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Dislodged Anthropocentrism and Ecological Critique in Folk Horror: From ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* to ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones*

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ABSTRACT

The dominant form of folk horror is distinctly anthropocentric, focused on unwitting outsiders who are brutally sacrificed after they stumble into a rural, pagan community. This plot is epitomised by Stephen King’s short story ‘Children of the Corn’ (1977) and its film adaptations (1984 and 2009), as well as by Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973). There is another, less anthropocentric variant of folk horror, however. ‘Folk horror without people’ is exemplified by another of King’s stories, ‘In the Tall Grass’ (2012), written with his son Joe Hill, as well as by one of its antecedents, the TV series *Children of the Stones* (1977). The critical element of sacrifice is still present in these ‘stone-centric’ folk horror texts, but humans are thoroughly displaced from their central role. Agency and sacrifice belong instead to stone. Both of these folk horror plots, the anthropocentric and the stone-centric, serve to critique—albeit in different ways—the devastating effects humans have had on the environment.

Folk horror is notable for its centring of human actors. In his 2017 study, Adam Scovell defines folk horror through the four narrative elements of the ‘folk horror chain’: landscape, isolation, a ‘skewed’ belief system, and an often violent and sometimes supernatural culminating event that he terms the ‘happening/summoning’ (pp. 17-18). Three of these links presume a human community that has become virtually synonymous with the subgenre. Indeed, criticism on folk horror to date has located the violent conflict between ‘modern’ urban outsider and rural ‘pagan’ tribe as perhaps its most definitive characteristic. This paradigmatic plot traces its roots back to Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973), one of Scovell’s founding ‘unholy trinity’ (p. 8), and its influence is evident in Stephen King’s ‘Children of the Corn’ (1977), along with its two film

adaptations (in 1984 and 2009). Both *The Wicker Man* and ‘Children of the Corn’ illustrate the dominant, anthropocentric folk horror plot—the clash between rural/local/primitive and urban/global/modern human communities.

This essay excavates an alternative folk horror narrative that is exemplified by another of King’s stories, ‘In the Tall Grass’ (2012), written with his son Joe Hill. This story discloses what I somewhat provocatively call ‘folk horror without people’. The critical element of sacrifice is still present, but humans are displaced. If agency in the dominant anthropocentric folk horror plot is human, in ‘folk horror without people’, agency tilts drastically toward the non-human. Once the characters step into the eponymous grass in ‘In the Tall Grass’, for instance, they lose the power to control almost everything. What exerts control instead are the ‘things’, the ‘quasi-objects’, that constitute ‘nature’—the endless swaying grass and a very old rock.¹ Like ‘Children of the Corn’, ‘In the Tall Grass’ has its anti-anthropocentric antecedents in the canonical British folk horror tradition—in this case, the TV series *Children of the Stones* (1977). Whereas ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* tell stories about hostile *human* communities, ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* emphasise *non-human* antagonists, and their narratives expand to geological rather than human scale. They both stand as what can be called ‘stone-centric’ rather than anthropocentric stories.

All of these folk horror texts, whether anthropocentric or stone-centric, tell stories about the environment, and this essay makes the case for folk horror as an important source of ecological crisis fiction. At first glance, *The Wicker Man*, ‘Children of the Corn’, *Children of the Stones*, and ‘In the Tall Grass’ appear to show humans living ‘in nature’. Indeed, a longstanding part of the popular appeal of folk horror has been its depiction of what F. R. Leavis (1933) called the ‘organic community’. Leavis defines the organic community through an ‘animal naturalness’ that is nonetheless ‘distinctly human’, and he emphasises that its way of life reflects the ‘rhythm of the seasons’ and that its members are ‘in close touch with the sources of their sustenance in the

¹ I am drawing on Jane Bennett’s (2010) description of ‘things’ as possessing what she calls ‘vitality’—the capacity ‘not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’ (p. viii). ‘Quasi-objects’ is Bruno Latour’s (1993) phrase and represents his effort to disrupt the absolute subject-object binary. For Latour, ‘quasi-objects’ are ‘social’, ‘real’, and refuse to serve merely as screens for strictly human projections (p. 55).

neighbouring soil' (pp. 87, 91). Leavis' book was very popular, reprinted in both 1950 and 1964, and it serves as part of an unrecognised genealogy of British folk horror in the late 1960s. All four of the folk horror texts I take up here, though, disclose the illusoriness of the organic community and the harmonious co-existence of human and nature. Instead, this apparently utopian co-habitation turns out to be what Eileen Crist (2016) calls a 'takeover' (p. 28). Either humans 'take over' nature, or nature takes over humans. There is only the struggle to colonise. Both anthropocentric and 'stone-centric' folk horror offer quite different versions of what this 'takeover' looks like.

'Children of the Corn' and anthropocentric folk horror

In King's 'Children of the Corn', married couple Burt and Vicky are driving across Nebraska when they hit a boy who stumbles out of a corn field. Heading to the nearby town of Gatlin to get help, they discover a cult of children who worship 'He Who Walks Behind the Rows' and who ritualistically sacrifice themselves when they reach the age of nineteen. They also sacrifice those 'strangers' who are unfortunate enough to end up in Gatlin. Structured as anthropocentric folk horror, almost everything that happens in 'Children of the Corn' is determined by the 'primitive' human cult members in service of their deity. Their movement began during a drought, when the children were called to slaughter every adult in Gatlin: the children dominate the story, and the mandate of sacrifice is theirs, specifically that of their 'Seer', Isaac (p. 277). Even the children's deity may be illusory. Only Burt sees it, toward the end of the story as he is running through the corn to escape from the children. He realises that he is being guided toward the clearing that serves as the town's sacrificial site: 'hadn't that been the plan all along?' Burt thinks. 'All the time he had thought he was cutting back to the highway, hadn't he been being led to this place?' (p. 275). And then Burt sees 'something huge, bulking up to the sky . . . something green with terrible red eyes' (p. 276). The deity may be real, or Burt may simply be making his fate explicable by imagining a malign god when he is confronted with certain death. Either way, those who sacrifice and are sacrificed are unambiguously human.

