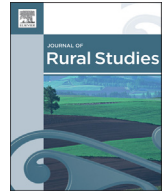




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# Performing a New England landscape: Viewing, engaging, and belonging



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## ABSTRACT

This research considered how rural landscapes and place identity are produced through private landowners' work. The notion of performance is explored from two perspectives: as a research method and as a powerful conceptual tool that affords a multi-scalar tracing of the connections between belonging, aesthetics, and the legacy of tourism narratives in a contemporary rural place. Interviews with rural Vermont landowners reveal that they conduct a diverse array of activities on their properties, but hold remarkably similar perceptions of the key elements in an ideal Vermont landscape. This vision closely matches the pastoral ideal that was manufactured for tourist consumption beginning in the late 19th century. Landowners engage in land-shaping activities that reproduce an ideal, agrarian view, but not necessarily agricultural livelihoods. Researcher engagement in a land-shaping activity afforded insight into the community and public elements of private landowners' land use practices. This mixed-methods approach revealed how landowners' sense of attachment to place and the doing of land-shaping activities contribute to the performance of a regional New England landscape.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Mr Jackson's wall

Mr Jackson lived in a white farmhouse a half mile down the dirt road from the village common. Massive sugar maple trees shaded his front lawn. His weathered three-story barn sat next to the house. Green fields rolled away from the homestead, climbing the hills to the west where they met a hardwood forest. His farm was admired by many in the small town of 2000 residents. As his property was located across the road from the town's school, looking at Mr Jackson's field for browsing deer, or to give a friendly wave to Mr Jackson himself, was a twice-daily occurrence for many people in town.

Mr Jackson was born in the house. Retired and a bachelor, he no longer farmed the property but cared for it full time, maintaining his rhubarb, potato and tomato plants in the garden, and making sure that a local farmer hayed his fields. His pride was the incredible length of stone walls that lined the property. Their origin was a mystery. Family members told him a soldier who deserted from the Civil War had built them, but he did not know for sure.

The only domesticated animal left on the property was Morris, his cat, so the stone walls no longer served to contain grazing cows or sheep. Yet, Mr Jackson continued to care for the walls. He put rocks that went askew back into order. He drove his riding lawn-mower close to the walls to keep the brush down.

Several years back, as he reached the age of ninety, neighbors realized that Mr Jackson was no longer able to keep up with the maintenance of the yards and yards—perhaps even a mile—of stone walls. Raspberry canes and saplings hid the walls from view. The townspeople organized a work crew. Clippers, chain saws, pick-up trucks, work gloves, children, women, and men were brought to bear on the problem, and within a day, the unruly vegetation was gone and the walls were revealed once again.

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Today the walls are enveloped in brush. Mr Jackson passed away a couple of years ago. His daughter plans to sub-divide the property for new house construction. The old maples were cut down. The garden is untended. Town residents talk about the history of Mr Jackson's place with a fond sadness and its future development with regret, as if they are watching Mr Jackson's pride fade away along with the history of the place.

We share this story from one of the authors' experience (Morse) because it calls up several questions that we have pursued in our research with rural landowners in New England, USA. How are former agricultural lands 'worked' in a post-productivist place? What is the relationship between private property, regional landscapes, and identity in rural New England? How does engagement in land-shaping activities influence attachment to place? And, why do people care so much about the neighbor's place? What meaning do they find there?

## 1.2. Research framework

Our research was conducted in the rural state of Vermont, USA, where agriculture has a dynamic history, a powerful association with place identity, and a complex relationship with the tourism industry. Interviews with landowners reveal that they hold a remarkably similar vision of what Vermont's landscape should include: open fields, farm buildings, grazing animals, forested hills, and small villages. This is precisely the pastoral view that was manufactured and marketed by state leaders for tourist consumption in the late 19th century. The pastoral landscape, and its marketing, we argue, has been internalized by residents who have come to regard an agrarian landscape as the 'authentic' Vermont. With the pastoral vision in mind, landowners engage in land-shaping activities that reproduce an ideal view, but not necessarily agricultural livelihoods. They perform a regional landscape, a place to which they feel a strong sense of belonging.

We approach the landscapes in question from two perspectives: 1) interviews capturing research participants' reflections; and 2) an engaged ethnography of land-clearing practice. Our primary aims in this research were to better understand how the post-productivist New England landscape is produced and performed through landowner work, and to gain insight into the cultural values, identities, and feelings of attachment to place that landowners express. Our mixed research methods afforded the opportunity to explore performance as both a theoretical approach and a research method. This paper therefore explores the notion of performance at the scales of regional landscape and individual tasks, and traces the connections between belonging, aesthetics, and the legacy of tourism narratives in a contemporary rural place.

## 2. Rural place production: performance, identity, and the view

### 2.1. Production of place in rural studies

Our research with landowners follows the lead of scholars who have designed theoretical approaches that take into account the multiple meanings of the rural (constructions), the production of places (through tasks, performances, and materialities), and scale (everyday, local, and global) in their analysis of rural communities (Abrams and Bliss, 2012; Cloke and Jones, 2001; Edensor, 2006; Galani-Moutafi, 2013; Gray, 2000; Halfacree, 2004, 2006; Woods, 2009, 2010; Yarwood, 2012). Cultural geographers' recent work on tracing materialities offers new approaches to capturing the diverse engagements between multiple bodies in the production of place (Tolia-Kelly, 2013). Both approaches have been attributed to the 'relational turn' which Heley and Jones describe as 'an increasing

recognition of the intertwined and co-constituent production of rural space through material and discursive phenomenon, processes and practices' (2012, 209).

The inclusion of nearly everything – material, human, non-human, narrated, sensed – in our stories of place brings its challenges. Rose and Wylie (2006) observe that while the proliferation of topological metaphors in geographic theory has enriched our understanding of the relational connections between things, it has left our accounts 'flat', attributing all actors the same value. Similarly, Tolia-Kelly (2013) points out that some research in material geographies provides only a 'surface' description and mappings of the elements of networks. She calls for work in material geography to take into account political contexts and the power of things to have effects, and to identify their situatedness in aesthetics and meaning. In other words, analyses of the material must work toward providing explanation of events and representations.

The taskscape concept, described by Ingold (1993) and developed by Cloke and Jones (2001), provides a starting point for this kind of analysis. Specifically, Cloke and Jones' analysis of an orchard offers a method to observe how discourses about land ownership and values are put into practice through embodied actions which result in the ongoing production of place. They recognize that places are fluid, and are continually re-worked through the simultaneous enactment of traditional practices and new methods. Of particular relevance to this study is their attention to the way that the orchard is marketed to tourists, drawing on views of the past which are intended to elicit nostalgic emotions amongst potential customers. Rural places like apple orchards can function as modern sites of production and as containers of the past. Not interested in reproducing romantic notions of authenticity, Cloke and Jones instead seek to uncover the 'character' of a place, a slippery concept that moves away from cataloging the elements that constitute a place to uncovering the meanings it holds.

