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### Article

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# Landscape and Embodiment in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and *The True Heart*

Harriet Baker

## Abstract

The essay contextualises *Lolly Willowes* and *The True Heart* in relation to interwar ideas about landscape and ruralism. It argues that the protagonists Laura Willowes and Sukey Bond depart from normative relationships to the English countryside in order to orient themselves more independently in their worlds. It suggests that Warner invests in potentialities of what Sara Ahmed analyses as 'disorientation', and that in her nuanced evocations of sexual deviance, landscapes become a prompt for the discursive construction of queer subjectivities.

**Keywords** Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, *The True Heart*, Sara Ahmed, ruralism, landscape, disorientation, queer

On a hot day in July 1922, Sylvia Townsend Warner visited the cheap section of Whiteley's bookshop in Westbourne Grove. 'I bought a map of Essex,' she later recorded, 'because I had never been there. It was a Bartholomew map, inch to the mile, coloured for elevation. The blue creeks, the wide expanses of green for marsh, the extraordinary Essex place names [...] all delighted me'.<sup>1</sup> On her arrival in Essex, the landscape delighted her, too: its flatness, the 'melting veil' of morning mist, and the 'particular smell' of the marsh after rain. Wandering this terrain, and 'letting my mind drift with the tidal water', she declared it 'my new landscape'.<sup>2</sup>

Warner's Bank Holiday trip to Essex was typical for a Londoner between the wars. 'For five years I was a complete cockney,' she wrote in 1939. 'If I went into the country it was to disport myself, or to visit.'<sup>3</sup>

She was a self-proclaimed ‘townee’, tripping to the coast in a cotton dress, leisure map in hand, to seek respite from urban living.<sup>4</sup> Yet Warner’s trip to Essex marked a turning point in her relationship to the rural. Intending to go for a day, she stayed overnight, and later returned for a month, taking pleasure in the simplicity of the brick cottages, the conversation of her farm-labouring hosts, and their home-brewed beer. Walking over the marshes, or sitting on banks of shingle to read, she found the ‘mysterious sensation of being where I wanted to be and as I wanted to be, socketted in the universe, and passionately quiescent’.<sup>5</sup>

Warner’s landscapes – her unchartered territories and liminal marshes, perpetually refigured through autobiographical essays and her early novels, *Lolly Willows* (1926) and *The True Heart* (1929) – are situated within debates concerning the status of the English countryside. As the first part of this essay suggests, Warner’s supple and shifting novels engage with and subvert the rural ideologies of the interwar period. Warner, like Laura Willows, is both cartographer and stray, engaging with masculinist landscape ideology – what David Matless describes as the preservationist ‘culture of landscape’<sup>6</sup> – and yet seeking alternative experiences of rural and wild environments. Laura’s deference to guide books and maps reflects the proliferation of preservationist literature during the period, and yet her transformation occurs off-grid, experienced through her body’s immediate relationship with its environment. The tension between these two positions – figured throughout this essay as empirical and embodied – testifies to the heterogeneity of attitudes towards landscape, and signals Warner’s engagement with cultures concomitantly obedient and transformative.

‘When I think of England when I am abroad, England comes to me through my various senses – through the ear, through the eye, and through certain imperishable scents’.<sup>7</sup> Stanley Baldwin’s account of his sensory apprehension of England sits within a broader culture of the body that was reflected in the preservationist literature of the period: in his 1930 essay, ‘Walking’, G. M. Trevelyan described the sensory unity of his body while hiking as an ‘ecstasy of body and mind’; Vaughan Cornish, in *Scenery and the Sense of Sight* (1935), declared, ‘I regard the refined action of the senses as revelational’.<sup>8</sup> These accounts gesture towards what Matless calls ‘the open-air body’, a conception of physical and psychological wellbeing achieved through organicism, exercise and exposure to the outdoors.<sup>9</sup> The body, then, plays a central role in the experience of the natural world, in which landscape itself attains a mystic and vital quality. As the second part of this essay proposes, Warner’s early novels foreground the body in encounters of landscape.

Her focus on the body's perceptive faculties, its ease or discomfort in space, and the ways in which it occupies that space, accommodates a phenomenological reading of her work, in which the vocabulary of embodiment signals her dissident politics, and elucidates questions of gender, sexuality and subjectivity.