Burt's ability to infer what has happened in Gatlin, as he explores the deserted town church after he and Vicky first arrive, emphasises how the 'new' religion in 'Children of the Corn' is

actually layered on top of a familiar Christian tradition. When Burt enters what used to be Grace Baptist Church, he finds not a place wiped of its Christian appurtenances but one where they have been interwoven with corn. The large portrait of Christ behind the pulpit has green hair—a ‘twining mass of early-summer corn’—forming a ‘pagan Christ’ (p. 266). The pipes in the organ are filled with dry cornhusks. And when Burt approaches the pulpit to find a Bible on the lectern, it is an unnervingly updated Old Testament, one that shifts without remark from Job 38 to corn worship—‘The Lord. He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Declare if though hast understanding’ (pp. 266-67). Burt is thus able to speculate credibly that the children killed off their parents because the corn was dying, and ‘they got the idea somehow’ that it was because ‘there was too much sinning. Not enough sacrifice’ (p. 268). Reading the signs that he finds in the church, Burt explains what birthed Gatlin’s corn cult by means of a Christian paradigm: Job’s story of disaster as a god’s punishment for sin.

The film that originated the dominant anthropocentric folk horror narrative, *The Wicker Man*, also manifests the human propensity to invoke the divine in order to manage disaster. Just as the children of Gatlin sacrifice both Vicky and Burt to propitiate He Who Walks Behind the Rows, Hardy’s film culminates with the ritual burning of Sergeant Neil Howie by islanders desperate to appease their ancient gods and renew their crops. There is still less evidence of an actual deity in *The Wicker Man* than in ‘Children of the Corn’, moreover. Indeed, Lord Summerisle reveals to Howie that his grandfather brought religion to the islanders in order to turn them into diligent labourers. The ‘best way to rouse the people from their apathy’, he had determined, ‘was to give them back their joyous old gods. And that as a result of this worship, the barren island would burgeon and bring forth fruit in great abundance’. While the islanders were revelling in their fabricated pagan rituals, Summerisle’s grandfather developed ‘new cultivars of hardy fruit’ in his laboratory, inventing nature as well as culture. Lord Summerisle insists to the sceptical Howie that the ‘pagan’ religion of Summerisle is actually very close to Christianity: both include the notion of a ‘virgin birth’, for instance. The proximity of the island’s pagan practices to Christianity is not at all surprising, since Summerisle’s grandfather no doubt crafted the ‘joyous old gods’ in ways that were familiar to him. The ‘pagan’ religions of both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* slide into resemblance with Christianity, then, as both are revealed as systems that *humans* devise to explicate and control ‘natural’ disasters.

The dominance of humans and their gods in ‘Children of the Corn’ renders the land—the corn—as backdrop.² More than once, what at first appears to be agential action by the land is revealed to be that of the cult. After Burt and Vicky initially hit the boy with their car, for instance, King hints at the ominousness of the corn as it makes ‘a weird sound like respiration’ and ‘rustled’ (p. 252).³ Once Burt investigates, however, he finds blood in the corn where the boy emerged, and he tells Vicky, ‘*Someone* cut his throat. Maybe *whoever* is watching us’ (p. 253; emphasis mine). The vague unease created by the corn thus dissolves into a clearly human ‘someone’. This idea is represented visually in Donald P. Borchers’ 2009 adaptation, in which an aerial shot late in the film shows Burt running through the corn and the corn swaying behind him as if it is animate. Within a minute, however, the camera reveals that the corn is moving because the children are chasing Burt. The corn acts in response to humans.

Indeed, in both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*, nature matters only as it signifies within anthropocentric rituals. While corn is bountiful in ‘Children of the Corn’ and crops (notably the famous Summerisle apples) are scarce in *The Wicker Man*, the community in each narrative believes that the abundance or dearth of crops is contingent on their relationship to their gods and is open to manipulation. Ironically, despite being adored by ‘pagan’ viewers, *The Wicker Man* depicts a ‘nature’ that is artificial, almost wholly determined within human relations.⁴ We see fruit ritually arrayed in baskets in the photographs of the May Day celebration that Howie scrutinises on the wall of The Green Man pub, for instance; the orchard Howie drives through on the way to visit Lord Summerisle is carefully laid out in rows; hedges are artfully sculpted (one of them as a phallus); and women do a fertility dance in a circle of manufactured stones—representing one of many ways in which the artificiality of the production seeps into the diegesis.⁵ We never see nature as ‘wilderness’ in *The Wicker Man*, only as landscapes that are engineered both by science and by an invented religion—by intentional and human practices.

² See Tenga (2016) on how the corn in Borchers’ adaptation evades human control (pp. 68-69).

³ The word ‘rustle’ is important here, as Emmanuel Levinas has argued for ‘rustling’ as central to the ‘impersonal life’ that resists subjectivity, a life not confined to the human, as I discuss in ‘Tentacular Horror and the Agency of Trees’.

