

Media Rurality

PATRICK BRODIE & DARIN BARNEY EDITORS



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Media Rurality

PATRICK BRODIE AND DARIN BARNEY

Wind farms next to hearth-heated houses. Cell phone towers on isolated mountain tops. Data centers in sight of grazing cattle. CCTV-monitored mining access roads cutting through Indigenous land. Drones buzzing over croplands embedded by sensor arrays. Dams drawing energy from remote rivers and fiber-optic cables landing on quiet beaches. Ruined foundations of experimental colonial telecommunications facilities on either side of the Atlantic. Rural communities as hubs of high-tech industry and high-tech work. Border zones that serve as logistical exchanges for migrating media equipment, products, and workers. Informal networks of communication circulating information and cultural engagement with state development projects in metropolitan hinterlands. Low-tech, DIY, and fugitive energy systems in energy-impooverished rural sacrifice zones. Right-wing news and content streaming into rural households and stoking smoldering, misplaced resentments. Contrary to persistent stereotypes of wilderness and countryside, rural locations are heavily mediated and media intensive. What forms of mediation emerge when we foreground rurality in the function of media systems and technologies? How do these forms of mediation affect how we think about, inhabit, and relate to rurality?

Media Rurality investigates the centrality of rural places and people within the media systems and technologies that shape daily life in and across rural and urban settings alike in diverse global locations. Drawing from a range of humanities and social sciences fields and discourses that foreground rural media technologies, experiences, and practices, this book resituates our inquiries and reorients our gaze to spaces often conceived of as spatially marginal and temporally lagging. *Media Rurality* challenges these biases by demonstrating that rural spaces are both media

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intensive and instrumental to media systems typically associated with modern and transnational urban economies and experience. Confronting the epistemological and geographical fixity of the rural with a dynamic and relational condition of rurality, this book documents and theorizes a productive, unstable, and materially vibrant *media rurality* undergoing continual development and political transformation.

From the Rural to Ruralities

Rurality, in our view, responds to a problem of classification. Communication scholar Christopher Ali notes that “the rural” is often defined, unhelpfully, as that which is “not urban,” determined on the basis of population metrics rather than relations to other economies and structures that occur within rural spaces and communities, and between rural and urban locations.¹ As Erin Morton observes, this way of thinking about rural places is baked in, both historically and etymologically: “The post-war modernization project rendered ‘the rural’ as a space of technological backwardness oriented toward subsistence. Even the linguistic root of its concomitant category, ‘the country’ (in French as *contrée* and in Latin as *contrara*), points to the idea of rurality existing in opposition to something, which, more often than not, means modern progress.”² Reified in these ways, the rural conjures stereotypical images of agrarian and pastoral living, isolation and wilderness, and communities that are either quaint and quiet or violent, vaguely criminal, politically regressive, abandoned, and failing. Deployed in this manner, the rural tends to erase varied rural experiences of resource extraction, diverse forms of work and labor, technological change, infrastructural mediation, and political, cultural, and social heterodoxy.³ This volume seeks to trouble these reifying descriptions, which fix the rural as the objectified other to the urban; it also seeks to endorse rurality as more dynamic, relational, and emergent category. *Media Rurality* reflects the diversity and instability of rural experience and the forms and practices of mediation by which it is constituted, proposing ways to work against the logics and practices that continue to foreclose just futures and consign rural spaces to an imaginary past or unlivable present.

As decades of interdisciplinary scholarship in rural studies has shown, to speak, think, or write of *the rural* as if the category refers to a singular, static, homogeneous, universal, and finished object is to engage in an exer-

cise that is more ideological than empirical, more prescriptive than descriptive. Even the commonplace that defines the rural as “not urban” dissolves when faced with the reality of urban and rural spaces and experiences that are not only materially connected but also nested and hybrid. A night out with cinephiles at the Palace Theatre in Daysland, Alberta (population 824), is a curiously urban experience, just as tending lettuce and beans on a condo rooftop in downtown Montreal (population 4.3 million) and trading these for a neighbor’s honey feels like a bit of country living in the heart of the city.⁴ As chapters in this volume by Burç Köstem and Isihita Tiwary suggest, hybrid experiences in places that are not quite urban but also not quite rural are often the norm in peripheralized regions and liminal, connective spaces such as border zones and trade routes.⁵ This is why recent scholarly turns toward articulating rurality (a social and material condition) and ruralization (a process) make more sense than studying the rural (an object) to guide the study of rural places and what happens in and to them.⁶ *Ruralities* are plural, dynamic, diverse, situated, and emergent, and *ruralization* is the set of multiple ongoing relational processes by which rural places, people, and experiences are continuously formed, deformed, and reformed. Ruralities and ruralization are also highly mediated; they vary significantly from one geographic and temporal context to another, even as they sometimes face similar challenges and common factors, including the socioeconomic drivers of rural depopulation (and repopulation) through migration, industrial and infrastructural histories that have coevolved with certain cultures and practices, and political policies designed to produce, manage, and sustain these geographies and processes. This variety does not mean that specific ruralities have no substantive qualities or character distinctive of a place or context. It means the opposite: that the qualities and character of rurality in a particular place are historical, in the sense that ruralities are made, not found, and can also be unmade and remade.

In the global northern context (especially in the United States and Canada, our respective points of origin), contemporary commentary on rural places tends to focus on the politics of conservative resentment, homophobia, and nativism, sometimes at the expense of more complex engagements with rurality as a political formation demanding attention and care.⁷ As Jordan Kinder’s chapter in this volume on the rise of trucker convoys confirms, it is certainly the case that rural experience is often mobilized in support of the regressive politics associated with resurgent forms of right-wing populism. Similarly, in Europe, populist (and in some cases

nativist) political formations, including erstwhile farmers' parties, have emerged in response to growing tensions between agrarian livelihoods, global agribusiness, and environmental regulation to challenge the authority of established farmers' organizations and state agencies, and have sought to anchor themselves in rural communities.⁸ Together, these and other examples confirm that rural places are as susceptible as any others to right-populist political appeals—though, as Phil Neel's insightful analysis of class in America's hinterlands demonstrates, the recent success of these appeals has more to do with the structural conditions of hinterland economies and the organizational skill of radical right partisans than it does with any essential regressiveness attributable to rural people and places.⁹

However, there is now, and has always been, more than just conservatism to the politics, culture, and economies of rural places. As Jenna Burrell's chapter in this volume on the shifting dynamics of rural masculinity in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States shows, there is considerable cultural complexity even within traditionally conservative rural settings. More broadly, research in peasant studies and critical agrarian studies has established that rural settings have also been the site of progressive and often radical political subjectivities and movements organized around contesting post- and neocolonial underdevelopment, extractivism, and land dispossession.¹⁰ This is especially true in rural settings in the global south, where the brunt of pathologies associated with industrial agriculture and mineral extraction continues to be felt and contested.¹¹ For over forty years, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais, Brazil's landless workers movement, has contested dispossession by massive *latifundios*, a struggle that has involved over 2,500 occupations by hundreds of thousands of families asserting their rights to confiscated rural lands.¹² More recently, in an action that lasted over sixteen months in 2020–21, farmers from across rural India mobilized in massive numbers to protest a suite of farm bills proposed by the national government that would have left them vulnerable to the predatory practices of global agribusiness firms.¹³ Even in core economies, where farmers and rural dwellers more broadly are frequently posed as environmental villains or hindrances to sustainability, farmers are contesting the increasingly digital incursions of agribusiness. Some have even become hackers by sabotaging subscription-based tractor systems, sharing tactics to disrupt increasing capture by these systems.¹⁴ Yet political ruralities are not only based on site-specific contestations and grievances. While distributed and unpredictable in political alignments, they are often transnational, liberatory, and frequently articulated in so-

phisticated ways against the uneven power and geographies that sustain their peripheralization, from imperialism to extractivism to various forms of dispossession, land grabs, and technological dependency.¹⁵

These diverse examples inform the focus in *Media Rurality* on the ambivalence of rurality as a political formation. Recent pathbreaking work by J. T. Roane demonstrates that reductive portraits of North American rural life are confounded by the rurality of insurgent “Black agoras” and everyday “Black ecologies” that form in places like Tidewater, Virginia.¹⁶ We could say the same of historical alignments of solidarity across migrant agricultural labor struggles and environmental movements in California,¹⁷ urban–rural coalitions of antiprison activists in the same state,¹⁸ the construction of white masculinities across shifting modes of production in the US Northwest,¹⁹ and the “combustive” politics of right-wing populism in rural Canada.²⁰ As chapters in this volume by Köstem on politics and technicity in the peripheries of Istanbul, Tiwary on the circulation of media in Indian and Nepalese border towns, Parks on do-it-yourself media systems in Tanzania, and Vemuri on the contested mediation of climate change in rural India demonstrate, the same goes for plural, diverse, and complex ruralities the world over.