### 2.2. Performance of rural culture, bodies, and place

Social science researchers are increasingly turning to physical engagement in activities to glean other-than-visual or verbal forms of experience in their accounts of place production, for as Crouch and Malm (2003) have asserted, '...landscape, place and space, are never ontologically given but developed through practices, discursively grasped in an embodied way. The subject in landscape is spacing, practising, producing, doing things in and with space' (2003, 255). Researchers have focused on activities such as walking (Edensor, 2010; Powell, 2010; Wylie, 2005; Ingold, 2011), farming (Carolan, 2008), wilderness rescue training (Yarwood, 2012), and angling (Eden and Bear, 2011) as a means to gain insight into how people produce place and make meaning from engagement with places.

'Performance' is a powerful theoretical tool in the investigation of the connections between rurality, identity and place production through embodied activity (Woods, 2010). As Edensor explains, '... the ways in which the materialities and meanings of rural space are reproduced, consolidated and contested, along with the identities of those who dwell and move within them, can also be considered by examining how rurality is staged so as to accommodate particular enactions' (2006, 484). Performance takes place within multiple theaters: through scripted performances of rural culture in reenactments at historical museums or television shows, and also in specific embodied activities and competencies such as skiing, wood turning, or interacting with others in a country store. Edensor notes that performances 'are never only visual but involve a diverse sensual encounter with the rural' (2006, 488), and it follows that the aesthetic aspects of rural place-making need to make their way into our conceptualizations of rurality and identity formation.

Cloke's review of similar work includes a variety of performances such as walking, farming, residing, and hunting, yet we note less emphasis in the literature on the performance of rural work and its implications in production of places and identity, a topic we sought to explore in this study.

### 2.3. Landscape engagements, work, and identity in rural areas

Rural communities undergoing significant economic, environmental or demographic change are key sites to study a number of processes: identity production in relation to landscape, local adaptation to social change, and contested landscape activities. Several recent investigations of rural communities center on the differing views on landscape held by social groups in communities that have transitioned from mainly productivist economies to consumption-based economies (Cline and Seidl, 2009; Frisvoll, 2012; Mahon, 2007). Galani-Moutafi's (2013) research focused on longtime residents' and newcomers' landscape engagements in a region of rural Greece that had formerly relied on agricultural production but has since shifted to a tourism-based economy. In his comparison of a life-long resident's view of the land to those of a young couple who recently began an agritourism business, he found that the life-long resident's identity was deeply rooted in working and improving the land, while the newcomers' 'acted upon rather than interacted with the land' (2013, 108).

Galani-Moutafi's focus on sensuous engagement with the landscape, and especially the connections between work and identity, is reminiscent of White's (1995) analysis of work in the context of environmental struggles in the Pacific Northwest. Productive work, White held, has been demonized by environmentalists who see it as destructive to natural places. Yet work is a way of knowing nature; it requires an engagement of the senses and attention to the micro-geographies of landscape, similar to the way that recreation requires attentiveness to landscape. White's analysis suggests that work and play, if viewed as bodily engagements, may not be so far apart as one might first imagine. Similarly, recent research with amenity-driven newcomers to rural places suggests that categorization of residents into new landscape consumers and long-time producers of extractive goods may be too simplified. Studies of new landowners in rural areas of Australia (Gill et al., 2010) and the American West (Abrams and Bliss, 2012) have found that new landowners engage in both production and consumption-oriented activities on their lands, and that such landscape engagements are complex and diverse (for a review of this work see Abrams et al., 2012).

### 2.4. The importance of the view in rural contexts

Extractive work – crop production, pastoral agriculture, fishing, logging and mining – has been the primary force shaping rural landscapes. In rural places where tourism has taken hold, the view crafted by rural work has become commodified, produced, or at the least maintained, for visual consumption (Urry, 1992). Visitors to the countryside hold expectations for the view; it must not be contaminated by technology, danger, the ubiquitous, or the modern (Urry, 1992).

The view is often described as an attribute that is valued primarily by visitors, a value that can conflict with the less attractive processes associated with extractive industries (Cline and Seidl, 2009). There has been little work in rural studies that investigates not only how rural residents feel about 'their' view but also how aesthetics impact their everyday lives. One exception is Burton's (2004) analysis of the linkages between values, aesthetics, and farmer identity in a grain and livestock-producing region of the UK. He found that farmers engaged in viewing of other farmers' fields as

a means of assessing the qualities of both farm and farmer. Of relevance to this study, he also traced the connections between farmer, family farm, and regional identity and found that regional identity 'results from a merger of a sense of history and a sense of place with the physical characteristics of the land itself' (Burton, 2004, 209). This insight leads us to consider how regional identity may be housed in the material landscape itself and perpetuated through both landscaping activities and the act of viewing landscape.

Benediktsson (2007) has chided landscape geographers for not taking the visual seriously. Listing a number of reasons for geography's neglect of the aesthetic, including that such work has been regarded as a superficial reading of place, his case study of environmental activism in Iceland demonstrates the power of the visual in political struggle. Seeking to take the aesthetic seriously, our research asked how perceptions of place that are crafted for tourist consumption interact and frame the dominant and desired views of residents. The next section of the paper briefly summarizes the development of Vermont's deliberately-constructed pastoral identity.

## 3. The production of Vermont's pastoral landscape

The social construction of New England's regional identity and that of Vermont, a small state located in northern New England, is well documented (Brown, 1995; Conforti, 2011; Harrison, 2006; Hinrichs, 1996; Searls, 2006; Vanderbeck, 2006). Today, the state of Vermont is lightly populated (625,741 residents in 2010), mainly white (although racial and ethnic diversity is increasing), and rural, as measured by the percentage of people living in towns of 2500 or fewer residents (US Census, 2010). While Vermont has a strong dairy sector, is the country's largest producer of maple syrup, and is experiencing what some have called an 'agricultural renaissance' with high growth in the number of small diversified farms, most Vermonters do not rely on farming for their livelihoods (National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2007; US Census, 2010). Vermont's major employment sectors are services, retail trade, and manufacturing. It is a post-productivist economy in a physical environment dominated by forest cover. Yet, much of the landscape looks pastoral. An overview of Vermont's landscape history puts the pastoral view and the production of Vermont's particular identity in the New England region into perspective.