⁴ See Higginbotham (2006).

⁵ The fake stone circle erected in the Castle Kennedy Gardens is described here: <https://www.findingthewickerman.co.uk/castle-kennedy>.

The anthropocentrism of ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* is also evident in the human-centred history that underlies their rituals. Anthony Magistrale draws on references to Vietnam in King’s story—Burt was a medic in the war, for instance—to argue that the text manifests the ‘more symbolic cultural “illness” of moral guilt and spiritual taint that accompanied American war involvement’, including US ‘defoliation of the Vietnamese landscape’ (p. 64).⁶ Both Kathleen Hunt (2020) and Patricia Oman (2012) read Fritz Kiersch’s 1984 film adaptation of *Children of the Corn* as an allegory of the US farm crisis of the early to mid-1980s. They claim that the film critiques the policies that led to this crisis—reduced government involvement in (and subsidies for) agriculture and a consequent increase in farmers’ debt, a ramping up of free market exchange, increased US exports, the 1980 grain embargo against the Soviet Union, and the massive grain surpluses after Ronald Reagan rescinded the embargo in 1982 (Hunt: pp. 174-75; Oman, p. 84). Hunt astutely argues that the ‘uniquely menacing’ and ‘endless monocropped fields’ of corn in Kiersch’s adaptation register ‘the consequences of capital-driven surplus production through the corn’s ominous excess’ (p. 180). The ‘haunting omnipotence’ of He Who Walks Behind the Rows, Hunt asserts, ‘articulates the corn’s surplus’ (p. 179). So, while Magistrale argues that the original drought and the ruined crops represent the ecological damage the US wrought in Vietnam, Hunt claims that the subsequent excess of corn figures ‘an industrialized food system centered around corn’, with its ‘hegemony of surplus cultivation’ (p. 183). In both readings, human actors are the drivers of ecological catastrophe.

The Wicker Man is more explicit about the human invention behind Summerisle’s religion, not least, of course, because the current Lord Summerisle’s entrepreneurial grandfather created the island’s rituals expressly to channel the potentially wayward energies of his work force. There is, however, a historical cause for the island’s barrenness that is strikingly absent from the film, just as the war in Vietnam and the intentional overproduction of monocropped corn are largely absent from the overt plot of ‘Children of the Corn’. Robin Hardy makes this cause explicit in his 1978 novelisation of his film. He establishes the narrative’s location as the West Highlands and

⁶ Donald Borchers amplified the connection of what happens in Gatlin to Vietnam in his 2009 adaptation: in the film’s conclusion, as Burt is fleeing through the corn, hunted by the children, he has several flashbacks to the war, misperceiving the children as enemy Vietnamese.

Hebrides, which were ravaged by the Clearances of the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries when the residents were moved off the islands and sheep were imported by ‘the Scottish lairds and the London bankers who backed them’ (p. 31). The novel takes Howie on a plane ride over the ‘barren scenic isle of Saint Ninian’s’ to the mainland of west Scotland and on to the Outer Hebrides and ‘beyond them’ to the fictional island of Summerisle (pp. 7, 32). As he flies over the Hebridean Islands, Howie sees ‘the ruined churches, the abandoned monasteries, and other evidence of the great migrations that had long since taken most of the original population to far-off Nova Scotia in Canada’ (p. 30). Howie then remembers reading an article by Karl Marx in the *New York Herald* that attributed the islands’ barrenness (which was the cause of the migrations) to the Clearances: ‘Not only the clansmen but the once plentiful trees too had fallen victim to the depredations of the sheep. The islands now were bald and barren’, the novel continues, save for the sheep and those ‘who had stayed to tend them’ (p. 31). The novel makes it clear that the Clearances, effected by those ‘Scottish lairds’ and ‘London bankers’, are the underlying cause of the ecology of the island that the original Lord Summerisle purchased. He bought a land engineered into barrenness and then, in both the novel and the film, he set about engineering it back to fertility. Two generations later, however, the current Lord Summerisle has engineered the island back to barrenness, a second ecological disaster that, like the first, is a human creation.

A portrait of his grandfather in Lord Summerisle’s manor illuminates the anthropocentrism of *The Wicker Man*’s story and its consequences for the island:



Figure 1: The portrait of the current Lord Summerisle’s grandfather in *The Wicker Man*

The first Lord Sumerisle stands in the foreground, holding a book that could be either an agronomical or a religious tome. Behind him the land looks grey and dead—a bare and withered tree and a stone that resembles a skull. Human impositions on the land, figured literally in Lord Summerisle’s dominance of the landscape, has laid waste to the island. Summerisle’s portrait depicts a human ‘takeover’ of nature (Crist, 2016: p. 28) that is of deadly proportions—whether it is the systemic nature of the Clearances or the individual entrepreneurship of one man.

The anthropocentric folk horror narratives of ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*, with their depictions of a community’s sacrificial rites and their ‘pagan’ religions, tell stories about the Anthropocene, the current geological era named for humans’ impact on the planet. Both narratives depict humans as what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) calls ‘geological agents’, as they change ‘the most basic physical processes of the earth’ (p. 206). Both narratives specifically implicate intentional human actions (both individual and collective) in ecological destruction. In *The Wicker Man*, land is rendered barren by the Clearances and by ongoing human manipulation of unnatural crops. In ‘Children of the Corn’, farming practices lead to drought, and then a new community ensures an excess of a monocropped corn. Human sacrifice in both narratives serves to sustain a worldview in which humans strive to control nature, either directly or by petitioning imaginary gods who serve their wishes. Both of these folk horror tales, in short, justify the ‘*anthropos*’ of Anthropocene and, in Matthew Adams’ (2020) words, ‘consolidate the notion of human influence on ecological systems’ (p. 2).