Resource Ruralities

Contemporary ruralities are deeply implicated in the raw materials, infrastructures, technologies, modes of production, and supply chains of capitalist globalization.²¹ As a result, they are also entangled materially with global media systems and cultures. The materials and energies that comprise contemporary media technologies are largely extracted in rural locations. Infrastructures that deliver media products and experiences to cities traverse rural lands and waters, including borderlands, and it is often back to rural locations that the unwanted material residues of media industries and culture typically return, in forms that include toxic wastes, dangerous working conditions, and climate collapse.²² As recent work revising Marx’s account of primitive accumulation has shown, the dispossession, enclosure, and occupation of rural lands and waters in colonial and settler colonial contexts is not only about turning peasants into proletarians but also about territorializing rural spaces as zones of extraction and circulation—and as sinks.²³ These ongoing relationships, and the logic of supply they materialize, form the fault lines of colonial, racial capitalist

and technological modernity, in which rural people and ecologies have been designated as spatially and temporally peripheral to systems in which their role is, in fact, materially central.²⁴

Rural places have long been produced as zones of extraction, exploitation, and disposability. Rurality in these forms has rested on cultural and legal constructions of rural people, lands and waters, and their elemental and biological constituents as features of the land and proprietary resources available for exploitation, commodification, and exchange. Such ruralities have also been predicated on false accounts of rural lands, waters, and inhabitations as empty, their economic potential wasted and untapped for want of their improvement.²⁵ These accounts, whether expressed in secular philosophies, religious doctrines, or cultural tropes, have given license to various techniques of dispossession, enclosure, and clearance that have been and continue to be instrumental in creating and recreating ruralities suited to capitalist, colonialist, and imperialist accumulations of value and power.²⁶ This means that rural settings have been primary sites where the inequalities and violence associated with extractive resource economies, including the slow violence of environmental degradation, have been made manifest.²⁷

Resource extraction has been and remains a core organizing feature of colonial, imperial, and capitalist economies. The relationship between coloniality, capitalism, and rurality is a central focus of *Media Rurality*, especially the manner in which media technologies and practices are implicated in the spatial distribution of settler colonial and postcolonial power and industry.²⁸ Colonialism has always relied on the projection and production of emptiness that is often characteristic of metropolitan imaginaries of rural hinterlands, whether via the construction of colonized lands as terra nullius, wilderness, or wasteland, already empty of inhabitation and value, or via the subsequent emptying of rural territories and bodies by extractive industries.²⁹ In settler colonial contexts, this has followed racist dispossession and murder of Indigenous populations, wherein their association with nature justified the material and moral mission of colonization.³⁰ During the establishment of colonies, imperial rule took shape through the establishment of infrastructure and agriculture—the physical manifestations of settler ways of life that came to be identified with spatial and discursive construction of the rural itself.³¹ As Indigenous scholars of infrastructure such as Anne Spice and Andrew Curley make clear, the process of infrastructural development and operation in the settler colony has always been one of land theft and the destruction of Indigenous life-

ways.³² Métis geographer Max Liboiron makes a similar contention that the condition of possibility for the toxic processes of colonial capitalism, from resource extraction to pollution, frequently enacted in and through territories categorized as rural, are premised on the logics of colonial land expropriation and use at differing levels of intensity.³³ These “violent inheritances,” as communications scholar e. cram describes them in the context of settler existence in the North American West, then become the basis of forms of rural life and communality that persist in complex ways that both reproduce and exceed the destructive, oppressive historical processes that made them possible.³⁴

However, as Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel have argued, the meanings associated with the terms *extraction* (“a concrete, physical practice”) and *extractivism* (“the cultural and ideological rationale that either motivates extraction or is the consequence of it”) have proliferated in recent years, a dynamic that risks undermining their descriptive efficiency and analytical value as a way to understand the durabilities of such processes.³⁵ Narrowly defined, *extraction* refers to the removal of “natural” materials and life-forms configured as resources, in volumes that exceed their use value for nearby communities.³⁶ The purpose of extraction at this scale is resource commodification such that the resources might be accumulated, traded, or speculated on in order to generate exchange value, along with the wealth and power this affords. The value proposition of resource extraction thus entails removal in a second sense: the circulation of commodities and the value they generate for accumulation, processing, and expenditure elsewhere, in places—whether regional, national, or transnational metropolises—other than the sites from which the resource has been extracted. What remains local to sites of extraction are conditions of resource depletion; the social, political, and environmental residues of extractive industry; and various forms of resistance that arise in response to these conditions. For these reasons, rurally located extractive industries are key sites where political and economic inequality, environmental injustice, and dispossession are produced, reproduced, and contested. As the recent experience of so-called neoextractivism in Latin America shows, extractive industry’s role in colonial, imperial, and capitalist formations has not prevented it from also featuring in postcolonial projects of national economic self-determination, including some with social welfarist intentions.³⁷

The concept of extractivism expands the stakes of resource extraction in multiple ways, two of which are especially relevant here. First, it extends

beyond the geophysical removals described above as definitive of extraction to encompass a broader set of social relationships, cultural practices, and subjective orientations. Reflecting on its emergence as an “organizing concept” across multiple disciplines in a piece for the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Christopher Chagnon and colleagues describe extractivism as “a way of organizing life . . . ; a complex of self-reinforcing practices, mentalities, and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, depletion, and non-reciprocity.”³⁸ Second, the category of extractivism is increasingly applied to a range of economic practices and relations that exceed those typically associated with the removal of raw physical materials (i.e., forestry, mining, fisheries, agriculture), or, as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson put it, beyond “literal extraction.”³⁹ Notable among these has been extension of the category to include proliferating forms of information, knowledge, and data harvesting enabled via digital networks.⁴⁰ This expansive conceptualization and application, which risks flattening and totalizing otherwise distinct social and economic practices and relationships, has prompted some to question the analytical utility of extractivism as a critical category.⁴¹

This is an important question, although one we do not seek to resolve here. What is made clear by several chapters in this volume is that rural locations remain primary sites for resource extraction and thus are profoundly shaped by, and responsive to, extractive activity. Moreover, if extractivism is “a way of organizing life,” then its varied dimensions continue to be experienced most directly in rural places and by the people and species who inhabit them, as well as increasingly permeated by complex telecommunications technologies to make them legible by and for resource extraction.⁴² As Chagnon and colleagues observe, “Extractivism has long been conceptually linked to capitalist processes and has recently been characterized as a fundamental expression of global capitalism, particularly in its manifestations across the rural realities of the Global South.”⁴³ This has been and remains the case across the multiple forms that comprise literal extraction—industrial agriculture and aquaculture, forestry, mining, fisheries—and is also characteristic of extractive activity and industry “beyond literal extraction.”⁴⁴ All of these extractive practices require mediation by technologies of prospecting, mapping, measurement, analysis, transportation, storage, and logistical coordination.⁴⁵