## ***Lolly Willowes, The True Heart* and ideologies of landscape**

The spatiality of *Lolly Willowes* – in which its eponymous heroine relocates from a domestic London household to a rural village – explicitly engages with national arguments concerning the English countryside. Laura chooses her new home by looking through a guidebook of the Chilterns. Announcing her departure, she quotes the book: 'A secluded hamlet in the heart of the Chilterns, Great Mop is situated twelve miles from Wickendon in a hilly district with many beech-woods. The parish church has a fine Norman tower and a squint. The population is 227' (*LW*, 81).<sup>10</sup> Warner's imitative description situates the novel within the discourse of preservationist landscape writing, which, as Matless observes, followed the 'geometry of form and function' of the parish, with topographic descriptions of church-focused villages surrounded by undulating countryside.<sup>11</sup> A contemporaneous guidebook to the Chilterns is similarly idealistic, describing 'a sanctuary' and 'a place of quiet beauty, not far from London, where those who love such things can find a patch of genuine country England'.<sup>12</sup> Warner's description depends upon the stock image of the sequestered English village as it was disseminated in preservationist literature, which amounted, as Raymond Williams observes, to 'a description and thence an idealisation of actual country life'.<sup>13</sup> Yet Buckinghamshire, contentedly rural in the novel's Georgian setting, had by the late 1920s become a paradigmatic example of urbanisation. A 1931 Council for the Preservation of Rural England pamphlet is explicit in its anxiety, describing the 'great changes' brought by new railway stations at Gerrards Cross and Beaconsfield, where 'large residential settlements have sprung up with startling rapidity'.<sup>14</sup> Warner stages Laura's first encounter with Great Mop through a literature that, to its contemporary reader, touted recognisably preservationist attitudes towards landscape. Laura's search for rural solitude, and her pleasure in descriptions of undisturbed English villages, is thus a parody of the pervasive nostalgia of preservationist ideology.

'I liked maps. I liked place-names, and the picture-making technique of map-reading', Warner wrote in 1939.<sup>15</sup> Her depictions of maps and map-reading follow Gillian Rose's suggestion that 'mapping is distinctive of spatial representation because it can be interpreted as visual and/or textual. To read maps as texts highlights their social construction and their potential for multiple interpretations by both producers and consumers'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Warner was resistant to the map's representation of a spatialised Englishness that served to reinforce the power structures of social organisation. In *Lolly Willowes*, Laura's rejection of her brother's London household for a life of rural solitude finds its first expression in maps. In search of uncharted territory, Laura is lured to the Chilterns by the map's 'surfeit of green', representing, as Jennifer Nesbitt notes, 'both a natural landscape and one that has not been fully organised and known by the state apparatus'.<sup>17</sup> The map's vacancies suggest spaces for the development of Laura's proto-feminist politics. Like Warner, she soon disregards her map; her initial investment in cartographical empiricism gives way to an alternative interaction with space. Returning from her solitary rambles each evening, Laura looks at the map and 'mark[s] where she had been with little bleeding footsteps of red ink' (*LW*, 94). Her retrospective mark-making subverts the textual language of cartography. She supplements the map with her own routes and pathways, thus remapping Great Mop to signal her self-autonomy. Laura turns the map into a tool of her own making, writing herself onto a landscape she has begun to inhabit on her own terms.

Brian Cook Batsford, who illustrated books about English rural life throughout the 1930s, wrote that one could learn 'more of a patch of country from an Inch Ordnance map in half an hour than by poking around it aimlessly for days'.<sup>18</sup> Batsford's injunction is typical of the preservationist ideology that favoured topographical efficiency. Warner's characters, by contrast, are peripatetic and wayward; they practise spatial vagrancy and roam off-grid. The vocabulary used to describe Laura's movement suggests truancy:

Let her stray up the valleys, and rest in the leafless woods that looked so warm with their core of fallen red leaves, and find out her own secret, if she had one. [...] Wherever she strayed the hills folded themselves round her like the fingers of a hand.

(*LW*, 106)

Like Laura, Sukey Bond in *The True Heart* eschews normative geographies in order to orient herself in the landscape independently. Prior to her

arrival at New Easter, a farmstead on the Essex marshes, her only knowledge of the landscape has come through books: she has 'learned from her geography book that an island is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by water', while the Bible has 'taught her that the sea was to be feared' (*TH*, 21). These masculinist texts prove inadequate, and, realising that Zeph won't take her across the marsh, she has soon 'found her way to the sea alone' (*TH*, 25). Sukey walks through unmapped space, the path 'lost in long grass', following the sound of the creek until she is in view of the sea (*TH*, 25). The marsh is an 'ambiguous territory', and yet her discovery of its smells and textures gives her 'a sensation of extraordinary buoyancy'; she has discovered 'a secret place between two worlds' (*TH*, 25, 26). Like Sukey, Laura determines to wander independently, throwing her map and guide book into a well: 'She scarcely knew what she had done, but she knew that she had done rightly, whether it was that she had sacrificed to the place, or had cast herself upon its mercies' (*LW*, 107). For Jane Garrity, Laura's choice to wander freely is figured as a rejection of 'the masculine bias of formal geography', thus signalling 'her embrace of an expressly feminized relation to the landscape'.<sup>19</sup> Yet Warner's attitude to maps is perhaps less contemptuous. Her characters, having gleaned from maps and books what they could, set off alone. Their self-abandonment to place suggests a mind-set that cannot be contained within the strictures of cartographical practice, and signals the beginnings of an embodied relationship to landscape.