Both of these stories, though, are also about an *attenuated* human intention and influence. Both open themselves to what Timothy Clark (2015) calls the long ‘Earth’ scale of reading a text, an interpretive strategy that looks beyond the personal and the national to where ‘a certain impersonal ecological dynamic start[s] to become visible’ (p. 100). Both *The Wicker Man* and ‘Children of the Corn’ elucidate what is, according to Clark, one of the most important global events of the last three centuries, ‘a worldwide supplanting of local biota in favour of an imported portmanteau of profitable species: cattle, wheat, sheep, maize, sugar, coffee, eucalyptus, palm oil etc.’ (p. 101). One might add Summerisle apples. As intentional as was the introduction of, for instance, sheep during the Clearances or a monoculture of corn in the US Midwest, such actions

also brought, as Clark points out, unintended consequences, as the ‘list of genuinely significant historical agents thus soon extends itself beyond the human in a rather bewildering way’. Environmental history, Clark concludes, ‘underlines how deeply the agency of the human is far more circumscribed and saturated with illusion than one might suppose’ (p. 101). Hence the centrality of ritual sacrifice to folk horror: ritual aims to redress the vanishing human agency that pervades folk horror, even in its anthropocentric versions.

‘In the Tall Grass’ and the eerie rites of a rock

Written almost four decades after ‘Children of the Corn’, Joe Hill and Stephen King’s ‘In the Tall Grass’ disrupts the anthropocentrism of King’s earlier story and its particular variant of folk horror. ‘In the Tall Grass’ culminates in sacrifice, but it is not exacted by anything human. Instead, the story represents ‘folk horror without people’—specifically, folk horror in which humans are thoroughly dislodged from the centre of both plot and ecology by the disconcerting power of the non-human. Despite the absence of the hostile community, ‘In the Tall Grass’ nonetheless inserts itself into the folk horror tradition by echoing the earlier more familiar plot of ‘Children of the Corn’. In both stories, out-of-towners driving through a midwestern state are stopped by someone who emerges from dense fields demanding their help. In ‘Children of the Corn’, a boy staggers out of the corn, but in ‘In the Tall Grass’ a seemingly boundless field of swaying, unnaturally tall grass beckons its characters, as siblings Becky and Cal, on their way to California, hear a boy calling for help. In both stories, the main characters try to help the children they encounter and are thus persuaded to stop in eerily empty locations, each of which features a deserted church. Unlike Burt in ‘Children of the Corn’, however, Becky and Cal do not enter the boarded-up church, the Black Rock of the Redeemer, which stands across from the field of grass. They plunge straight into the field and so, again unlike Burt, they never get the chance to ‘interpret’ what befalls them through a known religious parable. Indeed, the field repels all familiar, humanist stories.

Like both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*, ‘In the Tall Grass’ drives toward a culminating sacrifice that positions the story as folk horror even as its sacrifice is not enacted by

any ‘folk’.⁷ What demands the sacrifice of ‘In the Tall Grass’ is grass and a rock that sits alone in a clearing. Lost in the grass with his wife (Natalie) and son (Tobin) for much longer than Becky and Cal, Ross Humbolt tells Becky that ‘the stone in the center of this field’ has been here ‘since before red men hunted on the Osage Cuestas’, adding that ‘a glacier brought it here during the last Ice Age’ (p. 411).⁸ Expressly ‘before’ men, the rock emerges out of a pre-history in which not humans but non-humans acted, including rocks and glaciers. This centring of a rock generates a plot outside of what Eileen Joy (2013) has dubbed the typical ‘human-centered, historicist frames of reference’ (p. 29)—a plot fully open to Clark’s (2015) ‘Earth’ scale of reading (p. 100). King and Hill’s story is, indeed, explicitly ‘stone-centric’. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2015) claims that stone ‘offers a stumbling block to anthropocentrism’ (p. 6). The rock of ‘In the Tall Grass’ does more, however, compelling its own form of non-anthropocentric sacrifice and thus dislodging human time, space, agency, identity, and story.

The ‘huge black rock’ at the heart of ‘In the Tall Grass’ is inscrutable. It represents one of the ‘unfamiliar shapes’ Clark (2015) claims human history and culture take on when viewed ‘on very long time scales’ (p. 101). It is ‘the size of a pickup truck’ (p. 420), and the solitary rock is clearly ‘not from Kansas’, having ‘the black, glassy quality of volcanic stone’ while lying far from any volcano (p. 421). The rock is also ‘inscribed all over with tiny dancing stick-men’ (p. 420), suggesting that some kind of community—perhaps human but perhaps not, but certainly now vanished—might have made the inscriptions. The rock is a geological formation that logically should not be where it is, and it thus raises the enigma of presence (why is it here?) as well as the enigma of absence (who or what might have put it there and etched symbols upon it?).⁹ The rock is ‘eerie’, as Mark Fisher (2016) has defined a term often associated with folk horror. The eerie embodies what Fisher describes as ‘a *failure of absence*’ and ‘a *failure of presence*’. As he elaborates, ‘there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present

⁷ As Simon Bacon (2020) points out in his discussion of Vincenzo Natali’s film adaptation, *In the Tall Grass* (2019), the film changes the typical folk horror plot in that ‘it is the weirdness or occult nature of the land, and specifically objects and/or sites within it, that are the focus of malevolence’ (p. 19).

