HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY, FROM MARGIN TO CENTER

Lucas Bessire, *Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains*
(Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2021, 264 p.)

"On the high plains of western Kansas, there is no clear line between water and second chances" [1]. Lucas Bessire has written an opening sentence so beautiful it bears repeating. It is also an opening sentence that could have been a closing one since *Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains* is a book that takes the reader on a walk that follows that elusive line only to leave them inhabiting the ambiguity. *Running Out* is about holding the tension: it is about identifying the oppositional elements that make up the experience of depletion and recognizing the generative energy that arises in the confrontation between them. Holding the tension, rather than trying to do away with it through conceptual or theoretical closure, serves Bessire both as an analytical tool and as a narrative formula, but most of all it allows the author to put their finger on open wounds. The open wounds that Bessire traces are the kind that remind us that there is no clear line between the personal and the political, and that ethnography always inhabits that elusive frontier.

Bessire's latest monograph is an exploration of aquifer depletion in southwest Kansas. Throughout four chapters, "Lines", "Bones", "Dust", and "Clouds", the author delves into the lived experience of aquifer depletion in one of the world's most important grain producing areas. The formal beginning of the ethnographic work is placed in 2016, but the meaning of that formal beginning quickly begins to unravel as the reader follows the ethnographer on a journey that is both about aquifer depletion and about placing oneself in family history. The Ogallala formation, part of the High Plains aquifer above which the Great Plains expand, is part of an aquifer that like most accessible underground water resources in the world is threatened with depletion by the ceaseless mining of water for the purposes of industrial agriculture. Southwest Kansas is a front line of the global water crisis, but Bessire's exploration of it begins not with the choice of a strategic location but with a journey home. At the heart of this journey, spatially and affectively, is Little Rock House, his great-grandfather's former cattle camp and home for Bessire during his adolescent summers, and also the place where his father has returned to live. With Little Rock House at its center, the narrative

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unfolds as an exploration of silences that straddle the intimate and the structural. The tension between the two is the driving force behind what the author refers to as the book's central question: "how can we take responsibility for the future we are now making?"

Running Out is a penetrating account of the historical waves of dispossession that undergird the contemporary depletive agricultural model. The landscapes of the High Plains, so easily packaged into readily available stereotypes about a timeless nature, seemingly so stripped of points that would indicate transformation, are shown in their historicity. The space of industrial agribusiness is revealed as a sedimentary landscape constituted by intertwined tides of violence: the extermination of the buffalo; genocidal campaigns against Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche and Plains Apache; the suppression of the possibility of a different agricultural model arising from the ruins of the Dust Bowl; the profit-oriented poisoning of labouring bodies and lands through agrotoxins; the violent confinement of deviant voices. Bessire uncovers these histories of violence, and the mentions and silences through which they are converted into historical narratives, at the same time that he follows his own family's insertion into this conjuncture. Alongside today's irrigation farmers, water managers, and migrant laborers, stand, as actors and subjects, those already gone but still of the place: his great-grandfather RW, who helped initiate deep well irrigation in the area in the 1940s, and his grandmother, Fern, a dissenting woman entrapped by a punishing patriarchal order. RW, one of the early participants in the "race to the bottom of the aquifer" [157], and Lila Fern, his daughter with a life-long concern for uncovering the origins of vanished springs and a feverish interest in local history, embody different kinds of settler inheritances. Through recovering their histories while also embarking on a journey that reconnects him with his father, Bessire shows how the biographies of RW and Fern stand in for difficult choices in the present. These are choices made not under conditions of one's choosing: yet, between great-grandfather and grandmother lies the rift that separates enlisting into a race to the bottom or holding on to "minor potentials for recharge" [xiii]. The polysemantic "running out" also alludes to the father-son story of reconnecting that runs through the book. Told by Bessire in a tone that is courageously intimate, yet gentle and forgiving enough for it not to be intrusive, the account of the father-son relationship is as much about family ties as about the intimacies of fieldwork. Luke's dad, as he mainly appears, is also a partner in research. And there is no point at which the book ceases to remind the reader that this is an endeavor made possible by this unlikely collaboration, and by both father and son offering and being offered second chances.

