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Cottagecore and Rural Gentrification

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The internet has become filled with images of stone cottages covered in ivy, sepia-tinted tea parties abundant with home-baked pastries, women in peasant dresses trailing their fingers across tall grasses, and flower bouquets set into mason jars. Each of these scenes is categorized under the aesthetic of “cottagecore,” which is growing in popularity. This aesthetic movement draws upon people’s desires for simplicity and a nostalgia for a pre-industrial lifestyle.¹ However, an unexamined consequence of this idyllic fantasy is the subsequent gentrification of rural communities. Gentrification is the process of funneling capital into low-income neighborhoods to make them more attractive to middle and upper-class consumers, often displacing previous low-income residents.² This process is most often associated with cities, but over the past few decades, it has spread further out from the urban center.

One of the driving factors of gentrification is people attempting to buy into a particular lifestyle. This is amplified in the rural sphere as migrants’ goals are often not to extract profit monetarily from the land but rather to collect values from experiences. While urban gentrification pushes out previous residents, rural gentrification is more often observed as a change in land use.³ As Gotham notes, “gentrification is not an outcome of group preferences nor a reflection of market laws of supply and demand. Consumer taste for gentrified spaces is, instead, created and marketed.”⁴ In the age of the internet, this taste for a simple agrarian lifestyle is fostered by cottagecore. The aesthetic movement of cottagecore encourages rural gentrification by providing a cultural frame of reference for

middle-class migrants of how the landscape can be cultivated to fit their romanticized agrarian lifestyle.

For the majority of people that would be considered “rural gentrifiers,” they have no previous experience living outside of urban or suburban areas.⁵ Their migration is not driven by reality, but rather by the opportunity to project their own desires onto a landscape outside of the rigidity of the city. Given its proliferation online, cottagecore standardizes and aestheticizes this desire with images that adhere to a bucolic ideal of the countryside, facilitating a new cultural frame of reference of what an agrarian lifestyle looks like. This frame of reference serves to create a popularized expectation and understanding of rurality. Even before the rise in popularity of cottagecore, researchers Smith and Holt found in their case study of Hebden Bridge, England that “migrants... seek a very distinct representation of rurality, which encompasses a particular type of rural aesthetic [specifically]... the valley topography.”⁶ Many of the households that they interviewed cited the visual beauty of Hebden Bridge as its drawing factor. Further, when questioned as to why they did not settle in neighboring countryside towns, the households said that the alternatives were “uglier” and “not as stunning.”

Cottagecore has led its consumers to believe that a specific country landscape is most desirable; one characterized by an abundance of greenery, wildflowers and berries, and perhaps an idle river flowing across the land. This may explain why Hines finds the presence of “rural gentrifiers” to be more abundant in picturesque towns in the Western United States rather than anywhere in the sprawling prosaic plains of the

1. Rebecca Jennings, “Once Upon a Time, There Was Cottagecore,” *Vox*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/8/3/21349640/cottagecore-taylor-swift-folklore-lesbian-clothes-animal-crossing>.

2. Kevin Fox Gotham, “Gentrification,” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer and J. Michael Ryan (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 255.

3. Martin Phillips, “Rural Gentrification and the Process of Class Colonization,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 9, no. 2 (April 1993): 124, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(93\)90026-G](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(93)90026-G).

4. Gotham, “Gentrification,” 255.

5. Dwight J. Hines, “Rural Gentrification as Permanent Tourism: the Creation of the ‘New’ West Archipelago as Post Industrial Cultural Space,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 3 (June 2010): 510, <https://doi.org/10.1068%2Fd3309>.

6. Darren P. Smith and Louise Holt, “Lesbian Migrants in the Gentrified ‘Valley’ and ‘Other’ Geographies of Rural Gentrification,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 21, no. 3 (July 2005): 317, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.04.002>.

Midwest.⁷ Prime examples of these towns include: Durango, Colorado; Bozeman, Montana; and Taos, New Mexico. Hines also corroborates the findings of Smith and Holt by noting that the rural West “offers newcomers a territory that is (perceived/described by them as) cleaner, quieter, less populated, and more possessed of the possibility for valued experiences than the places they have previously known.”⁸ It is this perception of possibility that drives people to these communities, and cottagecore affirms that these desires can become a reality.