⁸ The racist term ‘red men’, like the invocation of the Vietnam War in King’s ‘Children of the Corn’, offers a glimmer of how systemically violent human history has been.

⁹ The difficulty of discerning whether a particular stone is inhuman or human ‘art’ (or whether it is art at all) is compounded by the fact that, as Cohen (2015) adds, ‘it does not matter if masons or geology fabricated the structure since humans and rocks have a habit of imitating each other’s work, of creating homologous spaces’ (p. 84).

where there should be something' (p. 61). The rock of 'In the Tall Grass' actually embodies both forms of eerie, each of which disturbs familiar anthropocentric stories.

In Fisher's formulation, eeriness is inextricable from the question of agency, specifically 'the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate: the agency of minerals and landscapes' (p. 11). With the enormous power it exerts over the characters, the rock of 'In the Tall Grass' certainly demands a materialist reading in which matter is not subordinate, not colonised, as in *The Wicker Man* and 'Children of the Corn'. Theories of new materialism, according to Maurizia Boscagli (2014), all present 'versions of the material as unruly: they refuse to play by the rules that define materiality as passive matter' (p. 3)—the passive matter, for example, that pervades the mise-en-scène of *The Wicker Man*. Jane Bennett's (2010) theory of the vitality of 'things' is especially useful, as it describes that 'uncanny' moment when the object refuses to stay in its place and instead becomes a 'thing' (p. 3), accruing a '*Thing-Power*' that names 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act' (p. 6). 'In the Tall Grass' reconfigures the world by depicting 'nature' not as an array of inert objects but as a world of powerful animate 'things'. The reconfigured world of this particular folk horror story, moreover, inverts the 'takeover' portrayed in *The Wicker Man* and 'Children of the Corn', enacting instead the takeover of the human by the agentic 'things' of 'nature'.

A world in which nature refuses to remain the 'object' of the exclusively human 'subject' is inherently bewildering, and so, not surprisingly, 'In the Tall Grass' plunges its characters into 'disorienting' terrain in which space and time do not hold (p. 401). Even before Cal and Becky enter the field of grass, they note how it stretches to a horizon that is 'illimitable' and that the height of the grass, 'more than six feet high this early in the season', was 'an anomaly' (p. 392). Once they are mired in the grass itself, though, Becky and Cal experience the complete disruption of known physical laws. The grass does not flatten when someone passes through it (pp. 397, 398), auguring an unsettling intransigence of the natural world—one could say, a lack of appropriate subordination—in its relation to humans. Space also refuses to conform: characters are not where their voices seem to place them, for instance. When Cal calls out to Becky, she thinks, 'he could say he wasn't moving but he was, he was getting further away all the time', and yet, when she jumps up to get her bearings, he appears close to her (p. 401). Cal has the same experience, seeing

the church and thinking that ‘in any normal world he should’ve been able to reach it by walking through the grass in a straight line’ (p. 402), but this is not a ‘normal world’ and he cannot walk in a straight line to the church: ‘reality was starting to feel much like the ground underfoot: liquid and treacherous’ (p. 402).

The world that Cal and Becky now occupy is controlled by the grass, which not only organises space and movement but also seeks to incorporate the human characters. When Ross assaults Becky, she notices how his ‘green breath’ smells ‘like a fresh-clipped lawn’ (p. 410). As she struggles with him, she thinks that she ‘didn’t want to smell the green stink of him anymore’ (p. 411). The story suggests that Ross is merging with the grass. Indeed, Cal recognises this fact earlier: ‘*The grass flows, and you flow, too. Think of it as becoming one with nature, bro*’ (p. 404). If the ‘flow’ of the grass begins the dissolution of the human and its separateness from the non-human, the rock lying in its midst completes that process. Ross’ son, Tobin, who appears to Cal after having touched the rock, tells him that it makes you ‘see’ and ‘know a lot more’, including teaching you ‘to hear the grass’. It also makes you hungry and thirsty (p. 419). The rock draws the human characters toward it; it has its own powerful propulsions, quite literally embodying Bennett’s (2010) capacity of all things to exhibit ‘trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’ (p. viii). Once Cal approaches the rock, ‘he slid forward because the stone had him, it had its own gravity, and it drew him as a magnet draws iron scrap’. The rock’s buzzing echoes in his head, as the force of the rock extinguishes his separate personhood in its version of ritual sacrifice (p. 423). As the characters merge with grass and rock, ‘In the Tall Grass’ dramatises an aspect of Bennett’s ‘thing-power’ beyond the mere animateness of things: humans are not exceptional but themselves ‘vital materiality. In other words’, Bennett continues, ‘human power is itself a kind of thing-power’ (p. 10).

As the characters in the story lose what are considered to be the properties of the human, including singular selfhood and affective bonds, and as they take on some of the properties of both rock and grass, the nature of sacrifice changes. It becomes more ‘elemental’, free of the trappings of scripture, law, prophets, and ritual—unloosed from the persistence of the human that we see in ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*. ‘*All flesh is grass*’, Becky thinks before she touches the rock. Like Ross before them, Becky and Cal become one with the grass, their flesh assimilated

with it. Like Ross and Tobin, they are driven only by hunger and thirst, and the bodies of those they once loved and held sacred—wives and babies—become fodder. As Cal says of Becky's just-born daughter, whom they have eaten, 'She's *elemental*. Becky—she *flows*' (p. 431). The 'weary pilgrim' (p. 423) comes to the rock and thereafter accepts only those sacrifices, like Becky's just-born baby, that feed and sustain.