Interestingly, Mezzadra and Neilson observe that “the productive front of data mining is particularly amplified in urban environments.”⁴⁶

Cities and their smart infrastructures are definitely key sites for extracting data from everyday social activity, a systematic harvesting of raw material for diverse processes of capital valuation, circulation, and coordination (and surveillance).⁴⁷ However, characterizing data mining as a predominantly urban phenomenon elides the manner in which emerging forms of resource extraction, including data harvesting, are reformatting rural places as extractive zones. This becomes evident if we replace *mining* with *farming* as the optic for catching sight of contemporary extractive activities. In the context of climate change and energy transition, the farm has become a commonplace way to describe extractive operations located in rural settings whose primary function (beyond capital accumulation) is to contribute to solving the environmental problems of cities, or the planet. Data centers (server farms), turbine complexes (wind farms), photovoltaic panel arrays (solar farms), replanted forests (tree farms), aquaculture operations (fish farms), and even land stewardship practices configured for carbon sequestration in soils (carbon farms) together comprise the infrastructures of decarbonization and sustainability that make demands on the rural landscapes where they are typically located. The degrees and manner to which they return observable benefits are ambiguous, unstable, and unevenly distributed. As sites of automated harvesting, computing, energy production, and carbon sequestration, these are often farms without farmers, at least in the traditional sense—a dramatic development in contexts where rurality has long been associated with farming communities.

At the same time, farms and farmers have not gone away, and rurality remains a category inextricably tied to food production. Agricultural practice and agrarian social relations in rural places remain central to future ways of growing food and managing land sustainably. As geographer Xiaowei Wang articulates in their remarkable book *Blockchain Chicken Farm*, “It is impossible to disentangle the countryside from food—food is at the core of the dynamic between the rural and the global. As humans, we eat to survive, and our appetite for food has carved new geographies and technologies into the world.”⁴⁸ These geographies and practices have always been mediated by technology and infrastructure (both epistemological and material), but the media intensiveness of rural life has increased in recent decades as a result of emerging regimes of industrialization, efficiency, and automation. Wang demonstrates that from the large scale to the smaller scale—from industrial-scale precision agriculture to the artisanal blockchain chicken farm—food production is an increasingly digitally

mediated prospect, and one that is crystallizing an increasingly dependent relationship between digital mediation and agrarian livelihoods. Consider the reverse migration of people from cities to the countryside in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, or a similar movement that has been occurring in China over the last decade. In the latter, incentivized by state and platform policies, creators and entrepreneurs have been returning to rural areas to establish businesses premised on promoting and building supposedly rural ways of life, typically foregrounding (and often idealizing) agroecological practices and traditional gender roles. This emerging platform economy requires the building of new infrastructure and the making available of new technologies in rural settings, including broadband cables and access to social media like Douyin, as intrinsic to the material and ideological construction of new economic prospects.⁴⁹ In other places, these new connectivities also potentially expose rural residents and producers to the novel extractive technologies of digital farm tech, like subscription-based John Deere tractors, autonomous harvesters, drone surveillance platforms, or high-capacity sensors, all premised on high-speed digital connectivity and often justified in the name of efficiency for more sustainable production.⁵⁰ Farm facilities, including contemporary precision agriculture operations and technologies of sensing and modeling weather and carbon cycles, are increasingly media intensive as the data they generate become significant additional sources of logistical and commercial value, enacting extractive relationships of harvesting that are decreasingly reciprocal to the land and places they extract from. The harnessing and application of agricultural knowledge, intricately tied to place-based ecological understanding, becomes not only a site of overt capture and extraction but also instrumentalization at scale. As societies adapt to the shifts of a climate-changed planet and the imperatives of transforming food systems and supply chains, rural agricultural areas are becoming key sites in which the material relations of sustainability are being imposed, negotiated, and contested.⁵¹

Widespread focus on urban ecologies and ways of living as sites of response to climate crisis serves to elide the impact of green capitalism and its mediating technologies on structures and cultures of rural and agrarian life, as well as the crucial role that rurality is playing in the construction of environmental, economic, and political futures in the context of climate change—futures in which agriculture and its media are deeply implicated, as Megan Wiessner, Anne Pasek, Nicole Starosielski, and Hunter Vaughan's chapter in this volume unpacks in detail. While it is certainly

true that, according to Benjamin Peters, “agriculture has driven the need for both the physical and psychological channels for connection (primarily transportation and communication) between rural and urban population centers,” it is also the case that emerging media ruralities in farm country are being driven as much by the communication of data, carbon, and nonrenewable energy as they are by trade in grain and livestock.⁵² For example, Emily Duncan and colleagues document the integration of data-driven systems into food production as part of a more general effort to train AI models on increasingly complex environmental systems, such that “digitalized agriculture that is not necessarily about or for those we normally think of as agri-food governance actors.”⁵³ This is one example of what Natacha Bruna describes as “green extractivism,” in which information harvested from agrarian operations exceeds the purpose of optimizing agricultural production and instrumentalizes rural regions in the global south under broader regimes of “sustainable” governance.⁵⁴

In a 2023 special issue of *New Media and Society* on “Farm Media,” Zenia Kish and Benjamin Peters raise a provocative set of questions about the intersections of media and farming: “What does it mean to study farms, and agriculture more broadly, as sites of multivalent mediation? How are the histories and conceptual ordering of agriculture and media braided together? What points of intersection between media theory and critical agrarian studies might open up new modes of farm media analysis?”⁵⁵ *Media Rurality* extends these questions beyond conventional farming to include the broad range of industrial and economic activities that form the material basis of diverse ruralities across and between multiple national and continental settings. From farm data to the data farm, *Media Rurality* complicates the tight coupling of data with cities. It shows that media economies are deeply implicated in rural spaces, and further that ruralities are centrally positioned within regimes of datafication, sustainability, and energy transition on which smarter urban formations and governance continue to depend. Rural spaces thus mediate urban experiences in ways that are typically unseen or illegible to those in cities. It is not just that the extraction and disposal of the raw materials and fuels required for manufacturing and operating digital devices and networks are concentrated in rural places; it is also that extractive media systems reorganize rural places materially, in the image of data-driven capitalism, in ways that are not adequately reflected in accounts of datafication as a primarily urban phenomenon. As chapters in this volume by Wiessner et al., Jenna Burrell, and Cindy Lin illustrate, these technologies establish

new frontiers for governance and capital accumulation within existing ruralities, adding digital layers onto sedimented relations of production and rural subjectivities. If data harvesting, storage, and circulation are indeed extractive, then they are yet another example of why extraction remains a key concept for understanding resource ruralities in general and media ruralities in particular.

Beyond the Urban-Rural Binary: Peripherality of Imperial Globalization

Media rurality names a condition in which, contrary to persistent stereotypes, mediating infrastructures are materially present, not absent, from rural places. They include information, transportation, energy, financial, and knowledge infrastructures that bind rural peripheries to urban centers in complex circuits of extraction and supply, even as they pass through, over, or under rural communities without provisioning them. Henri Lefebvre, in his early Marxist writings analyzing the conceptual and geographical problems raised by the rural in mid-twentieth-century Europe, ascribes widespread ignorance of rural ways of life to bourgeois urban realities and parochialism: “For as long as the ‘urban’ reality and its institutions and ideologies, for as long as the successive modes of production, together with their superstructures bathed in a rural milieu and stood on a vast agricultural foundation, the middle and ruling classes paid scant attention to the peasantry.”⁵⁶ As Raymond Williams describes in his canonical text *The Country and the City*, in the English context, this attention deficit cleared the way for ideology: “On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved center: of learning, communication, light.” He hastily adds, “Yet the real history, throughout, has been astonishingly varied.”⁵⁷