The preservationist culture of landscape was one in which 'particular sets of practices are seen to generate particular ways of being in the landscape, [and] which thereby becomes the occasion for an intellectual, spiritual and physical citizenship'.<sup>20</sup> Warner's participation in the 'traditional Bank Holiday custom'<sup>21</sup> of a day trip to the coast signals a degree of complicity in the broader national project of the English countryside. When Warner began writing in the 1920s, 'the country' was being celebrated as 'the apotheosis of patriotism, spirituality, and authenticity'.<sup>22</sup> Rural environments became sites of ideological investment in which preservationists responded to interwar uncertainties of 'national purpose and identity, [...] the question of what England stood for'.<sup>23</sup> The dominant narrative upheld the antagonistic town/country dichotomy, pitching a threatened rural England against fast-developing towns and an increasingly urban population.<sup>24</sup> Yet Matless warns against the homogenisation of cultural expressions of ruralism, noting the rhetorical diversity between conservatism and progressive modernity.<sup>25</sup> The year 1926 can be taken as indicative of the heterogeneity of attitudes towards landscape: the establishment of a new lobby,

the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), coincided with the publication of Stanley Baldwin's *On England*, a collection of the Conservative prime minister's speeches. While the CPRE entailed 'an attempt to plan a landscape simultaneously modern and traditional under the guidance of an expert public authority',<sup>26</sup> Baldwin's brand of nostalgia evoked England's vanishing rural past. Baldwin's rural England – woodsmoke, anvil and corncrake, 'striking down into the very depths of our nature'<sup>27</sup> – presented a 'political philosophy out of tune with preservationist planning',<sup>28</sup> drawing on rural landscapes as sites of pastoral community and agricultural tradition. Despite their ideological divergence, these two political aesthetics – one invested in England's modernity, the other in expressions of pastoral longing – nonetheless each claimed authority over landscape in the period between the wars. Constituting cultures both progressive and regressive, they pitched England's past against her future, and agricultural spaces against urban landscapes.

The preservationist movement was committed to designing a new England, structurally – in terms of architecture and land use – but also morally, through governance of the open-air leisure industry. Rambling became a focus point for the promotion of appropriate landscape



**Figure 4.1** J. W. Tucker, *Hiking* (1936). Photo credit: Laing Art Gallery

behaviours, with pamphlets warning against littering, the picking of wild flowers and damage to footpaths.<sup>29</sup> Warner's map of Essex was typical of those produced for the leisure market. With covers illustrated in colour by Ellis Martin, Bartholomew maps did much to promote hiking, which was best enjoyed, according to Vaughan Cornish, within 'definite rules of conduct'.<sup>30</sup>

J. W. Tucker's painting *Hiking* (1936)<sup>31</sup> illustrates some of the key issues, depicting three young women, with shorts and backpacks, poring over a map. Below them, a path runs down to a village; beyond them, the valley stretches out into open, cultivated countryside. The painting gestures towards social progression – emancipated women moving freely over the landscape – and yet it also reveals much about the 'right' ways in which to encounter landscape. Each woman represents an ideal 'geographer-citizen',<sup>32</sup> a moral categorisation of one who, through empirical process and appropriate behaviour, successfully inhabits the landscape.

Warner flouted the terms of her citizenship. Setting out in 1922, after abandoning her map, she traversed the liminal marsh landscape in contented solitude. Her novels correspondingly present a detailed rejection of normative masculinist approaches to landscape, espousing instead an alternative ruralism built upon feminist and queer identity. Warner's experience of the Essex landscape was transformative, marking the beginnings of her 'thinking about the country'<sup>33</sup> and the development of an observant consideration of place in which representations of rural or wild spaces, and their attendant ways of life, would become expressions of her leftist and gender and sexual politics. In *Great Mop*, Laura discards her social position as maiden aunt and becomes a witch; Sukey Bond, orphaned and sent to work on a desolate farm, falls in love with her patron's disabled son. In *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927), too, space suggests desire: Timothy Fortune, a Christian missionary on the fictional island of Fanua, loses his faith through homosexual longing. Through its spatial experimentation, Warner's early fiction exists in the margins of sexual geography; whether set in the beech-woods of Buckinghamshire, a Polynesian village, or the Essex marshes, these novels radically explore movement and belonging, and suggest alternative ways of being in the world.

## Embodiment, orientation and being-in-the-world

Warner's writing marks her departure from normative encounters with landscape; her knowledge of space is arrived at not through map-reading

or obeisance to marked footpaths, but through embodied experience. Becoming lost on the marsh, it is through her bodily awareness of her surroundings that Warner inhabits her environment. For Sukey, the marsh makes itself known to her through texture and smell, 'sensations of pleasure' which orientate her (*TH*, 26); Fortune, too, familiarises himself with the tropical strangeness of Fanua by 'taking an interest in his sensations'.<sup>34</sup> In these ways Warner stages landscape encounter through the body, negotiating time and space not through normative or empirical means but through lived experience. Sara Ahmed writes, 'Orientations are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places'.<sup>35</sup> Ahmed's queer phenomenology is situated within an emergent discourse in queer studies that stresses the connections between queer identity, time and space.<sup>36</sup> As queer theory becomes increasingly attuned to the modernist canon, contemporary discourses of queer time and space can shed new light on Warner's writing, in which a sustained spatiality presents a politics of citizenship in which marginalised sexualities and subjectivities are constructed and explored.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that *queer* refers to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning'.<sup>37</sup> Her definition of queer 'spins the term outwards along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses'.<sup>38</sup> Sedgwick's theorisation of queer makes room for a multiplicity of splintered and resistant identities that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation. In her ambiguously all-encompassing '*and other*' we might include Warner's proto-queer protagonists: Laura, with her knowledge of wild herbs and magic; Fortune, troubled by homosexual desire; the 'primitive' Lueli; Sukey, associated with liminal landscapes; and the disabled Eric. In these early novels, rural and wild spaces give expression to non-normative desire; in Warner's nuanced evocation of sexual deviance, landscapes become prompts for the discursive construction of queer subjectivities. I propose to analyse Warner's rural writing – with its interconnected discourses of landscape and individualised sexualities – her queer pastoralism, as a reorientation of Mary Jacobs' 'fantastic ruralism'.<sup>39</sup> For Jacobs, Warner's 'textual negotiations with folk culture, prehistory and magic' create a 'nomadic and playful nuance of ruralism [that] needs to be set alongside the sense of an ordered and productive landscape'; "'the country'" could suggest positive ascriptions for the fleeting and the feral along with the more familiar comforts of a rural community celebrating harvest home'.<sup>40</sup> Jacobs draws out the