***Children of the Stones* and stone-centric folk horror**

If 'Children of the Corn' advances *The Wicker Man*'s particular anthropocentric folk horror paradigm, the TV series *Children of the Stones* stands as a 'stone-centric' progenitor to 'In the Tall Grass'. Like 'In the Tall Grass', *Children of the Stones* shifts agency from people to stones. Filmed on location in Avebury, Wiltshire, in the summer of 1976, *Children of the Stones* is inseparable from the prehistoric stones that shape Avebury's landscape. The stone circle, Kennet Avenue, the Sanctuary, and West Kennet Long Barrow all feature in the drama. It is the stones in particular that impel the story once astrophysicist Adam Brake and his son Matthew arrive in 'Milbury' so that Adam can study their magnetic power. As Adam and Matt adjust to life in the village, 'within the circle' of the stones, they discover that with the exception of the most recent arrivals, almost all of the villagers are strangely 'happy'; they exhibit a mindless cheerfulness that renders them almost inhumanly identical to one another. Seeking the solution to the mystery of the unnerving 'happy people', Adam and Matt unearth a combination of geological and astronomical forces that transform the villagers first into an indistinguishable mass free of 'evil' and 'sin', and finally, when the circle is broken, into stones.

The non-human force that moulds the villagers in *Children* creates an iterative rather than a linear plot; this force is a complex interaction between the ley lines that all lead to Milbury, the stone circle, a stone dish that lies under the circle, and a collapsed supernova above the village. Together they form a 'pagan storehouse of energy' (ep. 7), which could also be understood as what Bennett (2010) calls an 'assemblage', marking how materiality is 'as much force as entity' (p. 20). Agency, she writes, is 'congregational' rather than 'atomistic' (p. 20). Actors do not act alone; rather, agency 'always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces', thus unsettling the anthropocentric notion of 'human will or

intentionality’ (p. 21). The narrative driven by the pagan assemblage of *Children of the Stones* is indeed bereft of singular and intentional actors; it is instead a story that has been repeated throughout human history and that involves an iterative cast of characters: the villagers, a priest, a man who warns of what is happening, and a man and boy who escape the circle. As in ‘In the Tall Grass’, the characters are fungible parts of a story driven explicitly by geological forces. The characters might sense this, but they cannot change it.

Time is a circle in both narratives, repeating not progressing. The poacher, Dai, who lives just outside the circle in *Children of the Stones*, is the ‘seer’, and he tells Matt that ‘something happened here in the past and it’s happening here again’ (ep. 3). Matt repeats this to his father, later in the series: ‘I’m talking about something that happened thousands of years ago. Something that keeps repeating itself’ (ep. 7). Indeed, the series ends with Matt telling his father, after they both escape the village, ‘Maybe there’s another circle besides the stone. Time. Perhaps that’s a circle too’. When Adam asks, ‘Do you mean it might all happen again one day?’, Matt replies, ‘It may already be happening—to the people inside the time trap’ (ep. 7). Just as ‘In the Tall Grass’ ends with a new group of passers-by being lured into the field, so does *Children* end with a new incarnation of the ‘priest’ driving into Milbury. In *Children of the Stones* and ‘In the Tall Grass’, time is not linear; it is, like rock itself, *stratigraphic*—one stratum, one epoch in time, layered on top of another.

The way in which events are inexorably repeated in *Children* serves, as in ‘In the Tall Grass’, to undercut human agency. On the surface, *Children of the Stones* appears to enact the typical anthropocentric folk horror plot with its powerful village ‘lord’ and ‘priest’, Hendrick (played masterfully by Iain Cuthbertson). Hendrick seems to manipulate events in the village, just as Lord Summerisle did in *The Wicker Man*. In his brief discussion of the series, Scovell (2017) claims that ‘*Hendrick is using the power of the stones, derived from its connection to a black hole, to empty the minds of his villagers*’ (p. 69; emphasis mine). Hendrick’s agency is an illusion, however. By the end of the series, it is revealed that, like every other character, Hendrick is just a replaceable element in a drama driven by the energy of the stones and the black hole. Similarly, Adam and Matt’s escape from the village at the end, apparently an act of human ingenuity, is not only part of a plot over which they have no control but was actually predicted in a painting Matt

discovered before they even arrived at Milbury. As Adam diagnoses it, the stones have removed that most essential human quality, the thing that confers agency, ‘man’s ability to think for himself’ (ep. 7). Matt and Adam are instead part of a pagan assemblage of ‘things’ that have a life beyond any individual life—indeed, beyond any human life at all.

The stones drive an impersonal plot, then: their story refuses human individuation and agency, reiteratively folding back upon itself and forging a different kind of human fused with larger non-human forces. The ritual of sacrifice in Milbury will continue—one that, as Hendrick intones, will ‘Make us at one with nature and the elements’ (ep. 5), finally turning them all to stone (ep. 7). This form of sacrifice is echoed in ‘In the Tall Grass’, in which characters dissolve and become ‘elemental’, and in which the buzzing of the rock, ‘like the electrified filament in a tungsten lamp’, becomes the buzzing in Cal’s head (p. 422). Both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* materialise what Cohen (2015) named a ‘human-lithic-world participation’ (p. 78), and in this world, sacrifice involves humans being incorporated into ‘nature’ not making offerings to it.