Conflicting legacies

Running Out is described, by its author, as a book that deliberately parts with some of the conventions of scientific and academic literature. This is anchored into the broader search for an anti-depletion project that, it is argued, is not well served by writing that defers to disciplinary conventions or reproduces a language complicit with destruction. Structural silences (or "gaps in what it is possible to say", as the author also refers to them) are constitutive of running out, and therefore to get to the heart of the latter a different genre of writing about destruction is required, "one that can account for depletion's dead ends, buried sediments, and mirage-like qualities" [171]. Such writing should be "irreverent to orthodoxies of any kind", it must "oppose the managerial genres that perpetuate groundwater loss in the name of preventing it", is "hostile to approaches that favor esoteric theory over a conceptual alliance with the experiences of real people" [171], and, we understand, it should refuse partial accounts of depletion. The refusal of partial, segmented accounts is a recurrent theme, and it is traced to the unity of the experience of loss and destruction. "On the Plains, people do not have the luxury of confronting it piecemeal" [169]. Bessire makes a case not only for the necessity of analysis at the level of experience, but for lived experience as the privileged scale at which the contradictions of depletion can be confronted. The book begins and closes with the insistence that "depletion requires its own genre to approximate" [xiii] and that *Running Out* should be read as part of a search for such a genre. The author lets us know that he "leaves theoretical exposition for other venues" [xiii] and that his intention is to write in a way that leads to the "core of an urgent and inchoate problem" [xiii]. This is certainly the case in as much as the writing is not narrowly scholastic; but the result is not a formal exercise in literary experimentation either.

Beautifully written and hauntingly unsettling, *Running Out* can also be read as evidence that such a method is already potentially available. Bessire recognizes the potential of ethnographic fieldwork, "the central tool of anthropology" [181], as a method that an anti-depletion project can draw on. Yet, there is a sense in which the book achieves more than this and relative to which the case for historical ethnography appears understated. Historical ethnography is, in *Running Out*, a broader epistemological framework that incorporates both the moment of research and the moment of writing. In the style of narration, unencumbered by jargon but dynamically conceptual, one can sense the beating heart of ethnography. The core method of anthropology can be said to have produced at least two very different inheritances. One seeks to subordinate the subjects of history to the role of informants whose partial accounts are to be translated and assembled into anthropological accounts by a privileged observer. Sometimes such accounts claim to be the very opposite of what they achieve. Yet, any anthropological narrative that disassembles the social world into supposedly incommensurable realities without recognizing the structural inequalities that underwrite the possibilities of voicing experiences of dispossession belong to this genre, regardless of their stated intention. An alternative inheritance is one that recognizes people in multiple capacities as participants in overlapping fields of knowledge production. This legacy is fundamentally open-ended, in as much as it recognizes, with Bessire, that fieldwork is always an encounter with numerous people who act as "teachers and guides". The necessary complement to this basic but still urgent insistence is that this encounter is always mediated by the "sharp inequities of loss" [180] and that people, as agents and actors, are not equal participants in the making of destruction and redress. But, paraphrasing Wolf, and with Bessire as a guide, one is pressed to remember that any inquiries that disassemble the totality of lived experience "into bits and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality[1]". How conceptual alliances can be formed without glossing over such inequalities is yet another of the tensions that *Running Out* directly confronts.

Dissolving margins

Perhaps it is the fact that the author's grandmother shares a name with one of the main characters in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels that brought about a parallel that kept forcing itself into my reading of several scenes in *Running Out*. In Ferrante's novels, Lila, one of the main characters, describes as dissolving margins the physically manifested experience of severed links. Dissolving margins is an embodied experience of disintegration. In *Running Out*, a structure of repetition is employed to highlight two types of embodied experiences of disintegration. One is that of the eerie correspondences between groundwater depletion in southwestern Kansas and the destruction of Ayoreo livelihoods by the advances of deforestation in northern Paraguay (the latter being the area where the author carried out fieldwork for a decade before his return to the Plains). Unlike in Ferrante, where disintegration is the point of arrival of a process of disconnection, for Bessire disintegration is the basis of connections across space and time. "Traces of the same disintegration" [9] that integrate two regions separated by thousands of kilometers become evidence of a shared experience of depletion structured by global processes.