According to environmental historians, at the time of European contact, the interior of northern New England was comprised of a complex set of forested environments (Cronon, 1983; Wessels, 1997). Non-native settlement of Vermont happened relatively late in New England's history, beginning at the end of the French and Indian War around 1760 (Wessels, 1997). Land in northern New England was settled swiftly; deforestation soon followed. The need for open pastures and cropland, demand for firewood and timber, and markets for forest products drove the removal of trees (Ryden, 2011). The clearing of marginal lands located on steep hillsides was accelerated by the advent of sheep farming in the early 19th century. It is estimated that by 1850, 70% of Vermont's forest had been removed (Johnson, 1980, 44).

Despite its rapid settlement, Vermont never developed a high population density, and its industrial development has always been light in comparison with its New England neighbors. The opening of the American lands to the west following the Civil War, poor farming conditions, the advent of the railroad, and a lack of work have been blamed for Vermont's high outmigration rates in the late 19th century (Brown, 1995; Harrison, 2005; Searls, 2006). Farm abandonment resulted. Brush and trees began to grow back. Rather than celebrating the return of the forest, Vermonters regarded the re-growth in pastures as a sign of Vermont's moral decline

(Harrison, 2005) and a reminder of their children's departure (Brown, 1995). Vermont began to look like a failed state. However, Vermont's relative lack of industrial development was exactly what southern New Englanders came to regard as one of the state's most valued attributes. When southern New Englanders looked north to Vermont they saw the past and an agrarian ideal.

Conforti's (2011) account of the construction of New England identity carefully separates the cultural values which shaped the dominant narratives about New England from the material realities that existed on the ground. The iconic white, neoclassical village circling a town common was retroactively produced in the 19th century to fit the post-Revolutionary image of what old New England had been. The region came to represent early America and republican values. The vision of New England as white, homogeneous, and untroubled by change, as a 'pastoral middle landscape,' was promulgated in fiction, poetry, and art (Conforti, 2011, 27). Yet, such imagining required one to overlook the factories, mill towns, and ethnic diversity that were literally re-working the landscape, especially in southern New England.

Brown writes that tourism in late 19th century New England was driven by 'a profound sentimentalization,' a longing for an earlier time and place (1995, 8). As southern New England rapidly industrialized, 'authentic' New England moved northward to the more remote states of Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire (although these places had their own mills and diverse populations). This movement north coincided with Vermont's landscape and demographic crisis. State promoters, eager to capitalize on the opportunities tourism could provide, constructed and marketed the view of a bucolic Vermont landscape that aligned with the notion that it contained the rural values, practices, and places that southern New England had lost. Now a largely deforested environment (but in the beginning stages of reforestation), open fields, hillside farms, villages, and small woodlots on ridges were the key elements of the landscape that was promoted in ad campaigns, logos, and other print material. Government efforts to promote the state began in the late 1800s, with a program that marketed abandoned farms as potential second homes to out-of-staters (Brown, 1995; Harrison, 2005, 2006). Over the course of the 20th century, activities and experiences for tourists proliferated and diversified from pick-your-own apple orchards and maple sugaring operations to skiing and bicycling vacations (Harrison, 2006). As Brown (1995) and Harrison (2006) have argued, these activities blurred the distinctions between work and leisure. Farms, orchards, sugarbushes, and homes came to function as sites for both production and consumption. Over time, one-dimensional views of Vermont took hold in the regional geographical imagination. Place, identity and the view became deeply interconnected. As we spoke with contemporary Vermont landowners, we heard and saw evidence of the enduring connection between the performance of place and identity, and the on-going production of pastoral landscapes. As we designed our research scheme, we purposefully included mixed methods that could potentially capture landowner perceptions, land use data, and land-shaping activities in order to conduct a multi-faceted analysis at multiple scales.

#### 4. Research approach and methods

Data for this research were generated from a broader project that considered the multifunctionality of agroecosystems in the Lake Champlain watershed of Vermont (Fig. 1). The goal of the study was to assess a diversity of metrics across ecological, production, and cultural dimensions; and the approach was multi-disciplinary. Our work brought together perspectives from human geography, geographic information systems, agroecology, and ecology (Lovell et al., 2010). We collected biophysical data (e.g. maps, plant and

bird inventories), and listened closely to the voices of Vermont landowners and the perspectives they have on the management and evolution of their rural landscape. This paper focuses on the social and cultural dimensions of the research.

Approximately 86% of Vermont's land area is privately owned.<sup>1</sup> Land use planning is mainly conducted at the local (town) level in Vermont; there is no state-wide land management plan. Important exceptions to this are Act 250, which regulates larger-scale development projects at the state level (State of Vermont, July 1 2013) and Act 200, which ensures that Act 250 regulation takes place at the most local level possible (Department of Housing and Community Development, 2003 (est.)). In addition to these, a state-wide program commonly referred to as 'Current Use' offers a lower property tax rate to landowners who conduct either agriculture or forestry practices meeting specific guidelines (Vermont Department of Taxes, 2014). While this program exerts influence on landscape change from the state level, we emphasize the point that the majority of land use activities in Vermont are not regulated by the state, or promoted by subsidies, but are directed by local zoning laws that differ greatly from town to town. In general, land use regulations are liberal (especially compared to places in Europe), and therefore many of the land-shaping activities that take place in Vermont are the result of independent decisions of private property owners. To best capture the motivations and activities, that create a New England landscape, we focused our study on private landowners.

##### 4.1. Structured interview design and methods

This research drew on two methods: structured interviews with private landowners and an ethnography of engagement in land-shaping activities. We interviewed 79 landowners on their properties using a structured questionnaire that generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Landowners were initially identified by parcel ownership within the randomly-selected sites of the umbrella study. Sites were selected at random along each of the seven major waterways in the Vermont portion of the Lake Champlain basin and stratified by the length of the waterway. Using detailed land cover data, each site was placed along a gradient from 100% forest cover to 100% agriculture. Landowners of these parcels were either approached in person or contacted on the phone by researchers. At least one landowner was recruited to participate from each of the sixty study sites.

The interviews were held in the summers of 2009, 2011 and 2012, in two distinct phases. In both phases a formal questionnaire instrument was employed. The 2009 interviews contained a subset of the overall questions; they tended to last less than one hour and interviewees were not compensated. Responses were recorded on paper. Interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012 were more in-depth, expanding on the original questions in the 2009 interviews, and addressing fine-scale features on their property (Lovell et al., 2010), and responses were typed directly into a digital interview form; they lasted as long as two hours, and participants were compensated US\$200 for their time. Participants were asked to describe their land (size, land cover), how they used their land (for recreation, farming, and other uses), and how they felt about various cultural aspects (aesthetics, historical legacy, spiritual value) of both their own property and the Vermont landscape more broadly. The questions

<sup>1</sup> This figure was computed using data from the Vermont Land Trust GIS office, accessed by private email on July 18, 2013. The metadata for Conserved Lands Database was originally created by: David Capen, Spatial Analysis Laboratory, 20090805, CadastralPublands\_CONSPUB: Public Lands Extract from the Vermont Conserved Lands Database August 2009, University of Vermont, Spatial Analysis Lab (SAL), Burlington, Vermont.