The determining presence of stone also changes the temporality of the narrative. Stone challenges ‘small, linear divisions of human history through its aeonic insistence’, as Cohen (2015) puts it (p. 78). Time becomes bigger. And humans become not only smaller but *different* within stone-centred geologic time. Both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children* imagine how ‘enmeshment’ with stone-being and existence in stone-time alters human interiority, including agency and affect.¹⁰ There is, in short, a quite different kind of ‘takeover’ occurring in ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* than in ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*. As in the latter, this ‘takeover’ is represented in *Children* by a painting. But unlike the portrait featured in *The Wicker Man*, with Lord Summerisle in the foreground, the painting in *Children of the Stones* is dominated by the non-human, by rocks and the beam of light. The humans in the painting are dwarfed by the landscape, and, in the camera shot itself, Adam and Matt appear only on the very edge of the frame as, respectively, a hand and part of a face.

¹⁰ With the term ‘enmeshment’, I am referring to Timothy Morton’s (2010) concept of the ‘mesh’ as a way to talk about ecology; he defines ‘mesh’ from the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting circumstances’ (p. 199).



Figure 2: The painting Matt finds in a store that predicts the plot of *Children of the Stones*

The camera repeatedly reinforces the insignificance of the human characters in *Children of the Stones*: the first shot of the first episode, for instance, is a low-angle shot of a stone. Illustrating the story itself, the figures in the painting Matt finds are indistinguishable, and the painting renders visually how their lives are organised around the geologic, non-human elements that surround them. This is a painting of a horizontally-arranged assemblage, not a vertically-structured portrait (as in *The Wicker Man*) in which a man dominates a natural background.

Stone-centric folk horror's alternate ecologies

In the environmental stories told by the 'stone-centric' folk horror narratives of 'In the Tall Grass' and *Children of the Stones*, nature is not engineered in the lab or subject to the rituals of humans supplicating illusory deities. Humans do not even appear to be in control. In *Children of the Stones* and 'In the Tall Grass', things themselves demand the rituals and enforce the sacrifice. Humans are far less distinct from non-human forces than in anthropocentric folk horror. As Clark (2015) writes, the 'larger the scale the more thing-like becomes the significance of the person registered on it'. Reading the human, he continues, 'on the same level as nonhuman agency' means 'reading

people as things’ (p. 103). In these narratives, humans are not only interwoven with an agentic non-human world, they also live in a deep, geologic time that vastly overshadows human chronology. As a result, both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children* are better able to offer representations of the enormity of a changing climate than anthropocentric folk horror stories. As Cohen (2015) writes: ‘Thinking the earth in billion-year spans is utterly disorienting—and the difficulty of comprehending ecological activity over such immense durations likely underlays our inability to address climate change, to formulate the ethics of scale and Long Ecology necessary to achieve something more than the witnessing of catastrophe’ (p. 79). Our temporal frameworks need to change, in other words, so that we can grasp climate change. Both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones*, with their strong intimations of geologic time, do indeed offer stories of long-term ecological damage, stories of disorienting heat and damp and of blinding, transforming light emanating from the skies. These are stories of damage without direct, intentional human action. Humans do not do things that bring about specific and immediate effects; instead, they act in stories of much more remote and uncertain causality.

‘In the Tall Grass’ weaves its powerful grass and rock into a story of sweltering wetness and thirst that inevitably, in the twenty-first century, evokes global warming and encroaching sea levels. As characters wander into the grass and get lost, they are unsettled not only spatially but temporally, displaced into the ‘immense durations’ that Cohen (2015, p. 79) claims are necessary to make climate change thinkable. Cal notes that, in the grass, the sun seems to ‘hover almost directly overhead’ for an unnaturally long time: ‘He could feel it on his scalp and the tops of his ears, which were tender, beginning to burn’ (p. 403). The field of grass is filled with ‘swampy water’, moreover, and it is ‘hot water—not lukewarm, *hot*, as hot as bathwater’ (pp. 404-5). If the field is oppressive, encounters with the rock are burning. As Cal is drawn toward it, ‘he became aware that his flesh was burning, that his skin was boiling in the unnatural climate that existed in the immediate space right around the rock’ (p. 423). The burning climate of the field—evocative of global warming—coincides with a sacrificial logic centred on the young.

Both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* depict the sacrifice of a sinful older generation: in the former, children slaughter their parents, architects of the drought; in the latter, Howie tells the island patriarch at the end that the people will sacrifice *him* next, the designer of

the over-engineered and failed crops. ‘In the Tall Grass’, on the other hand, depicts the sacrifice not of guilty fathers but of the young and innocent; its sacrificial logic culminates in Ross’ attack on the pregnant Becky and the consumption of her dead baby. The story thus allegorises the ways in which generations of thoughtless ecological damage have bequeathed a fatally warming planet to the young. The story ends with a new group of people ready to plunge into the field—and one of them looks across it and thinks, ‘*I bet all of Kansas looked that way before the people came and spoiled it all*’ (p. 433). The land was spoiled—and now it demands a terrible sacrifice—the death, the literal consumption, of future generations.

