I punched the air.

It might have been insensitive for me to have attempted to write a story set there, even one set so long ago. But I hadn't been a total racist to have noticed how similar the Kazak had looked to the tribal people back home.

I wait at the Subway window. I'd asked for "everything" from the salad selection and that takes time. It also takes time to fold the sandwich and tuck in all my exuberant lettuce and spinach. I watched the young woman do this and wondered if she was Muscogee. I hardly ever ask about anyone's heritage. Questions about ancestry are too often used to begin and legitimise a process of racial abuse, exclusion and marginalisation. And it's none of my beeswax, anyway.

Instead, I wondered where the wheat for

my bread had been grown.

Wheat for my sandwich was unlikely to have been grown in my home state, even though it was once known as the “bread basket of America.” Most of the perfectly produced wheat in Kansas, Oklahoma and Nebraska does not go into the human food chain directly. It is used to make cattle feed.

You don’t see many herds of cattle on the prairie anymore. Cow calf operations graze cattle, but modern American beef farming doesn’t raise beef animals in fields (Drouillard 2018). Calves have thirty to sixty days of daylight with their mothers. Then they are dehorned, fed a cocktail of wormers and antibiotics, and locked into feed stalls for rapid growth and quick slaughter and profit.

In the long campaign to settle the west for agriculture, something very strange happened. We ploughed up native grasses that were drought resistant and also resistant to natural pests. We killed the bison that fed on the grass. We then planted wheat – a cultivated grass, that needs support to survive. These days, support does not mean walking the rows with a hoe, but spraying poisons from a tractor or drone. Then we feed that wheat to European breeds of cattle, who themselves are poisoned in order to survive how we feed and house them.

We have destroyed the entire prairie ecosystem to do this. And studies show that the protein yield per acre in this vast enterprise has not increased (Steuter et al., 1999)

from when herds of bison raised their generations on the rich fodder of the prairie grasslands.

What a totally pointless exercise it has been, I thought. And what a lesson.

We’ve done this kind of imagination work before – my ancestors successfully imagined stepping outside societal

structures to shake off the yoke of monarchy. And what happened? In their quest for freedom, my forebearers ended up murdering, dispossessing, and enslaving entire nations of people. We plowed up the prairie and destroyed the fruitful ecosystem that could have sustained huge populations. Because we could not imagine difference. We could not think of buffaloes *and* agriculture. Cowboys *and* Indians.

As I watched the young woman make my sandwich, I understood. Storytellers everywhere will fail to imagine our way out of the mess of climate catastrophe if we only imagine the survival of people like ourselves. LoCash’s lighthearted song conceals the conceptual framework for colonisation, and colonisation nearly inevitably leads to ecocide.

My sandwich was ready.

I drove off again, through Muscogee lands. I’d spent all my teen years in a car, eating with one hand, shifting gears with the other, and steering with my knees. Eating a sandwich while driving an automatic transmission would truly be a piece of cake.

The road rose and the grasslands opened under the huge blue dome of sky. My heart opened with them, singing like the disappearing red-winged blackbirds. I love the prairie; the short grass down there, the tall grass back in Kansas and the high plains to the west of it all. I know everything about the place - the names of the trees, what kind of bird circled above me, what fish jumped in the river. I’ve published novels about its communities and won competitions with poems celebrating its fierce beauty.

Maybe the best way for me to love the prairie was to leave it behind, to take my DNA back to the British Isles, from where most of it had come. But maybe that was too simplistic. Human migration is not musical chairs.

As the landscape opened, it reminded me of a picture I’d once painted, where I’d turned clouds into blue bison in the huge prairie sky. I’d been reading about the Ghost Dance when I’d painted it.

The Ghost Dance was a religious ceremony practiced by plains tribes towards the end of European settlement of their lands. It was only a dance, but it gave such powerful hope that it was banned by the US army – dancing it was a capital offence.

One day, if the Ghost Dance were done properly, it would roll the white man’s world up like an old, dirty carpet. Underneath, the grass would come back bright green, like after a prairie burn. And the buffalo would return.

I want us to tell stories with that kind of power, stories that become refuges and guides as we face the oncoming train of climate collapse. Stories to live inside with hope and pride.

But the old story about the lone white man sitting high with his gun and his rope? It won’t work. Amitav Ghosh is right – the hero’s journey won’t take us where we now need to go (Ghosh 2016). We need to celebrate ourselves as herd – as a roaming population of an adaptive species.

And these stories have to be true. In the last years of the Ghost Dance movement, a new prophet claimed that shirts charmed by the rituals were bulletproof. Thousands of warriors went boldly to battle at Wounded Knee, certain their clothing was impervious to US firepower. They were slaughtered.

At the last traffic light, I took a big bite of sandwich. The oil and vinegar, the salt and pepper, the dried oregano and all the vegetables were in perfect proportion. It was delicious.

And then I left the Muscogee to their lands.

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