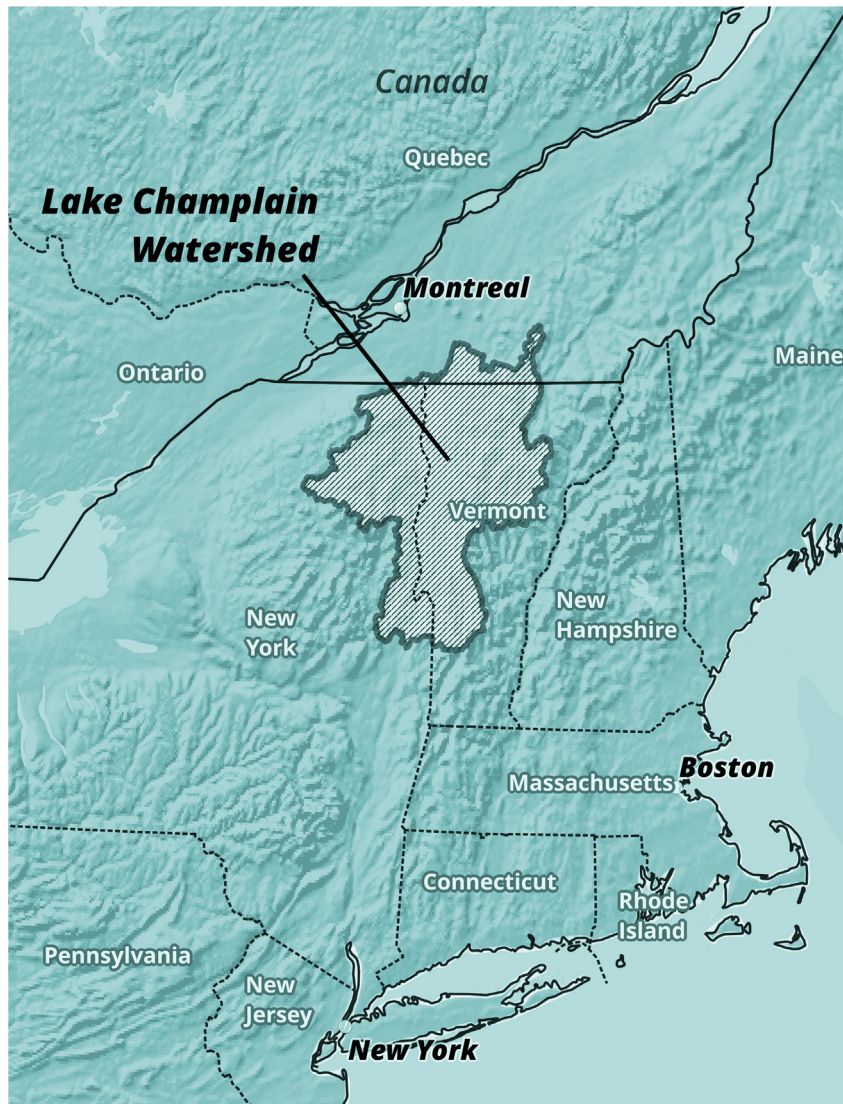


Fig. 1. Map of study area, northwestern Vermont, Lake Champlain watershed, USA (Watershed data source: Vermont Center for Geographic Information, 2014).

elicited a variety of data in numerical form, such as acreage of their property and estimates of the number of hours per week an interviewee spent doing outdoor recreation. Participants were asked to respond to several questions using a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5, with 1 less important or weakest and 5 as most important or strongest. These quantitative questions were followed with open-ended questions on neighbor interactions, family history on the land, and perceptions of landscape change over time. These questions allowed the interviewee to offer responses in their own words and to elaborate on specific questions. For example, interviewees were asked to rate the visual quality of Vermont with 1 as low and 5 as high. Then they were prompted to, “Describe what you like the most about the Vermont landscape”, followed by: “Describe what you least like about the Vermont landscape”. Roughly 70% of the results presented here were from questions that produced quantitative data and 30% were from open-ended questions.

#### 4.2. Data analysis

We used an iterative process to analyze the quantitative data and qualitative responses that the interview questionnaire generated. We first analyzed descriptive statistics using the SPSS analysis

package. Second, we investigated between-group responses using the chi-square and one-way ANOVA tests (as applicable), evaluated at the 90% confidence level, with  $p$ -values less than 0.1 identified as significant. Using these results as a guide, we looked to the qualitative data to either illustrate findings from the statistical analysis, or to generate additional questions for further statistical analysis. The responses to open-ended questions were coded by hand. Working between statistical analysis and the stories people shared, we were able to construct a multi-dimensional set of findings, and these findings motivated us to fold an entirely different research method into the study.

#### 4.3. Ethnography of engaged practice

In a review of work on performance and rurality, Woods noted, “Genuinely mixed-method or multi-method studies are largely missing in rural geography, at least beyond the basic level of following up a questionnaire survey with interviews, or quoting descriptive Census statistics as context for qualitative case studies’ (2010, 839). Our research sought to begin to fill this gap by extending our methods from interviews to an engaged ethnography of land-shaping activities. The lead author (Morse) took part

in one of the landscaping activities that the landowners reported on in the interviews as a means to learn through embodied experience. She and a small group of friends and family members cleared eight acres of overgrown pastureland on her property over the course of a weekend in the fall of 2013. She took field notes on her own experiences as well as the accounts offered by her co-workers. This ethnography was meant to provide a grounded, sensory, and micro-local dimension to our broader findings from the interview research. Following common practice, the names of the research participants have been removed to protect their identities.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Landowner research participants and their landscape engagements

The landowners we interviewed were, on average, long-time owners of their properties, long-term residents of Vermont, and owners of relatively large parcels of property. Fifty four percent (54.4%) of the interviewees owned parcels of land greater than 100 acres (40.5 ha). They owned property with diverse land cover: some were predominantly forested, others consisted mostly of open agricultural lands including crop, hay, and pasture fields, and others included a mix. Some properties were situated on the relatively flat lands of the Champlain Lowlands, while others were located on steep hillsides in the Green Mountain region.

The interviewees had lived on their property for an average of 26.7 years, and 43% had lived on their property for more than 25 years. The range for years living on property represented in the study was 1–84 years. A majority (64.5%) of interviewees had lived in Vermont for 25 years or longer, and nearly half (46.8%) had lived for more than 40 years in the state; the range for years living in Vermont was also 1–84 years.