Global warming was not as apparent when *Children of the Stones* was broadcast in 1977, but the series nonetheless reflects research that was emerging in the mid-1970s about the ‘greenhouse effect’—specifically a warming of the Earth’s atmosphere produced by chlorofluoromethanes as they disturbed both atmospheric and low-level ozone levels. These chemicals were at once depleting the high-level ozone level that protects the earth from ultra-violet rays and also elevating concentrations of low-level ozone and driving rising temperatures. Two years before *Children* was filmed, Mario Molina and F. S. Rowland (1974) published their Nobel-prize-winning research in the journal *Nature* showing that rates of fluorocarbon production were increasing and that they were definitively leading ‘to the destruction of atmospheric ozone’ (p. 810).¹¹ Amplifying the implicit connection between *Children* and the dangerous effects of ozone depletion, the series was filmed during the summer of 1976, which remains to this day a record-setting summer. As Sean Coughlan wrote for *BBC News* in 2004, ‘No one had heard of global warming then, but the records set that summer have still to be broken. In Dorset, there were 45 days without any rain and for an unbroken stretch of 14 days, southern England clocked up temperatures in excess of 32c’. According to the Central England Temperature Record, as of 2012, the maximum temperature ever recorded (since 1659) in the months of both June and July occurred in 1976, although those records routinely started getting broken in the 2010s (Walker 2019). Even with climbing temperatures in the twenty-first century, however, 1976 holds its own: the average temperature of the record-breaking summer of 2018 was only marginally hotter (15.80C) than the

¹¹ It’s unclear whether writers Jeremy Burnham and Trevor Ray or director Peter Graham Scott knew of this research, but it is indicative of its spread that in May 1977, less than a year after *Children* was filmed, a mainstream Hollywood film, *Day of the Animals* (1977) was explicitly centred around the damaging effects of ozone-layer depletion. The film even begins by mentioning Molina and Rowland’s research.

summer of 1976 (15.77C) (Weaver, 2018). In the wake of a growing understanding of the deleterious effects of fluorocarbons and the consequent ‘greenhouse effect’, an article in the *New Scientist* in 1987 noted the extraordinarily high ozone concentrations (about four times the acceptable limit—the highest ever recorded) in the UK in the summer of 1976 (Glenny, p. 17). The summer that *Children of the Stones* was filmed, then, saw not only the production of the first ‘stone-centric’ folk horror—humans entangled with powerfully agentic natural ‘things’—but also dawning awareness of a dangerously warming Earth.

Children does not refer, in the narrative itself, to the dryness and heat that was no doubt a significant factor during its production, although multiple shots of the landscape around ‘Milbury’ disclose dry, yellow fields. A critical part of the narrative, though, tellingly involves an intense beam of light that links the stone dish under the circle to the black hole; the beam blinds the villagers and ultimately transforms them, first, into mindless ‘happy people’ and, second, when Matt and Adam break the circle, into stone. A beam of intense heat and light, in other words, is profoundly damaging to the people of Milbury. *Children* also raises the question of causality: where does the light come from? What causes it? The narrative foregrounds debate about the directionality of the beam; Matt and Adam at first think it comes from the black hole toward the stone circle, but Matt later claims they had it ‘backwards’ and that the energy ‘comes from here’, with the ancient stone dish as a transmitter (ep. 7). That the beam of light might come ‘from here’ suggestively implicates humans in the plot that repeatedly turns humans to stone.

With their more inchoate causality, both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* represent a different kind of anthropogenic logic than the direct and immediately harmful human interventions represented in *The Wicker Man* and ‘Children of the Corn’. ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children* show larger geologic and planetary forces as drivers of sacrifice—folk horror ‘without people’. It is not that humans do not figure at all in these narratives, but they have a vastly attenuated and more entangled agency. When they are potentially implicated in unleashing destructive forces, the causality is not immediately apparent, the consequences are unintended. As Cohen (2015) writes, ‘Geologic scale diminishes the human’ (p. 79). As geologic scale and the attenuated and transformed ‘human’ is represented in *Children* and ‘In the Tall Grass’, it should

make us re-think the hubris that is implied in the term ‘Anthropocene’.¹² Indeed, I would argue that ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* conform more nearly with Adams’ (2020) suggestion that humans may not actually warrant our own geological era. Instead, we may more accurately be deemed a ‘parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity’ (pp. 1, 6), a ‘blip in the context of deep time’ (p. 6), a transition between the Holocene and whatever comes next.

There is a way to read ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* that recentres humans—by claiming that the power exerted by non-human things, by grass and stones, is actually some form of ‘revenge’ for human depredations. But this is to wrench these stories from their strangeness, their unfamiliarity, and to make them recognisably human stories: after all, to believe that nature’s efforts are directed at punishing us is to reinstate ourselves at the centre. A different way to read these narratives is precisely as diminishment of the human, a human that is sacrificed to the motiveless and illimitable power of grass and stone. We matter nothing in the face of such forces, which is why both texts present human characters as fungible. In this way, ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* answer Amitav Ghosh’s (2016) call for stories that bring ‘nonhuman forces’ back into human lives (p. 31), for stories that return the vast agentic landscape that was ‘pushed further and further into the background’ by literary realism, itself a profoundly anthropocentric literary form (p. 60). ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* are non-realistic folk horror narratives that do indeed privilege vast agentic landscapes while dislodging human characters. They are driven, as Matt from *Children* puts it, by ‘forces so powerful, they’re beyond our comprehension’ (ep. 3). Perhaps even the very idea of ‘sacrifice’ is too anthropocentric to accurately describe what these narratives do. Do the grass and the stones really care about humans enough to be said to ‘sacrifice’ them? With their depictions of the enigmatic causality and obscure motivation of non-human actors, these stone-centric folk horror plots depict worlds changing beyond human control, changing in ways that really do reveal us to be a ‘blip’, a mere parenthetical.

¹² As Adams (2020) writes, the notion of humanity as a parenthesis or transition unsettles ‘the emerging Anthropocene story, a challenge to both the hubris and the hand-wringing that might lean toward anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism’ (p. 7).

BIOGRAPHY

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