

Wendell Berry and the Work of Local Culture

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When Salman Rushdie in his book *Imaginary Homelands* refers to the migrant as “the central or defining figure of the twentieth century” (277), he has in mind the fact that in the modern world practically all human beings are uprooted and displaced, identifying with no particular local cultural community. Instead of being educated to stay at home to serve the needs of local communities, human beings are now educated to leave home in pursuit of a career that, in Wendell Berry’s words, turns them into “modern urban nomads” (*Harmony* 163), moving from one standardized suburban home to another in quest of professional advancement and recognition. Like everyone else in the alienated modern (or postmodern) world, the most widely recognized and admired writers and intellectuals are also now usually nomads and expatriates, individuals who fled the rural towns and villages where they were born in order to seek fame and recognition in metropolitan cultural centers like New York, Paris, or London. That was the “career trajectory” of modernist writers like Pound, Hemingway, Eliot, Wolfe, and Joyce, and it continues to be the pattern for postmodernists like Rushdie, Kingston, Naipaul, and Coetzee. Not only do such writers feel that they “belong to the planet” instead of one particular local cultural community (Kingston 107), but they see little that is negative in their lack of specific local roots. Indeed, local writers like Willa Cather or Wallace Stegner are generally dismissed simply as “regional writers” or “local colorists” in contemporary intellectual circles (McDowell 377, Love 230) while “nomadism,” “decentering,” and “transnationalism” are touted as unqualified values by many of our most prominent intellectuals. “We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time” (Rushdie, *Shame* 91), and despite the deepening environmental crisis in which we now find ourselves, few literary scholars seem to see a problem in that fact.

In this age of specialization and uprooted nomadic lives, Wendell Berry stands out as a writer who, after a few brief years of the usual professional nomadic existence, made a decision to go back to the rural Kentucky agricultural community in which he had grown up, devoting his life to the cultivation not only of the local farm land but also of the local cultural values on which it depends. In the forty or more years since making that decision, Berry has supported himself and his family mainly by farming and writing, pouring out a steady stream of highly regarded poems, novels, short stories, and essays devoted not only to arguing the

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value of local communities and traditional agricultural techniques but also to enriching the culture of the small agricultural community to which he belongs. Altogether, Berry has devoted more than twelve novels and story collections (not to mention poetry and essays) to fleshing out the history, culture, topography, and ecology of his fictional Port William, making it the next most fully chronicled American literary landscape after Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. If the function of "local culture" is, as Berry himself maintains, to preserve the memory of a community's past and "the knowledge of how the place may be well and lovingly used" (*People* 166), then Berry's output of novels, poems, and essays represents one of the most significant contributions to a local culture in all of literature. Among American writers, only Willa Cather and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings have written of a local community with the kind of loving attention that he has shown, and neither of them has done so with anything like his energy or persistence.

While devoting himself to the enrichment of his local cultural community and, as a farmer, to the nurture and informed cultivation of his land, Berry has also become one of the most persuasive and influential spokesmen in America for the value of community and sustainable agricultural practices. In an age in which education, the economy, and popular culture all conspire to make nomadic drifters out of us, Berry has spent much of his time and talent pointing out the disastrous environmental and ecological effects of cultural displacement and alienation. The extermination of North American wildlife and depletion of its topsoil was carried out by European settlers who, in sharp contrast to the native Americans already living there, were "placeless people" (*House* 183), lacking not only in "intimate knowledge" of the places they were invading but also in any responsible sense of attachment and dedication (*Unsettling* 31, *Harmony* 67-68). Only if human beings see themselves as part of the natural world, "as growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants" (*House* 178)--only if they "belong by history, culture, deeds, association, and affection" to a particular place on earth (*Standing* 58)--Berry argues, can we be sure that the health and vitality of the earth will continue to be safeguarded. Not only are modern human beings increasingly alienated from any particular place on earth, however, but they have also rejected any attempt to limit their powers and prerogatives by assigning them to a specific niche in the cosmic order of things, by imposing any code of decorum and propriety on their actions (*Standing* 124, 127). As Berry sees it, the decimation of the natural world that characterizes the last three or four centuries of human history can be traced back mainly to these two forms of human displacement.

One good thing about Berry's view of this alienation, as opposed to that of most postmodern writers and thinkers, however, is that it is a product of a particular historical evolution, not an inherent component of human nature. As Berry sees it, it is the modern

Enlightenment world-view with its distinction between mind and matter and its mechanistic conception of the natural world that is responsible for our alienation (*Unsettling* 106). We are not “natural aliens” (Evernden) but metaphysical ones, victims of a philosophy that has reduced the whole world to nothing but raw material for our intellectual or manufacturing processes (*Unsettling* 56), that has cut us off from the “originary kinship” that we once shared with the rest of creation (Harrison 193). The good thing about this view, of course, is that a shift in our attitudes and values can profoundly alter our relationship to the world and our treatment of it, that we can still be taught to see ourselves as part of a “beloved community” (*People* 87) or a “great animal continuum” (Fernandez-Armesto 37) and to alter our behavior in accordance with these views. This re-orientation seems finally to be starting to take effect around the world, and if it succeeds in the end in drawing us back from the brink of disaster, Wendell Berry will be one of the main people we have to thank.

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