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[1] Page 3, *in* E. R. WOLF, [1982] 2010. *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Sara R. Farris, in a wonderful essay that, like Bessire's monograph delves into the problem of how grounding truths can be found on the elusive border between the personal and the political[2], has referred to the experience of dissolving margins as "the fear of a world that breaks and morphs into monstrous forms". The other type of disruption that Bessire describes more closely approximates the defining experiences of Ferrante's character, Lila. In *Running Out*, two different episodes describe difficult to recollect board meetings of the Southwest Groundwater Management District (GMD). The meetings, "strangely flattened and trivial" [107], are episodes that Bessire has trouble remembering. It is in the description of the efforts to remember and retrospectively describe these events that the reader can sense how the apparently trivial meetings acquire monstrous dimensions. In the distinctly white, masculine space of the Southwest GMD, the future of the aquifer is decided between the raffling off of corporate sponsored branded T-shirts, cartoon dragons introducing the latest advances in irrigation technology, and tech-talk of wireless platforms connecting multiple sensors through the unique gateways of redundant technologies for an unrecognized problem presented to an absent public. Father and son refer to the unbearable double talk they witness as "marshmallow talk" [62]. It is in the act of writing and the difficulties of recollection that marshmallow talk is revealed as the language of disintegration, of a "world that breaks" and the basic contours of which defy recollection. This is talk that serves no other function but that of renewing a claim to power, a mechanical performance the monstrosity of which is less a function of what is said and more a result of that which cannot be voiced.

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[2] Sara Farris R., 2017. "There is No True Life, If Not in the False One: On Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels." *Viewpoint Magazine*. https://viewpointmag.com/2017/02/20/there-is-no-true-life-if-not-in-the-false-one-on-elena-ferrantes-neapolitan-novels/ (Last Accessed October 3, 2022).

My own research on groundwater depletion in the south of Spain has led me to sit through long hours of marshmallow talk. Powerful men armed with PowerPoint slides that conjure made-up numbers to summon the promise of untenable futures. Elected officials of constituencies built on exclusion evoking community values. CEOs with seven-figure salaries referring to below-reproduction wages as dignified salaries. Corporate social responsibility specialists extolling the virtues of Northern consumers. Representatives of the agroindustrial lobby playing up the myths of family farming. The spaces in which the grounding truths of experience can be voiced are ever receding. It is in such meetings that questions about the conceptual alliances one inhabits and forms as an ethnographer have most insistently returned to me. Actual sites of historical production, where each narrative is part of a broader effort to contain the range of alternatives, in such spaces the possibility of a shared truth is not only absent but actively undone.

In a landscape of differential control of the means of historical production, those who decide the fate of an aquifer are frequently those most adept at rehearsing "formulas of erasure and banalization[3]" directed at sanitizing the renewal in the present of legacies of dispossession. In these spaces the idea that ethnography should be in the service of an enlargement of the field of viewpoints without accounting "when and where power gets into the story[4]" is revealed as evidently complicit with the exercise of power. Ethnographic writing, forever evaluating the difference between that which has happened and that which is said to have happened, must in such contexts reflect a choice. It can subject itself to the "tests of historical credibility[5]" designed by those whose lived experience grounds the truth of legacies of dispossession, or it can entertain the illusion that the realm of accepted discourse can still renew a claim to truth rather than a sheer claim to power.

Bessire has written a book that reflects clear choices under difficult circumstances. His ability to reveal the interplay of mentions and silences that haunt a landscape of depletion will not be readily available to many of us as anthropologists. Part of the book's achievements reside in the narrative itself, contributions of an author that is an accomplished writer and an equally sensitive observer of the human and the non-human world. But many of the choices that make *Running Out* a meaningful contribution to an anti-depletion project precede the moment of narration. They represent a way of provincializing anthropology but reclaiming the political core of its central method. In situating himself in a shared field of knowledge production with non-professional ethnographers, Bessire points to the overarching interdependencies from which ethnographic writing emerges. In this light, anthropological writing appears as a minor subgenre of a broader historical genre that recognizes that we must take seriously people as narrators of their own experience. But, in choosing which voices to amplify and in refusing conceptual alliances built on bottomless silences, it shows us that anthropological narration cannot clothe itself in epistemological innocence.

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[3] Michel-Rolph TROUILLOT, 1995. *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history* (Boston, Beacon Press).

[4] TROUILLOT 1995: 28.

[5] TROUILLOT 1995.

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