Integral to this desire is the lure of freedom and community, and the safety and security that this provides. While popular across demographics, cottagecore has primarily been followed by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Although the impact on the land remains the same, it is necessary to acknowledge that queer people are rarely moving with the explicit malintent of gentrification. Instead, cottagecore’s removal from densely populated areas offers queer people the freedom to pursue gender expression and romantic relationships. The case study of Hebden Bridge was undertaken because the town was dubbed the “Sapphic Capital” of England due to the large migration of lesbians there in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many of the lesbian households that were interviewed there in 2005 cited a desire for an accepting community and a comforting lifestyle as their reason for migration.⁹ This correlation between sexuality and movement to rural communities can be explained by the longing to have the freedom to come out without the restraints of heteronormative expectations.

Evienne Yanney, a young lesbian, explains she was drawn to cottagecore because “many of us aren’t really accepted in the modern world, so the thought of running away to a cottage is really, I guess, kind of soothing.”¹⁰ This is an interesting perception, especially since rural communities in the United States tend to be more socially and politically conservative. However, this is the role that cottagecore plays: it reframes the cultural understanding of landscapes

with a promise of safety and the opportunity to express sexuality. Although cottagecore presents itself as an escape from social normativity, it is not the land itself but the cultural frame of reference that has been facilitated that offers this escape. In the Hebden Bridge field study, the households explained that they did not actually want to live isolated in nature and preferred having a community around them. As the community was established, it began to draw more lesbian migrants to Hebden Bridge as they knew they would find people with similar values and desires for life.¹¹ This demonstrates the necessity of sharing these spaces with people who have the same cultural frame of reference of what the landscape is meant to provide. Without this shared understanding of the environment, migrants are more likely to experience a cognitive dissonance between their expectations and the reality that they come to face. Conversely, the presence of shared cultural references and similar intentions of building community in agrarian landscapes magnifies the possibility and impact of gentrification.

Seeking safety and security is not limited to only the LGBTQ+ community, especially not in 2020. One of the reasons that cottagecore is considered an aesthetic or an aspiration is because it offers something so disparate from the current reality. Despite the subculture’s initial emergence on Tumblr in 2014, it was not until 2018 that the aesthetic was officially christened “cottagecore,” and only in 2020 that the aesthetic broke into the mainstream. This surge in popularity has a direct correlation with the increasing instability of the world: the disarray of the political sphere, ever-mounting climate crisis, and the coronavirus pandemic. During the early months of the pandemic, “the cottagecore hashtag jumped 153 percent, while likes on cottagecore posts were up by 541 percent.”¹² Amanda Brennan, a Tumblr trend expert, extrapolates that “every time there’s been a spike in Covid cases, there’s a spike in cottagecore right along with it.”¹³ Cottagecore offers people an escape from the uncertainty of politics and the vulnerability of the

7. Hines, “Rural Gentrification as Permanent Tourism,” 509.

8. *Ibid.*, 512.

9. Smith and Holt, “Lesbian Migrants,” 318.

10. Jennings, “Once Upon a Time, There Was Cottagecore.”

11. Smith and Holt, 318.

12. Jennings.

13. *Ibid.*

coronavirus pandemic. Despite lacking a comprehensive understanding of what rural life is realistically like, people are driven by the hope that they will reap the benefits of a stable, secure cottagecore lifestyle.

Gentrification in the urban sphere is often associated with an influx of capital and financial gains for middle-class and upper-class gentrifiers. On the rural stage, middle-class gentrifiers are not seeking monetary profit, but rather experiential value.¹⁴ As the middle class has grown and the economy has shifted to be post-industrial, symbols have become an important marker of socioeconomic status rather than material goods. Hines gives Karl Marx credit for his work in observing that people deployed cultural commodities to discern their relative standing to one another, particularly within the nebulous middle class.¹⁵ These symbols include experiences like traveling internationally, going to summer camp, and even attending college. Despite cottagecore maintaining primarily an online presence, the ability to actually live the lifestyle is the ultimate form of status in the world of experiential value.

One reason the middle class values the cottagecore lifestyle is because it signals that they were successful enough within capitalism to maintain an illusion of being able to opt out of it and remove themselves from the hustle culture that seems synonymous with urban centers. In the postindustrial, consumerist culture of the United States, success is sometimes understood in the context of having bought everything that is necessary and transcending to a life of simplicity. While cottagecore is the epitome of simplicity, this also explains why it is dominated by whiteness and middle-class migrants.¹⁶ For people with economic and racial privilege, cottagecore signifies a conscious choice to opt out of capitalism but for those that don't hold that historic power, it is instead perceived as a failure to reach societal expectations of success. Hines explains that the middle class is no longer a definitive position, but rather a performance that is put on by gathering experiences, signifying to others the level of status and success that has been claimed.¹⁷ Therefore, cottagecore is highly appealing to white, middle-class

migrants as it offers an ongoing performance to cement their role.