In the European imaginary, urban cities are where workers are profitably assembled and disciplined for productive wage labor, while rural town and villages are where the residual peasantry works the land. However, these spaces, and the processes that comprise them, have always been as connected as they are separated. For example, the industrialization observed and theorized by Marx and rendered spatially by Lefebvre were fueled both by the migration of the European peasantry into the exploding regional metropolises of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and

by the extraction of people and resources from the purportedly remote corners of expanding European empires. Observing both the agricultural devastation imposed on Ireland's peasantry and reflecting on the resulting migratory clearances, Engels writes in a letter to Marx in 1856, "One can already observe that the so-called liberty of English citizens is based on the oppression of the colonies."⁵⁸ In her chapter in this volume, Assatu Wisseh describes the "dark ruralities" of African enslavement generated by the violent extraction and forced migration of bodies to supply and nourish plantation capitalism. The structural tendency of capital to produce ruralities corresponding to the spatial organization of exploitable labor continues, including in ways that cannot be reduced to familiar stories of rural out-migration and urbanization. The rise of urban manufacturing in the European metropole itself relied heavily on an energy regime that entrenched spatial inequalities and class control in rural places, just as it intensified them in urban factories. As historian Cara New Daggett points out, coal, for example, was a more "mobile" fuel for energy production than water, whose flow was geographically dependent and largely seasonal, especially in rural areas where labor forces were more "static."⁵⁹ Coal, extracted far from urban centers, was a rurally sourced precondition of capitalism's signature productive relation: the concentration of an uprooted, expendable labor force in European industrial cities. As Ryan Cecil Jobson has shown, fossil capitalism was also racial capitalism, dependent not only on coal but on racialized, enslaved Africans who were violently displaced to support the manufactured rurality of colonial plantation economies.⁶⁰ In these cases, nonexploitative rural ecologies oriented to seasonal variability of resources and self-determined labor were actively foreclosed, subsumed by an industrial modernity built on territorial, class, and racialized divisions and unevenly defined mobilities between city and countryside, metropole and colony, that persist and intensify today.⁶¹

It was in this context that the cultural identification of the rural as hinterland, the distant other against whose difference the urban metropolitan seats and beneficiaries of colonial power were defined, became a core trope of Western modernity. *Rural* eventually marked internal divisions within European and North American states, but its genesis was in the imperial production of external places for extraction and harvesting, where people were treated at best as a source of physical labor that could be maintained and reproduced by means other than wages, or at worst as subject to displacement, dispossession, and extermination.⁶² Like other, similar categories for designating places that are not cities but still

perceived as sites of real and potential value—for example, *wilderness* and *wastelands*⁶³—*rural* posits a spatially defined elsewhere subject to exceptional modes of economic and political governance designed to facilitate resource exploitation in the circuits of colonial and capitalist economies. In this respect, our account of ruralities resonates strongly with the formulation of Esther Peeren and colleagues of *hinterland* as “crucial for understanding the global and planetary present as a time defined by the lasting legacies of colonialism, increasing labor precarity under late capitalist regimes, and looming climate disasters . . . a lens to attend to the times and spaces shaped and experienced across the received categories of the urban, rural, wilderness, or nature, and to foreground the human and more than human lively processes that go on even in sites defined by capitalist ruin and political abandonment.”⁶⁴ The work collected in *Media Rurality* aims to draw attention to how the forms, technologies, and practices Peeren et al. characterize as *hinterland thinking* are materialized in diverse ruralities.

Let’s take a more contemporary example, one that brings us more directly to media. Lin Zhang, in her book *The Labor of Reinvention*, documents the planned rise of e-commerce entrepreneurship in rural China, mediated by proliferating digital platforms and associated infrastructure. As she describes, “Rural entrepreneurs, together with tech platforms and different levels of state apparatus, reinvented centuries-old practices of family-based petty capitalist production to construct a new regime of ‘platformized family production’ . . . Integrating the Chinese countryside into global digital capitalism via e-commerce created new opportunities for peasants and marginalized urban youth to achieve social mobility, but it also shaped a new regime of value that rewards some and marginalizes others.”⁶⁵ Here, technological mediation and urban-to-rural migration generate a complex media rurality adapted to capitalist regimes of labor, productivity, and accumulation, but one that is far from the tropes of emptiness, pastoralism, and immobility that have long framed accounts of the rural and the proliferating hinterlands of human spatial practices.

Just over a decade ago, Monika Krause questioned the urbancentricity of prevailing accounts of “current sociospatial transformations,” provocatively suggesting that “it is worth at least trying out the opposite perspective and analysing them from the perspective of that which is supposedly acted upon or being transformed.”⁶⁶ *Media Rurality* takes up this suggestion. In their discussion of the durability of binary urban–rural thinking in academic geography, Jamie Gillen, Tim Bunnell, and Jonathan Rigg draw attention to the “porous relationality” between diverse spatial

practices and designations across what is often characterized as the urban–rural divide.⁶⁷ Like rurality, urban technologies and ways of life are not self-contained, discrete activities and enterprises. Cities have long been engines, aggregators, and condensers of the forms of accumulation associated with imperialism, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism.⁶⁸ However, the rural settings of the dispossessive and extractive practices that undergird these formations have been and continue to be primary, not secondary. Martín Arboleda has evocatively described cities as “inverted mines” where resources drawn inward from the countryside are processed and consumed, their value accumulated.⁶⁹ This story is a familiar one, and its patterns and modalities are accelerating in response to the affordances and the demands of emerging media technologies and infrastructures, as well as to environmental imperatives that seem to recommend intensified urbanization and further relegation of rural locations to extractive zones as the path to sustainability.⁷⁰ However, even critical formulations such as Arboleda’s inverted mine risk naturalizing the city as primary and reducing the future of rurality to eventual amalgamation into a planetary metabolism of connected, efficient global circulations centered in cities. This points to a structuring tension that is definitive of media ruralities and that surfaces throughout the chapters in this volume: one between the enrollment of rural places and people in economic, environmental, and political formations that exceed local scales and the persistent relationships and modes of life that continue to distinguish diverse ruralities from urban geographies (and from each other).

Geographer and sociologist Neil Brenner has influentially dubbed this process “planetary urbanization,”⁷¹ a dynamic wherein spaces are crunched into a global system of metropolises that absorb and accumulate wealth and resources extracted from scattered but increasingly connected hinterland milieus.⁷² As Peeren and colleagues have remarked, such accounts “end up making the rural disappear altogether,” and “ruralization remains largely invisible.”⁷³ The places most affected by this dynamic—whether oil palm plantations in Brazil’s cleared rain forests, coal mines in Appalachia, oil fields in Iraq, olive groves in occupied Palestine, copper mines in Central Africa, or lithium salt flats in the Atacama Plateau—are not urban; nor are they greenfields on which sites of extraction, production, and circulation have been established without friction. They are perhaps more akin to what geographer Michael Woods describes as the “global countryside: a rural realm constituted by multiple, shifting, tangled and dynamic networks, connecting rural to rural and rural to urban, but with greater

intensities of globalization processes and of global interconnections in some rural localities than in others, and thus with a differential distribution of power, opportunity and wealth across rural space.”⁷⁴ These “global” processes remain central to the construction and emergence of rural experiences and economies, as Tiwary’s chapter in this volume makes clear in the context of peculiarly urban markets in the border hinterlands of India and Nepal, where the migration of people and media structure encounters inseparable from dynamics of simultaneously global and peripheralizing forces. Places in the global countryside have been, and remain, sites of existing life and practices simultaneously drawn into and in excess of resource extraction and exploitation—what we might call, following Williams, dominant, residual, and emergent ruralities—and these plural and divergent dynamics demand sustained attention, including to the forms of mediation that enable them and the situation of media technologies within them.⁷⁵