tensions between Warner's mythic and realist modes, in which folklore, prehistory and magic negotiate with traditional pastoral to unsettle the historical present.<sup>41</sup> Yet the fantasy element in Warner's writing – touched by the fleeting and the feral – includes much we might now think of as queer; and much that in the delineation of individualised sexualities rejects the normative assumptions of patriarchal society.

'I perceive with my body,' wrote Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962).<sup>42</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the individual's site of subjectivity and thus their primary contact with the world: 'being the world through a body'.<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that a subject's apprehension of the world occurs through their sensory-perceptive faculties: 'What needs to be elucidated, then, is this primary comprehension of the world. The natural world, we said, is the schema of intersensory relations'.<sup>44</sup> Warner stages landscape encounter through sensory experience. Sukey inhabits space through her body's awareness of its textures and smells. She registers the terrain through her feet, feeling 'the slabs of soft mud' and 'thick cushions of samphire'; she perceives distance through the broken sounds of a dog barking and a cock crowing; she is drawn to the exotic strangeness of the vegetation through its 'smell of salt, of rich mud, of the bitter aromatic breath of the wild southernwood' (*TH*, 26). The marsh's peculiarity, previously unsettling, begins to take on new meanings, and provokes in Sukey a sense of acute physical enjoyment:

putting her hand to her face to wipe off the sweat, she discovered that she smelled of this ambiguous territory [...] She plunged her hands into a bush and snuffed into the palms. It was so exciting to discover herself thus perfumed [...] that she suddenly found her teeth biting into her flesh, and that was a pleasure too [...] (*TH*, 26)

Sukey's sensory immersion in the marsh landscape awakens her appetitive pleasures, representing her emergent sexuality. Laura, too, seeks contact with the natural world. While in London, she indulges in imagined pleasures, picturing a darkening orchard in which an old woman is 'rubbing her rough fingertips over the smooth-skinned plums, [...] her fingers seeking the rounded ovals of fruit among the pointed ovals of the leaves' (*LW*, 72–73). Warner thus presents a feminised relationship with landscape predicated on phenomenological intimacy and tactility implying a vital communion with the natural world, its smells, shades and textures.

Ahmed writes, 'Moments of disorientation are vital'.<sup>45</sup> Phenomenology, in dialogue with queer studies, leads to new ways of thinking

about the spatiality of sexuality and gender. Taking phenomenology's founding precept that space is dynamic and experienced through the body, Ahmed locates the queer moments in orientation and disorientation, in spatial experiences such as getting lost, and feeling at home. Warner too invests in such potentialities of disorientation. In *The True Heart*, Sukey's otherness is illustrated through dislocation and disorientation. On arriving at New Easter, she fears the landscape. The marsh – 'damp, [...] wild, [...] dangerous' – gives her an 'uneasy turn' and she is 'distrustful of her surroundings' (*TH* 7, 19). Her ambivalence about living part-way between land and sea mutates into a source of fear. She fancies that 'those who live upon an island are exposed to a special unprotectedness. They are all alone, cut off from the succour, the homely example of the mainland' (*TH*, 20). Yet the strangeness of the landscape excites her, and she is drawn to 'its secret longing', 'the hour when the sea-fog would come flowing over it, billowing in like the sea's ghost come back to claim its own' (*TH*, 21).

In *Lolly Willowes*, while Titus remains at Great Mop, Laura's body registers her anxiety through tired limbs and twisted ankles. She is 'estranged' from her landscape; 'Day by day the spirit of the place withdrew itself further from her. The woods [...] hushed their talk [...] [and] the hills locked up their thoughts' (*LW* 134, 135–6). Warner's novels measure the physical receptivity of her characters to new settings. States of bodily discomfort – hunger, fatigue or injury – reveal the ways in which the body is affected and shaped by its surroundings, thus determining feelings of alienation and dislocation. The body's relationship with space oscillates between intimacy and resistance. Warner returns to imagery of her characters' hands, engaged in activities such as embroidery, as a measure of the body's spatial privilege. Hands are 'reductive identifiers', from which a character's social identity can be ascertained.<sup>46</sup> We might think, for instance, of Eric's hands: where Sukey observes 'the delicate varied grain of the skin', others mock their limpness and ineffectuality, claiming his hands as an index to his disability (*TH*, 40). Similarly, Lueli is described as possessing 'small idle hands', which, for Fortune, are indicators of his primitive physicality (*FM*, 21–22). But hands are also 'instruments of agency' signifying emergent autonomies.<sup>47</sup> Sukey's hands have a metonymic relationship with labour, and yet as she sits sewing beneath the pear tree, her industriousness signals pastoral contentment. She darns, and 'seeing her hands at their work, she forgot to think of them as red and coarsened with labour, observing only how deft they were in movement, how fit in their proportions' (*TH*, 40). Sukey's physicality is here unified; she

sees beyond the physical appearance of her hands and experiences only the fluidity of their movement, and the extent to which they show the integration of her faculties and the harmony of her whole being.

