

Beneath Clouded Hills

A More-Than-Human Approach to “Deep England”

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I'd like to tell you a story, 'bout how England came to be...

So begins a retelling of *Des Grantz Geanz*, a more-than-human origin tale of England (Birt & Helle, 2023), which recounts how thirty exiled giants were the first to appear on Albion's shores, named so after the eldest. Here, they lived in harmony with the existing flora and fauna until the tyrant Brutus invaded and made them flee underground. The tale starts off *Beneath Clouded Hills* (Figure 1), an artist film by Verity Birt and myself, which forms part of a wider art and research project in which we explore the ambiguous term “Deep England” (Birt & Helle, 2023).

The notion of Deep England invokes a particular kind of England and Englishness; images of a picture-perfect rural idyll centred around agricultural ways of living; a bucolic landscape of village greens, country fairs, and local pubs. It inadvertently lays claim to an authentically English way of life, yet it is by no means representative of how most people in England live today. The landscape of Deep England is ultimately then a landscape of the imaginary, used as the familiar backdrop to well-known stories and television productions. *Wind in the Willows*, *Midsomer Murders* and *The Detectorists* all have a distinct Deep English feel to them—or as shorthand for an undefined ‘golden era’, located always in an equally undefined past (Williams, 2016).

Such romantic depictions of rural England started taking on a patriotic function during World War I when images of pastoral tranquillity were used to inspire young men to enlist in the war. Dakers (2016) writes, “Country life was never more desired than at the moment when it appeared to be on the brink of extinction” (p. 132). We saw this again during the

Brexit debate, where the image of the local farmer, or fisher, was pitted against the faceless bureaucracy of the European Union; a way of life under threat, which had to be fought for, lest it vanish. Such nostalgic notions can easily fall prey to parochial and xenophobic politics, with the English countryside positioned in opposition to both real and imaginary threats, whether they be other people, diseases, motor cars, or modernising town plans (Wright, 2001; Matless, 2016). The inaccessibility of much of rural England due to private ownership (Ware, 2022) or the implications of colonial wealth in the shaping of the English countryside (Fowler, 2020) are other factors that problematise the pastoral idyll.

It is through this muddy prism that we, as artists, have been engaging with Deep England as a term of both inspiration and complication. How to belong in a landscape with such a tangled history? How to encourage enchantment without glorifying an idealised and problematic past? And how can we sculpt a land-based mythos for today that is radically inclusive rather than parochially exclusionist?

For this we turned to the mythic past. For just as there is a reactionary side to Deep England, with an assumed entitlement to place and narrative, there is also a long history of using myth to celebrate the subversive side of bucolic England (Clarke & Rudkin, 1974; Harle & Machin, 2019). In this understanding of the term there is a pulsating, mystical current which runs through the land—or at the very least, through the popular national consciousness.

The 1974 film *Penda's Fen* (Clarke & Rudkin, 1974) is set within the green summer hills of the Malverns, in a landscape from which the spectres of myth and history are slowly rising. In one symbol-laden scene, we see young protagonist Stephen's musical prowess on the parish church organ cause the floor to crack, revealing a subterranean pathway to the transformational journey he is about to undertake. We could burrow deeper still into this mythic dimension; it is there from the very beginning, in the founding of modern Britain, where the harmonious co-existence between the giants and the more-than-human world of Albion is severed by Brutus' arrival. Given the deep scars this severance caused, how can the more-than-human world again be part of the story? And is this where we find a Deep England that resonates today?

There are countless English tales that proffer sleeping giants—or kings—waiting to spring forth from the fissures of the earth when England needs it the most. Surely then, in this age of multispecies extinction and climate change, the time is now. But as the giants had yet to appear by the time we started our project, we took it upon ourselves to wake them up. For this we had to go back to a place of many origins. This site was Creswell Crags, a group of caves whose formation go back to a time when there were no national borders and where Britain was still integrated into Europe through land mass. Here, in the middle of modern-day England, have lived a multitude of species over the past 40,000 years, including Neanderthals, *Homo sapiens*, spotted hyaenas, woolly rhinoceroses, and hippos. Creswell Crags contains the only verified cave art in the UK, made at least 12,700 years ago. According to Creswell Crags's (n.d.) website, these are “images of bison, reindeer and birds, as well as some abstract symbols which may have had religious meaning”. But historian Ronald Hutton (2013) makes clear the difficulties faced in interpreting prehistoric cave art and the at-times speculative nature of prehistoric archaeology, highlighting the disruptive function cave art has to modern binary categories of gender and non-/human. It is in this

speculative potential that prehistory presents, along with its potential for relation and ritual, that we, as artists, found creative opportunity. The many temporalities Creswell Crags offered up were like layers of history waiting to be excavated by experimental artistic approaches.

Hutton (2013) remarks that caves that have a large collection of images are often particularly resonant spaces and goes on to speculate that cave walls could have been seen as membranes between human and other worlds, with the cave art giving expression to spirit forms thought to exist in the world beyond the membrane. What if the cave was a spirit in its own self? What offerings could we give to this more-than-human entity? To be in exchange with the cave, we invited experimental singing group CRONE to join us in the dark. Together, we leaned into the imaginative qualities of the space, embracing our intuitive, spatial, and auditory responses to both each other and the cave. Reaching out to the sleeping giants, the cave acted as an *axis mundi*, a link between above and below with which one can pass from one realm to another by way of religious ritual. Past the membrane.

Having spent time in the cave's archives, we came armed with ideas about the previous inhabitants of the space, and this helped us get into a pluriversal state. In this state, the cave held a different reality than the outside summer world, resisting a linear relationship

Figure 1

Beneath Clouded Hills



Note. Still from *Beneath Clouded Hills*, a film by Verity Birt and Una Hamilton Helle (author's own)

to time. As we stood there, enveloped in darkness, our bodies seemed to blend in with the cave and the cave with us, denying our boundedness as modern human subjects. It was a fluid and permeable state, with geology and land seeping in and out of us; we were

states of being and sites in ourselves. This leaky inter-subjectivity of becoming multiple and decentralized was disconcerting, but at the same time the erasing of boundaries and hierarchies felt necessary and freeing.

In the final scene of *Penda's Fen*, Stephen, having just thrown all his neatly defined boundaries and assumptions out the window, undergoes an unequivocal embracing of his ambiguous and hybrid nature. In riotous joy, he shouts out over the fields of England; "*I am nothing pure. My race is mixed. My sex is mixed, I am woman and man. Light with darkness. Mixed. Mixed. I am nothing special. Nothing pure. I am mud and flame.*"

Funding Statement

This project has been supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 863944 THINK DEEP).

Conflicts of Interest

The research was conducted in the absence of any conflicts of interest.

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About the Author

Una Hamilton Helle (NO/UK) is a multidisciplinary artist, curator and researcher currently undertaking a practice-based PhD in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway, University of London, with the working title *Spirits of place: Thinking through subterranean subjectivities*. In addition to a written thesis, the outcome of the research will conclude with a number of creative responses realised as exhibitions, sound works, and artist publications. The first instalment of this was *Beneath Clouded Hills*, an exhibition at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, 18 May – 17 June 2023. <http://www.unahamiltonhelle.co.uk>