In many respects, the urban–rural divide is an imperial residue or, to borrow anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler’s term, a form of “imperial debris,” a register of the decimation that colonialism and imperialism have rendered on landscapes and ways of life.⁷⁶ Especially when considering the destruction of landscapes and the subduing of Indigenous cultural practice under colonial rule, we also see that rurality has been a crucial space and experience of refuge, endurance, and reclamation, especially in the aftermath of resource extraction. Connecting with discourses in environmental studies, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, among others, has conceived of the “possibility of life in capitalist ruins,”⁷⁷ trying to understand how environmental degradation and supply-chain capitalism have not only rendered rural landscapes such as industrial forests inhospitable and unlivable but also presented fertile territory for emergent forms of practice and community in the aftermath of extraction. Ruralities are “sites for brutalist experimentation and active laying waste,” but they are “also characterized by survival, endurance, refusal, fugitivity, and even resistance.”⁷⁸ Capitalism and imperialism, however wide-ranging the effects and tactics of their systems, always face friction, tension, and resistance as well as refusal, withdrawal, and exit. As the chapter by Patrick Bresnihan and Patrick Brodie suggests, the structure and durability of rurality in Ireland can be understood through the example of the contested history of Guglielmo Marconi’s early twentieth-century radio transmission infrastructure in Connemara, Ireland—a private imperial infrastructure in stark conflict with contemporaneous anticolonial mobilization and later postcolonial

experiments in public infrastructural provision through the rural peat industry. In this and similar contexts, rurality is sometimes the space in which to enact different ways of life in the apparently all-encompassing shadow of capitalist exploitation and imperialist expansion. Here, too, infrastructural mediation becomes a key process in shaping diverse media ruralities and potential futures that have the potential to exceed the otherwise constrained possibilities of rurality in the expanding ruins of empire.

As several contributions to *Media Rurality* demonstrate, connectivity and quality of life do not necessarily go hand in hand, especially when connectivity—and the value derived from it—are structurally biased in favor of domestic and transnational capitalist organizations. As media scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejia describe in their theory of “data colonialism,” these “costs of connection” are typically externalized to rural locations by infrastructures that support regimes of logistical control and capital accumulation across distances.⁷⁹ This manifests most visibly and materially in the physical structures of extraction, production, and circulation that sustain contemporary supply chains. The experience of being abandoned to certain kinds of disconnection and compelled to other kinds of hyperconnection is a common double bind facing contemporary media subjects. When it comes down to it, the same processes that deploy an array of media to gather more and more data from rural people and places are also those that contribute to emptying out rural places. In light of this, sites of resistance against these practices—Indigenous communities fighting for data sovereignty or energy autonomy amid historical injustices,⁸⁰ dissection of climate and soils for precision and autonomous agriculture,⁸¹ and expansion of land-intensive renewable energy infrastructures⁸²—become more urgent than what is allowed by prejudicial dismissals of rural political subjects as “irrational,” antiprogressive, and even criminal.⁸³ These are struggles for ways of life across highly varied rural settings. Furthermore, understanding the dynamics by which dispossession and displacement continue to define life in rural places can help us understand the roots of antiurban and even antistate biases and resentment, and especially how those feelings are capitalized on and instrumentalized by nefarious political actors.⁸⁴

Places that have been systematically excluded from connection, or that were connected on terms experienced as nonnegotiable, are also sites of intense media activism and disruption.⁸⁵ Whether agrarian or nomadic, rural political subjects across global settings have seized on connectivity and the tools it provides for publicizing harms, celebrating and sustaining

rural cultures, and accessing commodities, technologies, and forms of development often unavailable to rural and disconnected places. Similarly, in many contexts in the rural and agrarian regions of the global south, media technologies enable forms and temporalities of communication that assist in maintaining diasporic connections or even conducting everyday business through regional markets that sustain their communities.⁸⁶ Yet these are also scenes of compromise and disappointment. For example, small rural communities with few options accept extractive multinational developments as a path toward connectivity and chimeric “prosperity,”⁸⁷ while many rural communities in otherwise overdeveloped North America are unable to access reliable broadband, even in cases where it is essential to conduct agricultural business.⁸⁸ Such sites, addressed across this volume, point to the ambivalence and complexity of rural life in an era of continuously expanding media intensiveness and call for attention to how people and places react to and challenge the powerful, historically durable directionality of these systems.

Mediating Rurality: Infrastructure and Its Subjects

The modes of expropriation and displacement, and the possible futures offered to rural inhabitants as compensation, are often expressed in imaginaries that are bundled with the “promise of infrastructure”—of modernity, connection, and prosperity.⁸⁹ In his account of the postcolonial politics of large-scale infrastructure projects in northern Nigeria, Brian Larkin observes that these projects, however much they acted to maintain or facilitate particular kinds of exclusion or exploitation, also bore a “sublime” quality.⁹⁰ Residents may recognize that such infrastructures will not solve all their problems, and in fact may create new ones, but the chimera of connection and prosperity can alter how people subjectively process what otherwise looks like abandonment and exclusion.⁹¹ As several chapters in this volume illustrate, the tension between development and abandonment mediated by infrastructure is a structuring feature of many contemporary ruralities.⁹² Larkin’s pathbreaking work has established that the politics of infrastructure manifests not just in the physical arrangements, mobilities, and relationships mediated by infrastructures but also in the subjective orientations conditioned by their poetic and aesthetic operations.⁹³ As detailed in chapters in this volume by Emily Ng and Esther Peeren, Jenna Burrell, and Jordan Kinder, the subjective dimensions

of infrastructural mediation are crucial to understanding the political and cultural dimensions of contemporary ruralities.

In the past two decades, media scholars have turned to the concept of infrastructure to trace the material expressions and circulatory routes of media economies.⁹⁴ Infrastructures mediate and materialize the political, economic, and environmental processes of extraction, development, production, circulation, disposal, and abandonment that constitute the uneven relations between urban and rural settings regionally, nationally, and globally.⁹⁵ Anthropologist Akhil Gupta has argued that in spite of the perceived “invisibility” of functioning infrastructure in the overdeveloped global north, “urban dwellers are more dependent than their rural counterparts on infrastructures that deliver to them food, water, electricity, natural gas, gasoline, and sanitation.”⁹⁶ In a sense, this rings true. Many urban dwellers, especially in the global north, form discourses and politics around disruptions to the smooth operation of provisioning infrastructures they have come to take for granted. Such complaints about missed and lapsed connections are often taken for granted in rural infrastructural politics. However, this characterization of some sort of urban infrastructural glut against rural infrastructural lack also reiterates urban–rural and north–south binaries that obscure the qualities of media rurality that the chapters in this book aim to clarify. Rural places are as infrastructurally mediated and dependent as urban places, even if what matters as infrastructure differs across these categories. Infrastructure, for example, has also been a crucial means by which ruralities configured to serve colonial jurisdiction and capitalist accumulation are installed and reproduced.⁹⁷ Thus, media rurality often takes invasive forms that disrupt existing infrastructures of life and impose infrastructures designed and operated to extract resources, energy, and data from rural settings and deliver them for expenditure or accumulation in urban settings.⁹⁸ In these cases, highly mediated rural spaces become part of the infrastructure of urban spaces and the networks of circulation that connect them. As this introduction makes clear, the suggestion that rural places are those in which infrastructural mediation and dependency are absent risks erasure of both the specific and spatially diverse character of rural infrastructures and the ways in which rural mediation is implicated in urban configurations of service provision, security, and wealth.

Nevertheless, rural places are also routinely sites of infrastructural abandonment, ruin, and decay, as capital and the state respond to economic, technological, and environmental instability with misplaced and

misguided interventions in rural economies.⁹⁹ As Ayesha Vemuri's chapter on Kaziranga National Park in northeastern India details, often state-led environmental programs are sites of mediating risk in ways that maintain rather than correct ruralized imbalances, considering rhinos to be more worthy of state care (for tourism dollars) than local residents. Cindy Lin's chapter similarly captures these regimes of mediation as remote risk management through close study of digitalized state fire monitoring systems in Indonesia's peaty rain forests. These infrastructural interventions by the state, even under the guise of care and development, frequently leave rural people with little control and few options.