For Warner, hands perform narrative functions; they provide what Janet Zandy calls 'lucid maps to the geography of human complexity'.<sup>48</sup> Unlike those of the industrious Sukey, Laura's hands are rebellious, and contain the clues of her escape.<sup>49</sup> On moving to Apsley Terrace, they react badly to the hardness of the London water, being 'so thin that they were always a little red; now they were rough also' (*LW*, 39). Laura's hands seek idleness, though Caroline encourages their domestic productivity, engaging Laura in embroidery. Laura's resistance to sewing is explicit in the way the 'silk rasped against her fingers' so that 'she shuddered inwardly' (*LW*, 39). In the greengrocer's shop, however, she pictures the old woman picking fruit in an orchard, 'rubbing her rough fingertips over the smooth-skinned plums' (*LW*, 72). In Laura's mind, the woman summons the vitality and sensuousness of the natural world through her tactile relationship with its shades and textures. In her reverie, Laura is transformed into this solitary figure, with 'fingers seeking the rounded ovals of fruit among the pointed ovals of the leaves' (*LW*, 73). The description anticipates the development of her tactile relationship with the natural world; at Mr Saunter's chicken farm at Great Mop, Laura enjoys holding hens in the crook of her arm, 'while her fingers probed among the soft feathers and rigid quills of their breasts. She liked to feel their acquiescence, their dependence upon her. She felt wise and potent' (*LW*, 146).

In Warner's novels, bodies adjust to their environments. Taking Heidegger's notion of dwelling – 'the manner in which we humans are on the earth'<sup>50</sup> – we might consider Warner's landscapes as places of custom and daily practice which build over time. Sukey's life in kitchen and dairy, and the daily repetition of her duties, give her a sense of rootedness. This is her habitual life, the quotidian aspects of everyday experience which coalesce around site and subject. Yet Sukey continues to keep an eye on the pleasurable oddities of her environment: 'It was dream-like indeed that she should be washing clothes and baking bread where once the fishes swam' (*TH*, 21). Sukey's life, despite her industrious contentment, is 'tinged with unreality', and she feels 'astray from her proper self' (*TH*, 21). Her relationship with her environment has evolved into one of curiosity and desire; she begins to reconceive the landscape in terms of its openness and possibility. Menacing no more, it is 'ambiguous' and 'beyond', 'a secret place between two worlds' (*TH*, 25–26). The marsh, the saltings, and the sea beyond, have

shaped Sukey's subjectivity; the landscape enables and emboldens her emergent interiority, its strangeness reflecting her own.

At Great Mop, Laura lives 'in perfect idleness and contentment, growing everyday more freckled and more rooted in peace' (*LW*, 124). Her body changes, adapting to its new environment and reflecting her contentment. Entering Mrs Leak's cottage, Laura takes pleasure in 'the thought of having the house all to herself' (*LW*, 139). She 'looked at her room, the green-painted walls with the chairs sitting silently round. She felt herself inhabiting the empty house. [...] About the empty house was the village, and about the village the hills, neighbourly under their covering of night. Room, house, village, hills encircled her like the rings of a fortification. This was her domain' (*LW*, 145). Laura's inhabitation of space begins with her body, and its minute responses to its environment. She takes in the smells of the room – tobacco and hemp agrimony – and feels her parlour key, 'cold and sleek', in its space beneath the bookshelf (*LW*, 139). From here, her position spirals outwards, taking in the village of Great Mop and its surrounding landscape. The contrast of Mrs Leak's cottage to Henry's London household is significant; no longer assigned a single bedroom, Laura has the privacy of a locked parlour. Inherited furniture has given way to the objects of the cottage – lamp, dinner plates, and supper table – which meet her eye 'with self-possession' (*LW*, 140). Laura's identity has shifted from the negative ascriptions of spinsterhood; with Mrs Leak, solitude is a privilege, enjoyed freely in an alternative domestic arrangement that supports and encourages privacy and self-autonomy.