While these migrants are driven to the countryside by perceptions, middle-class performativity, and a desire to collect experiences, they enact a very real change of the landscape. Gentrification in the urban context is often associated with a change in architecture, businesses, and services. However, Hines describes rural gentrification "as producing what it seeks to consume, i.e. the displacement of industrial working/middle-class people and the creation of a post industrial landscape of experience."¹⁸ In the process of rural gentrification, migrants change the economic function of the environment, moving from the extraction of resources to create material results to prolonging the aestheticism of the landscape to produce experiential profits.

One example of this shift is the case study of Georgetown Lake in southwest Montana. The lake was built in 1901 to produce electricity for the local mining companies, and the runoff benefitted cattle farmers in the area. However, in the late 1980s, there was a surge of ex-urbanites who moved to Georgetown Lake and quickly bought up lakefront property. As previously explored, these migrants held specific perceptions and expectations of the landscape. Their expectations are articulated in the purpose statement of the homeowner's association covenant:

"[To] ensure use of the Property for attractive recreational and residential purposes only; to promote health and happiness; to prevent unnecessary impairment of the environment; to maintain the tone of the Property in its native form and preserve its natural beauty as far as possible."¹⁹

These migrants placed the highest value on the long-term visual beauty of the land. While the lake was exploited for economic purposes for decades, the new residents demanded that the level of outflow from the lake be decreased significantly, consequently harming the mining companies and cattle farmers. One reason for their demand was to keep the water level high enough to cover the shoreline, ensuring an

14. Phillips, "Rural Gentrification," 125.

15. Hines, 516.

16. Phillips, 131.

17. Hines, 516.

18. *Ibid.*, 515.

19. *Ibid.*, 518.

aesthetic view of the lake from their properties. Another reason was to maintain a habitable environment for trout in the lake, allowing residents and tourists to continue sport fishing. A compromise was eventually reached, but a shift had occurred in Georgetown Lake, changing it from a working-class, industrial mining community to a middle-class, ex-urbanite destination. Hines succinctly summarizes the process of rural gentrification as the assertion of “class-based ideals of proper land use.”²⁰ While it is not identical to the gentrification that occurs in cities, rural communities still experience the change in businesses, the development of landscape to be visually appealing, and the ignorance of working-class needs that are associated with gentrification.²¹

Both Hebden Bridge and Georgetown Lake demonstrate the tangible reality of how aestheticized emotional desires can eventually inspire migration to and cultivation of rural areas. Jennings notes that cottagecore “is just one of dozens of iterations of movements fetishizing the countryside and coziness over the past few hundred years,” but it is also “the first that has existed almost exclusively online.”²² As an online movement, cottagecore has accumulated a significant audience and instilled a new ubiquitous cultural assumption that an agrarian lifestyle is ideal to pursue beauty, art, and the joyful simplicity of home-making. While the bulk of cottagecore exists online, there is still a portion of people that will move to rural areas with the intention of changing the landscape to match the photos they have collected on a Pinterest board. A small percentage of people are realistically able to move to rural landscapes and implement the cottagecore lifestyle, yet there is the danger of these communities growing and fortifying the impact of gentrification. As was the case with Hebden Bridge, the early presence of lesbians in the area led to an exponential influx of more queer migrants.²³ The same could be predicted of emerging cottagecore communities. However, these rural areas are not blank canvases, and often have a long history of industrial communities who are reliant on the natural resources of the land. Therefore, the in-migration of cottagecore followers echoes the gentrification of urban areas; they

displace working-class residents in order to remake the land into an idyllic scene and market it for experiences. Cottagecore began online but has since seeped into the collective consciousness, and encourages its more privileged consumers to engage in rural gentrification disguised as an embrace of simplicity and agrarianism. The cozily decorated cottages hide the reality of working-class displacement, and the aesthetic photos in nature mask the dwindling economic opportunities. In trying to escape the woes of city living, these cottagecore migrants brought the process of gentrification with them.

20. Ibid., 523.

21. Phillips, 125.

22. Jennings.

23. Smith and Holt, 318.

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