Rural places are also more vulnerable to, and frequently conditioned by, the temporalities of delay, suspension, deferral, and abandonment that are characteristic of infrastructural experience everywhere. The "promise of infrastructure"—and its spectacle—is as much about anticipation, duration, and absence as it is about connection and fulfillment.¹⁰⁰ *Media Rurality* offers a lens through which to register and understand the slowness and disconnection, the experience of waiting for access and experiencing the frustration of "half-built assemblages" that is typical of infrastructure time more generally.¹⁰¹ As geographers Ashley Carse and David Kneas argue about the temporalities of stalled infrastructure, "The infrastructure projects that concern scholars are often considered complete, or, if not, their materialization is assumed to be imminent. And yet, many—if not most—of the dams, roads, railroads, ports, airports, and pipelines generally classified as infrastructure exist in states aptly characterized as unbuilt or unfinished. Planned, blocked, delayed, or abandoned, such projects are ubiquitous—the norm, rather than the exception."¹⁰² In the rural areas of the world, these experiences of belated, uneven, and suspended connection to urban, national, or planetary systems, to which rural areas relate in ambiguous and contradictory ways, are constitutive of infrastructural life and politics. As Lisa Parks's chapter on homemade media systems in Tanzania documents, this means that rural places are also sites of ongoing infrastructural adaptation, resilience, and innovation—qualities that spill out from the material practices of media and infrastructure into social, political, and economic forms more broadly. In the context of hardening market logics, the individuation of economic risk, and the instability imposed by environmental degradation, the experience of rural communities in diverse geographies as zones of both sacrifice and refusal over the past several decades places them in the position of being ahead of urban centers, not behind them. Ranging across accounts of video bazaars, devel-

opment projects, high-tech rural workplaces, agricultural media, energy infrastructures and systems, telecommunications, and conservation zones, *Media Rurality* aims to provide an interdisciplinary and international encounter with the complex relationships, subjectivities, and experiences across media, infrastructure, environments, and rural life at a time when the rural tends to be a mark of abjection, disavowal, and erasure.

Rurality and Media Studies

As we have made clear, *Media Rurality* responds to a persistent bias within media studies toward urban formations and the pasts, presents, and futures they represent—what Jack Halberstam refers to as *metronormativity*.¹⁰³ This response recalls pathbreaking work in media ethnography by Lila Abu-Lughod, whose fine-grained account of television viewing practices among women in a rural Egyptian village troubled *culture* as an abstract descriptive category in and across rural settings, instead pointing to “the kinds of cosmopolitanisms one finds in many rural areas around the post-colonial world and that confound the concept of ‘cultures.’”¹⁰⁴ It is grimly fitting that Abu-Lughod closes her essay about the cultural politics of this agricultural village by describing the threat of its bulldozing in service of projects animated by modernist and national developmental ideals of progress, justified by the promise of cultural tourism and heritage dollars brought in by European visitors. Following this poignant prompt, *Media Rurality* asks what it would mean to recognize and truly, deeply engage with the town, village, and countryside as sites and thresholds of intensive and meaningful media activity and operations. Accordingly, *Media Rurality* is simultaneously broad and grounded in its geographical reach, presenting accounts of the material, social, and environmental conditions and relationships that characterize actually existing rural places in their great diversity. In its complexity and ambiguity, media rurality is a plural, situated, relational, dynamic, and intensively mediated condition whose social and political character cannot be decided in advance or from afar.

This is reflected in the deliberately sited, emplaced, and often field-based methods used by many authors in this volume. It goes without saying that hermeneutic analyses of mediated representations of rural people and places remain indispensable to critical study of media ruralities.¹⁰⁵ However, as the chapters by Ng and Peeren, Wisseh, Burrell, and Kinder demonstrate, the richness of such work is increased considerably when it

is grounded in specific historical and material places and when it resists reification of the rural as an abstract category. Beyond this, *Media Rurality* also seeks to build on recent work in media studies—much of it addressed to media infrastructures, including in rural settings—that extends the field methodologically into *the field*, engaging with the atmospherics and ecologies of rural media practices.¹⁰⁶ In this, *Media Rurality* also takes a cue from the “dirt research” associated with earlier traditions in communication studies,¹⁰⁷ an inclination toward the field (in both senses) that prompts many of our authors’ engagements. Such disjuncture between the field and the ideal singularization of the rural helps to defamiliarize ideologies that rest on the negation and denial of complex geographies of rural mediation, enabling in-depth engagements with the confounding spatial contradictions of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism as well as the many enduring processes and afterlives of these structures across the rural world.

The studies in this book are immersed in the relationality and ambivalence of rurality, exposed by inquiring into sites of media and practices of mediation that make and remake rurality on the ground in the places where it is lived. This orientation implies neither a lament for a lost pastoralism nor panic about the alleged backwardness of rural places and people. Rather than reproducing binary distinctions and reductions that flatten the coexistence of different kinds of experience within and across rural areas—or, worse, shying away from the messy geographical and historical problems they raise—this book interrogates them and resituates rurality at the center of critical attention, a positioning that, as we have argued throughout this introduction, is uniquely afforded to those of us who study media. Here, *media rurality* refers to a complex set of contemporary practices, technologies, infrastructures, relationships, and processes that are always underway, incomplete, and evolving, often contradictory, and intensively mediated. How are rural places, people, and resources implicated in the mediation of global circuits of culture, technology, and capitalist circulation and exchange? How is urban life thereby enabled by particular material and cultural configurations of rural places? How do the infrastructures and technologies that mediate these relationships emerge as sites of politics and struggle? Ali’s chapter on rural broadband in the United States, for example, draws attention to the ways in which connectivity (and its lack) to major media infrastructures, including electrical grids, telephone and broadcast networks, and internet service, have long structured rural experience in that country, as elsewhere.¹⁰⁸ *Media*

Rurality expands this focus on rural media, reaching beyond the frame of connectivity lack and exclusion to examine forms of mediation by which rural communities and economies are (often involuntarily) connected to global flows and circuits, typically serving priorities located elsewhere. Following geographers Jesse Heley and Laura Jones' call for attention to "relational rurals" in order to understand the co-constituency and mobility of rural life across material and discursive processes,¹⁰⁹ we thus see media, and particularly media practices, infrastructures, and technologies, as materials through which to unravel the differential and uneven modes and relationalities of communication and connection that make up rural life and experience.

As Geoff Hobbis, Marc Esteve Del Valle, and Rashid Gabdulhakov remark in a 2023 article in *Media, Culture and Society*, "It is time for a rural turn in media studies."¹¹⁰ *Media Rurality* is both a provocation and a corrective, a way for scholars to approach rurality as a set of materially and geographically specific relations through the lens of media, its cultures, and its technologies. The volume speaks to pressing political issues facing the humanities and social sciences more broadly. Questions of environmental and climate justice and concerns about global economic and political disparity, as well as the mapping of these along historical and contemporary lines of racial capitalism, intersectional precarity, colonialism, and decolonization, are central to the book's contributions. This is because rural spaces shoulder many of the burdens of growth and environmental turbulence driven by these systems. Together, by bringing media technologies, infrastructures, practices, and politics to the fore as structuring and productive forces in these geographies of rurality, *Media Rurality's* contributors reattune the conceptual and methodological tools of media studies toward these diverse implications, experiences, and politics of rurality. We hope that others will soon join us.