Though she doesn't return to the sea – 'it was as if she had washed off its spell with the odour of the southernwood' (*TH*, 26) – Sukey senses the transformative aspect of her journey. The liminal marsh landscape rouses and provokes her. As darkness falls over Dannie, 'a nameless ecstasy and excitement seemed to be rising up all around'; leaving New Easter, Sukey senses 'something urgent and secret in the appearance of this landscape, so full of movement, so denuded of colour' (*TH*, 51, 90). Sukey's subjectivity is couched within the landscape, her peripatetic explorations both spatial and psychological. Warner invests rural and wild spaces with secrecy and magic;<sup>51</sup> they become material presences, their queerness – expressed through gurgling waters and unquiet woods – reflecting her characters' own. As Laura catches her 'recurrent autumnal fever', her imagination is drawn 'to wander in darkened fields and by desolate sea-bords, through marshes and fens, and along the outskirts of brooding woods' (*LW*, 147). Here, Laura's imagination is spatialised, marginal and waste spaces stimulating in

her 'a kind of ungodly hallowedness' (*LW*, 67). Warner associates female individualism with wildness, with the vagaries of weather and nature's untamed spaces; both Laura, the proto-feminist witch, and Sukey, the emboldened servant, are psychically represented through landscape.

## Landscapes of transformation

In a 1959 lecture, Warner described women writers as 'obstinate and sly', using the term 'bi-location' to suggest 'the ability to straddle two places at once'.<sup>52</sup> Laura, like Sukey, has a 'split subjectivity', causing friction 'between her conscious and unconscious selves'.<sup>53</sup> The capacity for imaginative vagrancy in Warner's characters – for psychological wandering, even while their bodies are still – is reflected in her formal explorations of their fractured subjectivities. Sukey's monologue, which occurs when she is asked to kill a cockerel for Prudence's engagement dinner, contains distinctly 'modernist elements', thus 'presaging the birth of her new subjectivity and politicization in the subsequent part of the novel'.<sup>54</sup> Warner explores Sukey's consciousness through textual fragmentation – 'I am like a ghost [...] I am like a dream' (*TH*, 68) – so that, on emerging from her reverie, she is altered: 'Everything is new and unknown and terrifying, for love has changed it, and changed me too' (*TH*, 67). Her spatial disorientation is mirrored in her subjectivity: 'now all her memories of her former life were disused, and her past thoughts were strange to her [...]. Perhaps it was through living on an island' (*TH*, 29). For Laura, the valleys and field margins of Great Mop, which have 'taken such hold of her imagination', play a part in her transformation from spinster into witch: 'She was changed, and knew it. She was humbler, and more simple' (*LW*, 123). In these novels, then, landscape becomes a structuring agent in the discursive construction of proto-queer subjectivities: 'To those who have travelled but little, each new landscape remodels the mind, and here, among a rump of small hills and woodland, she was no longer to herself the Sukey of the marshes' (*TH*, 169).

The relationship between Sukey and Eric may be thought to trouble the 'heterosexist assumption'<sup>55</sup> of sexual values, an assumption, as Margrit Sildrick writes, predicated on 'the disqualification of non-normative bodies from discourses of sexual pleasure and desire'.<sup>56</sup> Eric's disability – revealed in his gliding footsteps and non-verbal communication (he rolls an apple towards Sukey to get her attention) – suggest

what Margrit Sildrick terms ‘anomalous embodiment, [...] physical and mental states that resist definition’.<sup>57</sup> His ‘otherness’ is often figured through nonhuman imagery. Sukey observes Eric’s ‘affinity’ with the cows of the farm, ‘as though he belonged to some intermediate race between human beings and animals’ (*TH*, 34). He is in touch with the nonhuman; he ‘loved all helpless things, all wild things, [...] for he himself was wild and harmless’ (*TH*, 71). Eric – degenerate by society’s standards – becomes the ideal pastoral subject, a prelapsarian whose goodness preserves him from society’s ills. Sukey, too, is described in terms of her animality; she becomes a ‘quick-breathing creature with shining eyes’, and ‘a young wild-cat’ (*TH*, 53, 75). Sukey is enlivened by Eric’s other-worldliness; his difference, so often used by others to set him apart, becomes a factor in the construction of her subjectivity. Eric’s disability performs a necessary narrative role: through his union with Sukey, Warner tests the possibilities of non-normative love and sexuality,<sup>58</sup> and explores questions of social justice. As against a social identity defined through incapacity, disability here functions as an enabling concept through which Warner destabilises hegemonic constructions of identity.

For Laura, spinsterhood similarly enacts a disqualification from normative sexual discourse; as a social designation, it implies the surplus and suspect. After her father’s death, she moves to London ‘feeling rather as if she were a piece of family property forgotten in the will’, and is subsequently ‘absorbed’ into Henry’s household (*LW*, 9). Her predicament reflects Warner’s lamentation that ‘to be feme sole [...] hands you over, no more claim to consideration than a biscuit’.<sup>59</sup> But, like disability, spinsterhood also suggests deviance. Writing in 1934, Winifred Holtby emphasised the spinster’s marginality, writing that while her status had ‘no recognizable value’, it also cast doubts upon ‘her decency, her normality, even her sanity’.<sup>60</sup> Laura’s embrace of spinsterhood signals transgression and disrupts the domestic. Her rejection of Apsley Terrace for a life of rural solitude signals the novel’s reconceptualisation of female agency; no longer subject or dependent, Laura seeks spatial and sexual alterity. In her detailed queer reading of *Lolly Willowes*, Garrity argues that the novel’s patterning of natural imagery, and in particular its recurring floral motif, is evidence of Warner’s ‘code for lesbianism’.<sup>61</sup> At Lady Place, Laura stains her wrist with the juice from a crushed geranium; later, standing in the London greengrocer’s, she experiences a moment of ‘great longing’ while looking at a bunch of chrysanthemums: ‘Their curled petals were deep garnet colour [...]. She longed for the moment

when she might stroke her hand over those mop heads' (*LW*, 6, 72, 74). These moments are effective in the process of Laura's eroticisation, instances in which she experiences 'bodily pleasure and renewal' through contact with the natural world.<sup>62</sup>