Of the 79 interviews conducted, 49 were with men alone, 23 were with women alone, three were male–female couples, and four interviews did not have gender identified due to a recording error. We excluded the couples and four cases with unknown gender from a gender analysis of landowner and land characteristics and values. We found that the men interviewed had lived in Vermont significantly longer than the women (male average: 40 years; female average: 32 years;  $p = 0.077$ ), and men had lived on their properties significantly longer than women (male average: 28 years, female average: 21 years;  $p = 0.098$ ). Men were more likely to farm their property than women (55% of men farmed their property compared to 33% of women,  $p = 0.064$ ).

Despite the fact that over half of the interviewees (54.4%) owned more than 100 acres of land, full-time farming was conducted by a small minority of the landowners we interviewed. In this study, full-time farmers were those individuals who said they received 100% of their income from farming. While we recognize the complex and important role off-farm incomes play in family farm economies (see for example Donovan and Poole, 2014; Krammer et al., 2012; Meert et al., 2005; Mishra and Paudel, 2011; Pilgeram, 2011; Qasim and Knerl, 2013; van Leeuwen and Dekkers, 2013), our goal was to better understand how individuals perceive and engage with landscape based on their own personal identities and experiences. Therefore, we allowed people to self-identify as full-time farmers and did not interrogate the economic strategies of their households or farm businesses.

Only 15 of the respondents (19%) derived all of their income from farming, mainly from milk production and the associated dairy activities of raising heifers, growing forages, or harvesting hay. While relatively few made their livelihoods from full-time farming, 51% of landowners reported using their land for farming. Some of these landowners engaged in part-time farming (24%), but

the majority of part-time farmers earned less than half of their household income from farming. More than half of the landowners (57%) earned no income from farming. In summary, for all but 15 of the respondents, farming was either a part-time activity and/or an activity that did not contribute economically to the household, yet agricultural activities were frequently performed. Putting up hay, raising animals, gardening, or allowing others to farm the land took place on more than half of the properties.

Landowners reported other productive activities on their property: 51% cut firewood from their woodlots to heat their homes, 21% produced maple syrup, and a few mentioned harvesting wild edibles or cutting timber. Over half of the interviewees (52%) hunted for large game (deer, moose or bear) or allowed others to hunt on their property. Bird hunting was also common; 44% percent of landowners hunted for wild birds (turkeys and grouse mainly) or allowed others to do so on their property. Hunting, fishing, and vegetable gardening were activities that blurred the distinction between productive and recreational pursuits. As we talked with landowners, we learned that other tasks associated with caring for rural property were also regarded as both work and fun. For example, when asked about the recreational activities they do on their land, one dairy farmer said “weed whacking” (trimming back brush), and another man mentioned “snow-blowing” (clearing snow from driveways).

Our discussions with landowners revealed that most (87%) made their land accessible to others. According to Vermont law, people may access private property unless it is ‘posted’ (a process where the landowner obtains official ‘no trespassing’ signs from town government and must place them along the boundaries of their property). Landowners reported maintaining old roads and trails on their property for walking, skiing, and other activities, and allowed others to use them.

When it came to purely recreational engagements, landowners named a range of leisure activities, from walking to bird-watching to riding off-road vehicles. In summary, while landowners listed diverse modes of recreational and work activities, as a group they reported a high level of engagement with the landscape.

### 5.2. Landowners' perceptions of landscape change

While landowners engaged in different modes of interaction with their properties, they expressed very similar perceptions of, and desires for, the surrounding landscape. Development, in the form of construction of new homes and commercial buildings, was perceived as the dominant agent of landscape change in the recent past, and was viewed by many as something to be prevented in the future. When asked to describe how their property and the surrounding landscape have changed over time, 31 interviewees (39%) said housing and commercial development had taken place, and many indicated their displeasure with development. We note here that proximity to the ‘urban’ and developing areas (Chittenden County and a portion of Franklin County) may account for this concern about development. People seemed to describe development as something that moves or grows out of urban areas. One man referred to the development as ‘encroaching residential’ and another said that he sees ‘more buildings that don't fit the context of [the] rural character [of the surrounding area]’. Other changes noted included the reforestation of fields, changes to waterways and more frequent flooding. However, 27% of landowners said there has been very little alteration of the area; one person referred to the landscape as ‘remarkably static’.

The responses we received to the question ‘How would you like the landscape to look in thirty years?’ indicated that landowners would like the physical environment to remain static. Well over half of the interviewees (54%) said they do not want the landscape to

change in the future. Several landowners succinctly stated they want the landscape to be ‘just as it is.’ A woman who had lived in Vermont for 50 years said that if the land changes ‘we’ll lose a part of who we are.’ Others indicated they desired changes that would enhance what presently exists, mentioning they would like more open farmland, higher quality timber, increased vegetable production, and more conservation rather than development. There was remarkable uniformity in the answers to this question.

### 5.3. Attachment to Vermont and the ideal landscape

The solidarity the landowners in this research showed in their resistance to landscape change was also evident in their strong sense of attachment to Vermont’s landscape and their vision of the ideal Vermont landscape. In short, their ideal landscape looks like today’s landscape.

We asked a sub-set of participants (those interviewed in 2009,  $n = 53$ ) what they liked most about the Vermont landscape. A mixed agricultural landscape of open fields and forests, with rolling hills, was mentioned eighteen times, and the small scale of villages and towns, including low levels of development was named sixteen times. This same sub-set of landowners was asked what they did not like about the Vermont landscape. Over half of the interviewees could find no fault with the landscape, responding with ‘nothing’ or giving no response at all. Those who did find flaws named ‘sprawl,’ ‘development’ or ‘commercialization’ ( $n = 7$ ), or properties that were not being ‘kept up’ ( $n = 4$ ). From this perspective, the ‘natural’ landscape was appealing, but development and poor maintenance of property were regarded as problems.

We asked respondents to rank their attachment to both their own property and to the Vermont landscape. What we found surprised us: on a scale from 1 to 5 with 5 representing the deepest level of attachment, landowners ranked their attachment to the state at an average of 4.27, higher than their attachment to their own property (4.05). What accounts for a higher sense of belonging to an abstract state than to one’s own home property? To work toward answering this question, we considered landowner responses to more fine-grained questions about the attributes of landscape that matter most.

### 5.4. The importance of the pastoral view

Interviewees found the state of Vermont to be beautiful, and said that visual quality is the most important cultural attribute the land offers. On a 1–5 scale (least to most attractive), landowners rated the visual quality of Vermont at 4.63, placing the state’s visual quality higher than that of their own property (4.56). When asked to rate the importance of four cultural attributes associated with landscape – visual quality, recreation, historical legacy and spirituality—on a scale of 1–5 (least to most important), visual quality emerged as the most valued element of the physical environment with an average score of 4.58. The next highest ranked attribute was recreation at 3.88 and historical legacy ranked third at 3.69. Spirituality was ranked last at 3.63. There was a strong gender difference in these results; women rate the importance of spiritual cultural attributes much higher than do men (men: 3.3 and women: 4.4;  $p = 0.001$ ). We do not explore that dimension of the findings here, but it could be a fruitful area of research in the future.