Organization of the Book

The first four chapters of the book, "Extractive Mediations," are united by the concept and experience of *extraction* across different periods and geographies.¹¹¹ How can media rurality be glimpsed and defined through extractive processes and industries, and what are the sometimes frictional and turbulent relationships that form when capitalism and colonialism encounter and are tasked with managing people and ecologies in places

designated remote, unproductive, or otherwise requiring the material and discursive processes that ripen territories and peoples for extraction? What forms of mediation enable this, and how are media used to represent this? Megan Wiessner, Anne Pasek, Nicole Starosielski, and Hunter Vaughan comment on the rise of green digital technologies in the contemporary landscape of production, with a specific focus on rural geographies. From precision agriculture to soil carbon measurement, media technologies are increasingly being used to more efficiently generate and withdraw value from the countryside—with profound implications for emerging green digital economies. The next chapter, by Emily Ng and Esther Peeren, turns our gaze to rural areas in the Netherlands and China, specifically looking at documentary approaches to work, ecology, and community experience in and of the extractive industries, using Raymond Williams and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to articulate the hinterland as a central geography of extraction. Patrick Bresnihan and Patrick Brodie provide an extended version of the history of the Guglielmo Marconi radio station in colonial Connemara as informing contemporary geographies of tech capital in rural Ireland, theorizing “energetic mediation” as a process of imperial geography that continues to manufacture relationships in and across rural areas today. Assatu Wisseh traces a similarly historical account of the American Colonization Society and its mediated construction of “dark ruralities” in western Africa, which acted to racially justify the construction of the colony of Liberia through the ur-logic of extraction of people and things from the African continent by European colonialism.

In the next section, “Practicing Rurality,” the chapters focus on life and practices of media and mediation in rural and ruralized places. Burç Köstem’s chapter, for example, takes an ethnographic view of the politics of development in the hinterlands of contemporary Istanbul, arguing that these developmental and construction politics depend on processes of “mediating the periphery” experienced in and through communities and ecologies. Lisa Parks takes us to rural Tanzania, where small-scale home-made energy systems perform vital functions for lives and livelihoods, reflecting on how the politics of off-grid life can tell us about the promises of development and sustainability in and through systems of mediation. Ishita Tiwary’s contribution focuses specifically on the movement of media content and technologies across the borders of China and India, demonstrating that the informal practices and experiences of the global in such peripheralized places of exchange shifts our conceptual frameworks of the politics and pathways of media systems. Jenna Burrell then reflects

on the politics of masculinity in rural Oregon at the site of a Facebook data center, where its development and operations have mapped onto durable—and problematic—histories of masculine labor and “cowboyism” as embodied and experienced by local workers.

The final section, “Political Ruralities,” complicates and disrupts taken-for-granted ideas of media politics by interrogating how governance, power, and subjectivity are assembled and negotiated through distinctive forms of mediation across diverse rural settings. Jordan Kinder’s chapter is a case in point. Kinder, directly addressing the elephant in the room surrounding North American right-wing rural politics, takes up the case of the Canadian Freedom Convoy in 2022, an ostensibly antilockdown protest that, as Kinder finds, shared ideologies and personnel with pro-oil movements and other petroturfed right-wing movements in Canada over the past couple of decades. He argues that by appropriating indigeneity, these protestors used an ultimately fascist imaginary of Canadian rurality within which the hegemonic norms of white Canadian settler society sought to mobilize rurality toward supremacist ends. Christopher Ali, in the following chapter, explains how mapping mediates power in and through the development of rural broadband systems in the United States. Cindy Lin provides an account of state technological monitoring and detection of underground peatland fires in Indonesia, examining the politics of research labor and environmental governance enacted in these mediating practices. Finally, we conclude the collection with a chapter by Ayesha Vemuri on the politics of conservation in rural Kaziranga, India, in which several issues prevalent throughout the collection converge—rural territorialization, politics of indigeneity, and colonial politics of conservation and sustainability. Vemuri’s contention is that financial and insurance infrastructures comprise forms of environmental that mediate between powerful global economic interests and rural dwellers in ways that reproduce historically entrenched relationships of environmental injustice.

Each of these chapters, together and individually, shows us something about how rurality and forms of mediation co-constitute contemporary relations and systems within and across multiple rural geographies and locations. Across the chapters, we see media play a formative, if sometimes elided, role in the construction and maintenance of uneven systems that have long foreclosed just futures and consigned rural spaces to an imaginary past or unlivable present. Rurality is ambivalent, subjective, relational, plural, emergent, systemic, mediated, and above all political. In presenting such a range of critical analyses of media rurality, we hope to

suggest pathways toward engaging with rurality as a dynamic and lively political geography of media.

Notes

- 1 Ali, “Thoughts,” 2.
- 2 Morton, “Rural.”
- 3 See Epp and Whitson, *Writing Off the Rural West*. We are grateful to Roger Epp for presenting his work on the implications of artificial meat for livestock-based ruralities at our initial 2022 event at McGill University, “Media Rurality.”
- 4 For an excellent account of the potentially liberatory politics of urban farming, see White, *Freedom Farmers*.
- 5 On this theme, see Cowan, *Subaltern Frontiers*.
- 6 See Krause, “Ruralization”; Parsons and Lawreniuk, “Geographies of Ruralisation or Ruralities?”; Gillen et al., “Geographies of Ruralization.” See also Edensor, “Performing Rurality”; Woods, “Performing Rurality.”
- 7 For more nuanced scholarly treatments of political identity in rural America, see Wuthnow, *Left Behind*; Hochschild, *Strangers*; Cramer, *Politics of Resentment*.
- 8 Matthews, “Farmer Protests.”
- 9 Neel, *Hinterland*.
- 10 See, e.g., Edelman and Borras, *Political Dynamics*; Cauoette and Turner, *Agrarian Angst*; Padilla, *Rural Resistance*. See also the long-standing reservoir of radical academic work across disciplines on critical agrarian issues in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* as well as *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*.
- 11 See, for example, Hetherington, *Government of Beans*; Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*; Gordillo, “Metropolis”; Riofrancos, *Resource Radicals*.
- 12 Carter, “Landless Rural Workers.”
- 13 Baviskar and Levien, “Farmers’ Protests.”
- 14 See Newman, “New Jailbreak.” For a wide-ranging articulation of farmers’ politics against agribusiness, including digital and antimonopoly struggles, see Gibson and Alexander, *In Defense of Farmers*.
- 15 See, for example, Ajl, “Does the Arab Region”; Dunlap, *This System*; Edelman, *Peasant Politics*.
- 16 See Roane, *Dark Agoras*; Roane, “Black Ecologies.” We are grateful for having had the opportunity to engage with J. T. Roane at Media Rurality in 2022, where he presented his research on Black ecologies and rural life in the northeastern United States.

- 17 Bresnihan and Milner, *All We Want*.
- 18 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.
- 19 Burrell, chap. 8, this volume.
- 20 Kinder, chap. 9, this volume.
- 21 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.
- 22 See Iheka, *African Ecomedia*; Devine, *Decomposed*; Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish*.
- 23 Coulthard, *Red Skin*, 7–15; Nichols, *Theft Is Property!*, 52–84; Day, “Eco-Criticism”; Li, *Land’s End*; Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*.
- 24 We should include in these conceptions, of course, John Bellamy Foster’s famous theorization of the “metabolic rift”—a core eco-Marxist idea describing capital’s constitutive severing of society from nature via intensive agriculture—as also one that crystallized an urban and rural divide in early capitalist society: “Marx provided a powerful analysis of the main ecological crisis of his day—the problem of soil fertility within capitalist agriculture—as well as commenting on the other major ecological crises of his time (the loss of forests, the pollution of the cities, and the Malthusian specter of overpopulation). In doing so, he raised fundamental issues about the antagonism of town and country, the necessity of ecological sustainability, and what he called the ‘metabolic’ relation between human beings and nature.” Foster, “Marx’s Theory,” 373.
- 25 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*.
- 26 Harvey, *New Imperialism*.
- 27 Adunbi, *Enclaves*. We were fortunate to engage with Omolade Adunbi at Media Rurality in 2022, where he presented his research on energy practices, climate crisis, and the social death of the environment in Nigeria. See also Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
- 28 Davies, “Coloniality of Infrastructure.”
- 29 Voyles, *Wastelanding*; Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*.
- 30 See Daschuck, *Clearing the Plains*; Nichols, *Theft Is Property!*
- 31 Knoblach, *Culture of Wilderness*.
- 32 Spice, “Fighting Invasive Infrastructures”; Curley, “Infrastructures.” We learned a great deal from our engagement with Andrew Curley at Media Rurality in 2022, where he presented his research on decolonizing the Colorado Compact, which regulates water distribution across Indigenous territories in the southwestern United States.
- 33 Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*.
- 34 Cram, *Violent Inheritance*. See also Curley, *Carbon Sovereignty*.
- 35 Szeman and Wenzel, “What Do We Talk About.”
- 36 For an excellent account of multispecies entanglements and extraction in rural contexts, see Chao, *In the Shadow*.