However, Garrity's search for indicators of same-sex desire – in particular moments of female intimacy, such as Laura's evenings with Mrs Leak and her dance with the red-haired Emily at the witch's Sabbath – doesn't fully account for Warner's textual strategy of ambiguity.<sup>63</sup> Certainly, Laura enjoys female company, but she also desires solitude: 'While she lived her solitudes were hers inalienably; she and the kitten, the witch and the familiar, would live on at Great Mop, growing old together' (*LW*, 146). The landscape responds to and communicates her desire for space: 'She felt that nothing could ever again disturb her peace. Wherever she strayed the hills folded themselves round her like the fingers of a hand' (*LW*, 106). Her celibacy – built upon self-sufficiency and autonomy, and thus rejecting heteronormative desire – is her chosen sexual identity.<sup>64</sup> As Peter Swaab notes, Laura belongs to 'the community of the unmarried' for whom 'a happy ending may be a solitary one'.<sup>65</sup> Warner advocates an individualised sexuality that aligns with Sedgwick's all-encompassing queerness, in which identity is greater than the sum total of a person's sexual proclivity, instead reflecting multiplicity, possibility and resonance. Laura's wild herbs, her solitary walks and her communion with nature perform as pastoral signifiers of her queer identity.

For Sukey, too, the Georgic setting of *The True Heart* communicates her desire. Eric leads her to the overgrown orchard of an abandoned cottage, where, amid the fruit trees, she begins to sew. The space is enclosed, hedged with thorns, and yet it is a wilderness, the fruit tasting of 'a curious watery sweetness' (*TH*, 38). It is a pastoral idyll, in which they experience freedom – 'for a time they strayed in silence' (*TH*, 39) – and the privacy to imagine a life together. As Sukey sits beneath a pear tree, she thinks, 'this [is] a peaceful place in which to play at keeping house' (*TH*, 39). Sukey presents an image of contented pastoral industry; taking out her needlework, she creates a domestic setting within the landscape itself. In Laura and Sukey's search for alternative ways of living, Warner explores pastoral settings as emancipatory, private and secure.<sup>66</sup>

Warner lived out her spatial politics: in 1930, she moved from London to East Chaldon in Dorset, where she began living with the poet Valentine Ackland. For Warner, rural Dorset was orientation and anchorage; the day after she and Ackland became lovers, they lay 'in

the hollowed tump of the Five Maries, listening to the wind blowing over our happiness'. In her diary, Warner heralded a beginning: 'This new life'.<sup>67</sup>

## Notes

- 1 'The Essex Marshes', in *With the Hunted: Selected Writings of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Peter Tolhurst (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), p. 29.
- 2 'The Essex Marshes', p. 32.
- 3 'The Way By Which I Have Come', in *With the Hunted*, p. 15.
- 4 'The Way By Which I Have Come', p. 13.
- 5 'The Essex Marshes', p. 32.
- 6 David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 73.
- 7 Stanley Baldwin, *On England* (London: Philip Allan, 1926), p. 6.
- 8 G. M. Trevelyan, *Clio, A Muse* (London: Longmans, 1930), p. 5; Vaughan Cornish, *Scenery and the Sense of Sight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. xii.
- 9 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 89.
- 10 Page references to *Lolly Willows* (London: Virago Press, 2012) and *The True Heart* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929) will be given within the text of the essay.
- 11 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 42.
- 12 Ralph M. Robinson, *The Penn Country and the Chilterns* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1929), p. 6.
- 13 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 26.
- 14 The Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), '*Penn Country*' Branch: *Rules, Aims, Objects and Membership, With an Introduction by Ralph M. Robinson*, Pamphlet No. 1, February 1931, p. 3.
- 15 'The Way By Which I Have Come', p. 15.
- 16 Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (eds.), *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (London: Guilford Press, 1994), p. 10.
- 17 Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt, 'Footsteps of Red Ink: Body and Landscape in *Lolly Willows*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003), p. 459.
- 18 Batsford cited in Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 75.
- 19 Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 161.
- 20 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 73.
- 21 'The Essex Marshes', p. 29.
- 22 Mary Jacobs, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral 1925–1934', in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893–1978*, ed. Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simons (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p. 62.
- 23 Simon Miller, 'Urban Dreams in Rural Reality: Land and Landscape in English Culture, 1920–45', *Rural History* 6, no. 1 (1995), pp. 89–102 (p. 90).
- 24 Jeremy Burchardt describes the rapid urban developments of the 1920s and 1930s as an 'intense phase of suburban growth' in *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p. 89. See also Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 1; Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, pp. 17–26; Clara Jones, 'Virginia Woolf and "The Villa Jones" (1931)', *Woolf Studies Annual* 22 (2016), pp. 75–95.
- 25 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 16.
- 26 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 25.
- 27 Baldwin, *On England*, p. 7.
- 28 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 26.
- 29 Matless notes that 'Between 1918 and 1939 open-air leisure in England took on a new scale and scope', typified by the formation of the Ramblers' Association in 1935 (*Landscape and Englishness*, pp. 62–70). The formation of new leisure clubs and associations was accompanied by a growing body of environmental literature warning of the effects of tourism on rural landscapes. See also Ralph M. Robinson, *The Penn Country and the Chilterns* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1929), pp. 4–6; CPRE, '*Penn Country*' Branch, *Rules, Aims, Objects and Membership* (1931); Mary Butts, 'Warning to Hikers' (1925) in *'Ashe of Rings' and Other Writings* (New York: McPherson, 1998), p. 267.