We also found indications that the view may be linked to other cultural attributes provided by the landscape. For example, full-time farmers ranked the importance of historical legacy significantly higher than non-farmers (full-time farmers rated historical legacy at 4.95 while non-farmers ranked it as 3.66,  $p = 0.002$ ). Many of the full-time farmers come from families who have lived for generations on the same land, so viewing the property may be a

way of valuing the productive functioning of the land and the farm family over time (as noted by Burton, 2004). A 63 year-old dairy farmer told us that his father moved from Quebec to Vermont to establish his farm. He said, ‘[My] father provided a strong connection to making the land productive, and he loved working with the land and cattle.’ His statement links the historic working of the land and memories of his father to the very ground on which he stood.

Landowners are willing to work for the view. Nearly 60% of landowners said they managed their property in some way to improve its visual quality or aesthetics. What is it that they did to make their land beautiful? They held back the forest. Seventy percent of those who said they managed their land for visual quality report that they mow, trim, clear, brush-hog and otherwise physically limit the transformation of open land to forested land. This work is conducted on the basis of personal decision-making as there are no government subsidies or other programs which support landowners to keep land open. They are reproducing, by choice and through hard physical labor, a 19th century agrarian landscape.

### 5.5. The work of making a pastoral landscape

The fact that most landowners we interviewed did not earn income from agricultural activities, or from tourism, shows that the Vermonters in this study exert the effort to clear their fields because they prefer the way it looks: it is an aesthetic choice, not an outcome of production. In fact, most contemporary land-shaping practices involve a cost borne by the landowners. As we heard from some landowners, these activities do not neatly fit in the categories of recreation/labor, or public resource/private benefit. Rural landowners develop a heightened sense of relatedness to place through the performance of these activities, and this extended beyond one’s own private land to neighboring properties.

In New England there are a few common methods to maintaining fields: keeping grazing animals, growing crops or hay, and clearing. ‘Brush-hogging’ is the term for cutting down tall grasses, shrubs, and small tree saplings using a machine. The debris that is cut remains on the ground and decomposes; it is not harvested for any other purpose. Some landowners hire someone to clear their fields. Depending on the acreage involved, this can cost several hundred dollars to thousands of dollars. Other landowners do the work themselves and either own or rent the equipment from a local dealer. Those who cut their own fields must acquire a number of skills and intimate knowledge of their land to accomplish the task of holding back the forest. Morse learned this first-hand when she spent a weekend clearing a field with a rented riding brush-hog. Her field, located on a series of steep hills, hadn’t been mowed for a few years, and blackberry canes, milkweed, and tree saplings covered the ground. Morse is similar to many of the landowners in the study: she is a life-long resident of Vermont, gardens for home consumption but receives no income from farming, and owns property that was formerly worked as a small dairy farm. While her family had previously discussed cutting the field, the opportunity to mow the field coincided with the completion of the interview analysis, which in turn offered an ideal opportunity to conduct an ethnography of brush-hogging. Friends and family members agreed to share their perceptions of the process with her, and she took field notes—quite literally—over the course of the two day work period.

The brush-hog Morse rented looks like a riding lawnmower. It has a low center of gravity and therefore can operate on steep inclines without tipping over, however, the operator has the physical sensation that the machine will roll because their own center of gravity is atop the machine. Over time—and by spending time on the machine—the operator learns to ‘read the field,’ judging the grade of slope, looking for rocks hidden under tall brush, and



determining the proper height of the blades for the terrain. The work requires heightened sensory awareness, an awareness that is gained only through doing the work.

Morse found that operators had different sensory experiences while working the machine. Her son noticed the snakes in the field and found himself looking carefully for them as he mowed. A friend who is a forage researcher was sensitive to the smell of the cut grasses, and said the smell dominated his experience on the mower. Morse focused on the pitch of the machine over the terrain, and attempted to memorize the topography of the field as she made plans for future uses of the field. Each member of the group gained knowledge of the topography, vegetation, and wildlife in the section that he/she cleared, but did not 'know' the other sections with the same detail. While group members verbally shared what they noticed while operating the mower, each person's full set of embodied knowledge was not entirely transferable; it came only from the doing of that particular task on that piece of ground. Reflecting on the experience several months later, Morse noted that she associates the different parts of the field with the person who mowed it, linking a moment in time, stories, and the events that took place during that weekend to a physical space. She also feels a stronger sense of attachment to the land which is not the same as feelings of ownership. It is best described as a feeling of relatedness to the place, as if the engagement in mowing, and the close attention to the micro-geography of the field it demanded, created a moment to know the space more intimately.

Clearing the field was a laborious task conducted on private land. But the weekend was not all work, and it was not an independent endeavor. As we found in our interviews with landowners, the field clearing activity blurred the boundaries of work and play, as it gave a group of people an activity to share together. Similarly, the effects of the brush-hogging highlight the private and community aspects of place shaping. Morse and her family decided to cut the field because they plan to put it to an agricultural use in the future, and because they appreciate the view of the surrounding hillsides, the wildlife habitat, and the sunlight that the open space provides. They did not need to consult regulatory agencies to do so, and did not receive any tax or subsidy benefits for doing the work. In this regard, it was an independent decision, both costing and benefiting the landowners. However, there were also community and neighborhood-scale elements to this activity. Morse made the final decision to cut the field only after an adjoining neighbor cleared his land and referred her to the equipment rental company. Another neighbor skis on the lower portion of her land so Morse used the mower to open up a few trails for him. The piece of land that was cleared contributed to the patchwork of forested hillsides and fields of the surrounding landscape. These are examples of the ways in which private land-shaping activities can be understood as community engagements that contribute to the making of regional landscapes.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. The on-going production of Vermont as a rural place

'Tourists discovered—indeed, they helped to invent—a new myth of Old New England, a vision of the region that has proved to be extraordinarily tenacious and attractive' (Brown, 1995, 10).