- 37 On neoextractivism in Latin America, see Gudynas, *Extractivisms*; Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*; Riofrancos, *Resource Radicals*; Svampa, *Neo-Extractivism in Latin America*.
- 38 Chagnon et al., “From Extractivism,” 763.
- 39 See Mezzadra and Neilson, “On the Multiple Frontiers.”
- 40 See Couldry and Mejias, *Costs of Connection*; Sadowski, “When Data Is Capital.”
- 41 See Szeman, “On the Politics of Extraction,” 444. Szeman argues that under the framework of extractivism, “extraction becomes the name for any process through which value is generated for capitalism” and, referring to equivalence between “coal mining and data mining,” he suggests this is “a case of conceptual metaphor and allegory run (a little) wild.” See also Ajl, “Theories of Political Ecology.” Ajl similarly is skeptical of the ways that critiques of extractivism often seem to describe and stand in for capitalism across very different geographies, and thus are limited as political analyses.
- 42 Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*; Han, *Deepwater Alchemy*.
- 43 Chagnon et al., “From Extractivism,” 761.
- 44 Mezzadra and Neilson, “On the Multiple Frontiers,” 193.
- 45 See Wang, *Blockchain Chicken Farm*; Tollefson, “Staking a Claim.”
- 46 Mezzadra and Neilson, “On the Multiple Frontiers,” 195.
- 47 Halpern and Mitchell, *Smartness Mandate*.
- 48 Wang, *Blockchain Chicken Farm*, 6.
- 49 Zhang, *Labor of Reinvention*. See also the ongoing thesis research of Hanxiao Zhang, whose investigation into rural content creators on Douyin considers the platform-mediated (and often state-supported) prospects of this reverse migration and the construction of new rural livelihoods. Zhang, “Platformizing the Rural.”
- 50 Barney, “Autonomous Agriculture?”; Hendrickson et al., “Power, Food, and Agriculture.”
- 51 Hetherington, *Government of Beans*.
- 52 Peters, “Afterword,” 1966.
- 53 Duncan et al., “New but for Whom?,” 1195; see also Bronson, *Immaculate Conception*.
- 54 Bruna, “Going Beyond.”
- 55 Kish and Peters, “Farm Media.”
- 56 Lefebvre, *On the Rural*, 59.
- 57 Williams, *Country*, 1.
- 58 Engels quoted in Cleary, “Irish Studies,” 42–43.
- 59 Daggett, *Birth of Energy*, 29–30; see also Malm, *Fossil Capital*.
- 60 Jobson, “Dead Labor.”
- 61 See West, *Dispossession*.
- 62 Yusoff, *Billion Black Anthropocenes*.

- 63 Rasmussen and Lund, “Reconfiguring Frontier Spaces”; Voyles, *Wastelanding*.
- 64 Peeren et al., “Introduction,” 4.
- 65 Zhang, *Labor of Reinvention*, 14.
- 66 Krause, “Ruralization,” 233.
- 67 Gillen et al., “Geographies of Ruralization,” 189.
- 68 Graham and Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism*.
- 69 Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*.
- 70 See Riofrancos, “What Green Costs”; Bresnihan and Brodie, “From Toxic Industries.”
- 71 Brenner, *Implosions/Explosions*.
- 72 For an agrarian take on planetary urbanization, see Ajl, “Hypertrophic City.”
- 73 Peeren et al., “Introduction,” 11.
- 74 Woods, “Engaging the Global Countryside,” 492.
- 75 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.
- 76 Stoler, “Imperial Debris.”
- 77 Tsing, *Mushroom*.
- 78 Peeren et al., “Introduction,” 13.
- 79 Couldry and Mejias, *Costs of Connection*. See also Starosielski, *Undersea Network*; Cowen, *Deadly Life*.
- 80 Kukutai and Taylor, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty*; Kinder, “Solar Infrastructure.”
- 81 Barney, “Autonomous Agriculture?”
- 82 Bresnihan and Brodie, “New Extractive Frontiers.”
- 83 Lewis, *Scammer’s Yard*. Rahul Mukherjee’s discussion of mobile phone scams operating in rural India at Media Rurality in 2022 was particularly fruitful in this regard, mediating gestures of both connectivity and criminality in relation to uneven systems of finance, and we thank him for that early contribution.
- 84 See Kinder, chap. 9, this volume.
- 85 A compelling example of these dynamics was presented at Media Rurality in 2022, in a paper by Lisa Parks, Assatu Wisseh, Gaylene DuCharme, and Sarah DesRosier on “The Nuances of Network Sovereignty: A Collaborative Study of Internet and Digital Technologies in the Blackfeet Nation.” See also Duarte, *Network Sovereignty*.
- 86 Hahn, *Media Culture*; Tsing, *Mushroom*.
- 87 Brodie, “Stuck in Mud”; see also Burrell, this volume.
- 88 See Ali, chap. 10, this volume.
- 89 See Anand et al., *Promise of Infrastructure*; Axel et al., *Coloniality of Infrastructure*.
- 90 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*.
- 91 Brodie, “Stuck in Mud.”

- 92 See Gordillo, *Rubble*.
- 93 Larkin, "Politics and Poetics"; Larkin, "Promising Forms."
- 94 Barney, "Infrastructure"; Larkin, *Signal and Noise*; Parks and Starosielski, *Signal Traffic*.
- 95 Gillespie et al., *Media Technologies*; Hockenberry et al., *Assembly Codes*; Packer and Wiley, *Communication Matters*; Parks and Starosielski, *Signal Traffic*; Sharma and Singh, *Re-Understanding Media*; Towns, *On Black Media Philosophy*.
- 96 Gupta, "Future in Ruins," 66.
- 97 LaDuke and Cowen, "Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure"; Ruiz, *Slow Disturbance*.
- 98 Spice, "Fighting Invasive Infrastructures."
- 99 Brodie and Velkova, "Cloud Ruins"; Dawney, "Decommissioned Places"; Storm, *Post-Industrial Landscape Scars*; Voyles, *Wastelanding*.
- 100 Anand et al., *Promise of Infrastructure*.
- 101 Burrell, "On Half-Built Assemblages."
- 102 Carse and Kneas, "Unbuilt and Unfinished," 9. See also Günel, *Spaceship*.
- 103 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*.
- 104 Abu-Lughod, "Interpretation of Culture(s)," 123, emphasis in original.
- 105 See Fowler and Helfield, *Representing the Rural*; Strand and Barney, "Telling Their Stories."
- 106 See, for example, Larkin, *Signal and Noise*; Starosielski, *Undersea Network*; Ruiz, *Slow Disturbance*; Mukherjee, *Radiant Infrastructures*; Parks et al., "Media Fieldwork."
- 107 Young, "Innis's Infrastructure."
- 108 Ali, *Farm Fresh Broadband*; see also Ali, this volume.
- 109 Heley and Jones, "Relational Rurals."
- 110 Hobbis et al., "Rural Media Studies," 1489. We note that the case was arguably already made in 2010; see Andersson and Jansson, "Rural Media Spaces."
- 111 We share the terminology *extractive mediation* with Lisa Yin Han's exceptional 2024 book, *Deepwater Alchemy: Extractive Mediation and the Taming of the Seafloor*, surrounding the technologies and practices that condition deep-sea spaces as resource frontiers.

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