- 30 Vaughan Cornish, *The Scenery of England* (London: The Council for the Preservation of Rural England, 1932), p. 11.
- 31 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 77; <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/hiking-36495>, accessed 31 August 2017.
- 32 Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p.77.
- 33 'The Essex Marshes', p. 16.
- 34 *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (London: Virago Press, 1978), p. 45.
- 35 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 8.
- 36 See Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 2–19; E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (eds.), *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), pp. 1–25; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 1–18; Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), pp. 1–31; Richard Phillips, David Shuttleton and Diane Watt (eds.), *De-Centering Sexualities* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1999), pp. 1–19.
- 37 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 8.
- 38 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, pp. 8–9.
- 39 Jacobs, 'Politics of the English Pastoral', p. 64.
- 40 Jacobs, 'Politics of the English Pastoral', pp. 79, 63.
- 41 Jacobs, 'Politics of the English Pastoral', p. 81.
- 42 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 326.
- 43 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 309.
- 44 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 381.
- 45 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 157.
- 46 Janet Zandy, *Hands: Physical Labour, Class, and Cultural Work*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 1.
- 47 Zandy, *Hands*, p. xi.
- 48 Zandy, *Hands*, p. 1.
- 49 Prior to Laura's move to Apsley Terrace, Warner shows the tuning of her body to her environment. At Lady Place, Laura's legs are 'very slim and frisky, they liked climbing trees and climbing haycocks', but on her mother's death they are forced to 'retire from the world', and are confined to a life lived beneath skirts. These new clothes 'that smelt so queerly' suggest the inevitability of Laura's trapped existence, made manifest through the suppression of her lithe body. Her legs (metonymic of her whole being) have been 'subdued into young-ladyhood' (*LW*, 18).
- 50 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 149, 147.
- 51 Garrity argues that Warner 'employ[s] an individualized discourse of inversion that relies on elements of fantasy, evasion, dissimulation, and displacement' (*Step-daughters of England*, p. 140). Several studies connect Warner's genre-crossing literary style with her genderqueer politics. In *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), Elizabeth English explains that fantasy 'served as a strategy for writing the lesbian and provided a language for modernist and mainstream authors alike to navigate [...] the social and cultural complexities of the time' (pp. 1–2). See also Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1993), p. 88; Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (eds.), *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Woman and the National Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 134; Jane Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner' in *Women Writers and the City*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p. 136.
- 52 'Women as Writers', in *With the Hunted*, p. 231; Maud Ellmann, 'The Art of Bi-Location: Sylvia Townsend Warner' in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920–1945*, ed. Maroula Joannou (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 84.
- 53 Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 159.
- 54 Jacobs, 'Politics of the English Pastoral', p. 71.
- 55 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p. 8.
- 56 Margrit Sildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*

- (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 11.
- 57 Sildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability*, pp. 2, 10.
- 58 See Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 1–32; Lennard J. Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006); Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (eds.), *Sex and Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 173–85; and Sildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability*, pp. 2–14.
- 59 Letter to William Maxwell, in Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 140.
- 60 Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (London: John Lane, 1934), pp. 128, 133.
- 61 Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 150.
- 62 Garrity, *Step-daughters of England*, p. 162.
- 63 Warner's ambiguity over Laura's sexual orientation might reflect contemporaneous anxieties concerning censure of literary depictions of homosexuality. In 1928, Virginia Woolf evaded censure with *Orlando*, though Radclyffe Hall was tried for obscenity for her portrayal of sexual 'inversion' in *The Well of Loneliness*.
- 64 An emergent strand of queer studies examines celibacy and its erotic manifestations as a distinct sexuality, which both subverts social hierarchies and rejects heterosexual norms. See Lisa Isherwood, *The Power of Erotic Celibacy: Queering Heterosexuality* (Edinburgh: A&C Black, 2006), pp. 177–33; Benjamin A. Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 1–35.
- 65 Peter Swaab, 'The Queerness of Lolly Willowes', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2010*, pp. 35–7.
- 66 Warner later complicates this model of pastoral contentment. In *Summer Will Show* (1936), Sophia Willoughby associates pastoral settings with responsibility, husbandry and trauma; indeed, she resists their pull, having learned that country life is far from idyllic. See Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (London: Virago, 1987); David James, 'Capturing the Scale of Fiction at Mid-Century' in *Regional Modernisms*, ed. Neal Alexander and James Moran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 106–20; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 26, 130.
- 67 Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, (London: Penguin Books, 2015), pp. 70–1.

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