A visitor driving through the rural areas of Vermont today will see the 'Old New England' that has such a stable place in the collective geographical imagination. The pastoral landscapes comprised of tidy white villages, small fields edged with forests, and tree-lined dirt roads leading to hillside farms still exist. They are a product of work conducted by landowners working independently on their private property. They are also the outcome of

the internalization of a set of narratives and images that was originally fabricated for tourist consumption. These images have indeed been 'extraordinarily tenacious'. Representations of Vermont have been reproduced on maple syrup labels, ski area posters, and food travel reviews in urban newspapers. They are consumed not only by tourists, but also by generations of Vermonters who have been consistently reminded of who they are and what their place is. The reiteration of representations of Vermont has become a cyclical process whereby present day landscapes crafted in the image of 19th century Vermont provide the foundation for new cultural representations of the state and its people. However, landowners do not consciously produce landscapes for tourist consumption; by contrast, they see their landscape labors as perpetuating an attractive agrarian heritage. Far from a superficial engineering of place for the benefit of visitors, the pastoral Vermont landscape holds deep meaning for the Vermonters we interviewed, furnishing a strong sense of identity as members of a larger community of Vermonters.

### 6.2. The performance of a regional landscape

Edensor's (2006) work on rural performance points to the ways that cultures are made at multiple scales and locations, ranging from residents' doing of everyday skills and tasks, to visitors' performance of recreational rural activities, to the formal staging of rurality in public events. We identify all three of these categories of performance in our research with Vermont landowners: everyday practices of improving land through embodied work, the reproduction of formal discourse about Vermont's landscape, and the production of identity through identification with landscape. In addition to these, we suggest a fourth category of rural performance: rural enactment at the scale of a regional landscape.

The making of Vermont's pastoral view is the product of on-going tasks of individuals, working not in concert or by conscious design, but whose collective labor reproduces the landscape both residents and visitors expect. It is a taskscape that stretches over property boundaries to entire viewsheds. Yet the tasks that create and recreate today's agrarian view are entirely different from the tasks that created the 'model' agrarian view of the late 19th century, and the social anxieties that motivate the pastoral view are also quite different. The Vermont rural ideal was created and marketed with the goal of re-populating Vermont villages and farms. It took place in the context of extensive deforestation and outmigration. The pastoral view was what Vermonters had to 'sell'. The Vermonters we interviewed now fear having too many people on the land. The landowners cherish the rural 'look' of the landscape and worry that new housing and commercial growth will destroy the view, and the rural community. Fewer Vermont residents are engaged in farming, therefore the agricultural tasks that once kept the fields open—grazing animals, making hay, growing crops—are practiced less frequently. To maintain the Vermont they know, these Vermonters engage in non-productive chores; tasks that keep the forest back but do not make agricultural goods. The resulting regional landscape looks 'remarkably static'—in many places just like 'Old New England'—but is made by people with machines and livelihoods that 19th century Vermonters could not have imagined.

This finding suggests that discourses manifested through landscape may be long-lived, outlasting the original activities that produced them, and invites more research of this type especially in places heavily influenced by tourism. As Cloke and Jones' (2001) work demonstrated, discourses about rurality, and in particular the rural ideal, may remain fixed and powerful, but the ways in which agricultural spaces are produced may involve new tools, technologies and bodily engagements. Even in spaces that are



represented and marketed as unchanging, the everyday practices of place-making may differ greatly from historic place-making tasks.

We were led to this insight by considering interviewees' specific landscape engagements and by working from these to make sense of the values they shared with us. In other words, we worked from performances to identify the discourse and social relations that manifested in landscape. In this way we attempted to push our work beyond the 'superficial' and 'flat' accounts that [Tolia-Kelly \(2013\)](#) and [Rose and Wylie \(2006\)](#) are concerned about, toward an analysis that has a topography of its own, where the dominant narratives and actions emerge as elevated sites or thickened places in our map. Further, by considering the engaged practices and perspectives of landowners within an entire watershed, we have jumped scale; moving the analysis from the scale of a single operation—or taskscape – to that of a region. We encourage new work that similarly attempts to trace both the material and discursive aspects of place production at the regional scale. The aim of this endeavor would be to build a larger body of work from which rural researchers could make comparisons between places on topics such as contemporary land-shaping practices in post-productivist areas, demographic shifts and landscape change, and the long-term impacts of tourism discourses on the shaping of rural environments.

### 6.3. Landscape engagements: identity and attachment to place

As we have noted, the majority of the landowners we interviewed allowed others to access their property for recreational purposes. There is a cultural history of Vermonters enjoying skiing, hunting, and riding snow machines across private properties; they recreate along entire landscapes. Many of the landowners we interviewed reported maintaining trails on their land which we suggest can be regarded as a private landowner activity that is at least partially performed for a broader community of users. The work of maintaining trails, like the work of clearing overgrown fields, is laborious, and its associated costs are borne by the landowner. It is a task that again problematizes easy categorization of work and play. Instead, trail maintenance and recreating on trails perhaps are better understood as different forms of intense embodied engagements with place which together perform Vermont landscapes. Each activity in its own fashion shapes the terrain (through the on-going use of trails), enables a specific mode of engagement with the land (as riding an ATV at high speed requires skills that differ greatly from cross-country skiing) and produces a particular perceptual and sensory experience of moving through places (in the way that Morse learned the micro-territory of her field through mowing).

In his early work on taskscape, Ingold insisted that meaning is gathered from engagement within landscape: '...in dwelling in the world, we do not act *upon* it, or do things *to* it; rather we move along *with* it' (1993, 164). In later work, he has used the concept of 'meshwork' to describe how inhabitants, through their actions, make places:

'Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant leaves a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as life of each is bound up with the other. Every entangling is a knot, and the more that lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot' (2011, 194).

Taken together, taskscape and meshwork illuminate how the doing of activities across a regional landscape produces meaning for rural residents. In the Vermont context, engaged activities take place across the surrounding geography: on a neighbor's walking path by the river, in a nearby apple orchard, or on a friend's hunting

grounds. Indeed, non-owner and owner activities alike contribute to the making of taskscapes, as well as the making of knots that hold meaning. As Morse reported, working closely on a small piece of land created a sense of relatedness to that place. Despite the passage of time, and seasonal changes to the landscape, the sense of familiarity persists. We can imagine, then, that for people who have for years viewed the same scene or hunted on the same ground, the knot becomes larger and perhaps more enduring, regardless of land ownership. Taking this perspective, we can begin to understand why some Vermont landowners feel a stronger sense of belonging to the Vermont landscape than to their own piece of land, why Mr Jackson's neighbors wanted to help clear his stone walls, and why the view of the landscape is held so dear.

### 6.4. Interactive engagements: viewing, performing, and belonging

'Performance is an interactive and contingent process which succeeds according to the skill of the actors, the context within which it is performed and the way in which it is interpreted by an audience.' ([Edensor, 2006](#), 493).

For Edensor, performances imply a viewing (or listening, feeling, smelling) audience. If landscapes are performances, then the 'audience' is anyone who views, feels, smells, or otherwise engages with it. Akin to the farmers in [Burton's \(2004\)](#) study, Vermont landowners know how to read landscapes for the skilled work and recreational activities that have shaped them, and they also have a hand in producing the view. Vermont residents therefore are both the stagers and audience members for landscape performance. The construction of a new house, the deterioration of an old barn, the cutting of a ski trail, the growth of a new crop, and the slow disappearance of a former pasture are the landscape events which mark the passage of time, signal cultural changes, and call up memories of the viewer's particular engagements with place.

[Carolan \(2008\)](#) explored the notion of the countryside as an embodied, lived event with residents of rural Iowa. During his fieldwork, he paid close attention to how changes to the local landscape impacted his research participants and he relayed this statement made by an older resident: 'I feel like I'm losing a piece of myself every time I see farmland turned into the latest bedroom community' (2008, 419). Our research with Vermont landowners captured similarly strong feelings of identification with landscape. The woman who stated that if the landscape changed a great deal in the future, 'we would lose a part of who we are' was perhaps not speaking metaphorically. If one's identity is crafted in part from embodied engagements with place, and if that place changes dramatically, what happens to those aspects of identity that no longer have a place to 'take place'? Does the development of a neighbor's land where one used to hunt grouse, for example, create a sense of loss for the hunter, or a spatial challenge to her identity?

We note that the Vermont landowner quoted above spoke in the plural, not representing herself as an individual, but speaking as a member of a larger community of Vermonters. We do not mean to suggest that Vermonters constitute a homogenous and harmonious community of people, but instead highlight the fact that the landowners we interviewed indicated their strong attachments and feelings of belonging to a landscape that extends beyond the borders of their own property. Our interviewees were men and women, descendants of generations of Vermonters, and newcomers to the state. The degree to which interviewees shared a common discourse about the landscape, and a strong sense of attachment to the state as a place, were some of the most remarkable findings in this study, especially compared to research elsewhere that notes diverse stewardship attitudes amongst rural residents ([Abrams and Bliss, 2012](#); [Abrams et al., 2012](#); [Gill et al., 2010](#)). However, it is important to separate out practices from

visions. We suggest that there could be a gap between the everyday performance or making of place and the imagining or visioning of ideal spaces, in other words, of what people do and what they wish for, and we encourage new research that attends to both.

The view is a powerful aspect of landscape appreciation for the participants in this study. We found no evidence that appreciation of the visual beauty of their surroundings emanated from a fascination with the superficial but instead learned that the view was a means of capturing, assessing, and reminding landowners of the other cultural attributes the landscape offers. The interviewees who gave the visual attributes of landscape the highest ranking (5) named a wide array of cultural and sensuous attributes they also valued. One person said 'It feels right to live in natural, undeveloped, clean land' while another landowner enjoyed the 'peaceful birdsong.' A woman who owned a forested piece of property said, 'It's my sanctuary.' These comments indicate that appreciation for aesthetic beauty may be intertwined with other cultural values that the act of viewing calls up. Our research supports [Benediktsson's \(2007\)](#) contention that critical geographers should take the 'scenic' seriously. 'The view' is a portal to a nuanced, contextualized, and rich investigation of place, embodied engagements, and identity.

### 6.5. Engaged performance as a research method

We assert that the performance of activities as a research method has the potential to yield much more than an understanding of how the doing of an activity feels; paying close attention to how engagement in an activity can yield an intimate knowing of place and process, an awareness that cannot be attained through second hand accounts. One of the most powerful outcomes of performance within a mixed-methods research scheme is its ability to help perspective jump scale. In our case, we were able to travel from the apprehension of the micro-geography and embodied experience of one place (at one moment in time) to theorization of how viewsheds and attachment to place are generated at the regional scale over longer periods of time. Morse's reflection on cutting ski trails for her neighbor led us to revisit our interview data to ask how social networks at the neighborhood level may influence individual landowners' decisions to craft their lawns, trails, fields, gardens, and forests. This, in turn, prompted the realization that private lands may provide highly valued public goods such as activity spaces for neighbors, and agrarian views for residents of and visitors to the region. Performance, in combination with other qualitative and quantitative methods, offers a way to make sense of landscape engagements across viewsheds and up and down scale.

## 7. Conclusions

To conclude, we return to the story of Mr Jackson's stone wall and the questions that it posed. Our research with Vermont landowners illuminated the connections between individual embodied activities, an enduring discourse about how the Vermont landscape should look, and a high level of attachment to and identification with Vermont landscapes. Mr Jackson and his neighbors wanted his land to remain neat, open, and agrarian-looking because that is the way it had appeared for generations. A change to Mr Jackson's land signaled the passage of time, the end of agriculture as a livelihood, and the loss of a space where walking, deer viewing, and a leisurely chat with an elderly resident of the community could happen. The fondness the neighbors had for the view of Mr Jackson's homestead was not a superficial desire for beauty, but an appreciation for the activities and relationships that the property made possible. Clearing Mr Jackson's stone walls was an act of neighborliness and

respect. It was a means to re-assert a sense of belonging to a property that was privately owned but functioned as a historic community space. Participation in the clearing of Mr Jackson's walls created a larger 'knot' of meaning and experience for those who lent a hand; the neighbors developed a sense of relatedness to the walls and became players in the walls' long and mysterious history.

The return of northern New England's forests is the outcome of a post-productivist society that no longer depends on extensive farming for its survival. While agriculture remains an important economic activity in Vermont, it is perhaps even more important to Vermonters' sense of identity. Jan Albers once mused, 'One wonders if Vermonters need to believe in a mythic view of Vermont even more than the tourists do' (2000, 288). For a long time, agricultural activities defined Vermonters for tourists, defined Vermont for Vermonters and produced an iconic view of home. This research has demonstrated that the legacy of tourism can have unexpected impacts on local residents. This is not a claim that tourism is a disembodied force which imposes itself on locals, but rather it is a set of actions that create, circulate, and make particular visions of the local material. Tourism is enacted through many performances, and these performances are lived by local residents and visitors alike.

The visual aesthetic is particularly powerful for its value to landowners and in the way that visual perception of landscape is one means to sense the other cultural attributes landscape offers. It would be a mistake to judge landscapes or their inhabitants on a scale of authenticity. Today's Vermont properties are every bit as real as their former selves; now as then, they are the resulting taskscape of landowners' actions or inaction on the land. They are the material outcome of landowners' needs, preferences, constraints, and hopes for the future.

Our discussions with Vermont landowners suggest that landscapes – like folk concerts and demonstrations of traditional skills – are performed. The stage is a wide reach of terrain. The props are tools and machines and farmhouses. The actors include laboring landowners, recreating neighbors, growing forests, a changing economy, and tourism ads. The production is constituted by ongoing embodied engagements with and among the inhabitants of place. The outcomes of such performances are the lived experiences of those who take part as actors or audience members and who find meaning in the production.

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