

Threats of the Rural: Writing and Designing with Affect



Norman Makoto Su

Abstract Drawing from the author’s background and fieldwork in the rural West and Midwest, this chapter presents findings that are, at times, evasive and ambiguous. Stylistically, the writing foregrounds the unnamed and subliminal intensities that circulate in and out of the rural and onto the body. These rural affects give rise to our emotions shaped by social culture. This chapter is a provocation toward writing ethnographically inspired work in human–computer interaction (HCI). I suggest that the hallmarks of HCI research—deep analysis and clarity of argument—may unduly simplify the complexity of the rural, particularly its inhabitants. This chapter presents an alternative to normative modes of writing HCI, inviting multiple readings, interpretations, affects, and, indeed, “designs” from readers.

1 Front Matter

This chapter presents writings that draw from my experiences in the rural, both personal and professional (Hardy et al. 2019; Steup et al. 2019, 2018; Su and Cheon 2017). Each scene represents something about the various imminent forces—the tingling, indiscernible perceptions—that dance about in the rural. I, my body, felt these affects. Some scenes lie squarely in the rural. Some scenes lie at the juncture of the rural with other rurals, suburbans, urbans, and in-betweeners. All imply that the rural is always there, threatening to surge and explode. These scenes need not be read in one sitting, nor in the order presented.

N. M. Su (✉)

Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering, Indiana University Bloomington, Bloomington, USA

e-mail: normsu@indiana.edu

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I refer to myself as “he” to remove authorial authority.¹ “He” also highlights that these scenes are not the result of an intrepid “me” collecting the unvarnished truth.

2 San Martin: Rural South 101 of Silicon Valley



Crop of California Map (U.S. Geological Survey 2020)

To make that one-hour trip² (double that in rush hour) in California from San Jose (population ~1 million³) to San Martin (population ~7K⁴), he goes south, where highway 85 and 101 intersect. From there, 85 vanishes, four lanes dwindle down to two, and mountains, dry with yellow brush, run by the side, bobbing up and down. He thinks: *we’re not in Silicon Valley anymore*.

After a long stretch of about eight miles, the lanes widen again. He drives past Morgan Hill to exit out of San Martin, making a sharp unprotected left turn at the end of the ramp.

¹This is akin to a form of writing Søren Kierkegaard called “indirect communication.” “Double reflection” is achieved via indirect communication which requires “a person [the reader] first grasp the relevant concepts (first reflection), but then go and think through what it would mean to apply these concepts to the person’s own life (second reflection)” (Evans 2009, p. 35).

²~26 miles.

³2018 population estimated from 2010 census (U.S. Census Bureau 2020a).

⁴Latest figures are from 2010 census (U.S. Census Bureau 2020b).

He grew up in San Martin, a “rural unincorporated area” between Morgan Hill and Gilroy. Morgan Hill is known for its Mushroom Mardi Gras. Gilroy is known for its Garlic Festival; though now it is perhaps better known for its shopping outlets. When people unfamiliar with the South Santa Clara valley ask him where he’s from, he replies with “one hour south of Silicon Valley or San Jose.” The idea that San Martin is rural never crossed his mind. He never claimed to have grown up in “the country.”

When someone says “rural,” he thinks of the vast fields of corn, red barns, livestock, and small towns not too far from his current home in the Midwest.⁵ This is a sort of romantic, packaged ruralism.⁶ In fact, after living so many years in California, the idea of “rural California” seemed odd. How could a place less than an hour away from the valley that birthed the PC and teems with Prii (now Teslas) be rural?

3 Affective Infrastructures



His barn in San Martin, now a garage

⁵Bloomington, Indiana.

⁶There is substantial scholarship on the discursive function of terms such as country, rural, and nature. Bell (1994) speaks to how new, moneyed inhabitants, and long-time inhabitants of a village grasp at different notions of the country. In *Uncommon Ground*, we find a deliberate, often hidden, construction drawing from a romanticized nature of Yosemite Park (Olwig 1996) and Niagara Falls (Spirn 1996).

Infrastructures hint. They slyly suggest pathways. Roads don't always surprise us by making rides bumpy. Rather, cracks start weaving, becoming deeper in the asphalt. The lanes gradually fade. Five lanes (plus a carpool lane) slowly merge to four, then three, then—suddenly—you're on a two-lane highway. It's as if you've been driving with only one lane next to you the whole time. Their ordinariness⁷ lulls you toward affects you embrace without thought.

Sometimes infrastructures jar. He drives by a neighborhood. The houses look expensive. The gardens are well manicured; the bricks are bright red; and the architecture seems to draw from Jefferson's Monticello. Then he makes a turn to the "wrong side" of town. A rush of fear, trepidation, and gloom envelops him. Buildings become derelict. Windows have security bars. He's only gone a few blocks and everything has changed. Things become more homemade—signs crudely painted, old shacks converted to restaurants that sell food, mom-and-pop shops.

In the rural, these affective infrastructures hit us harder. Class divisions, so tied to infrastructures, jut out in the rural.⁸ He sees, feels, and hears the things that say who's well-off and who's not because they're right next to him.

This sudden uncertainty exposes judgment on infrastructures.⁹ He is on the "wrong side" of town only because he is comfortable with the "right side" of town. He has the comfort of privilege, only to feel discomfort with squalor. He has judged this infrastructure as shitty because he is a product of other infrastructures.

4 A Dark Room for Rabbits

The whole family moved from San Jose to San Martin because his father dreamed of owning land. After, his dad always boasted of having a "one-acre property."

With that land, came animals. Their new neighbors had horses, pigs, and rabbits. During the summer, an awful stench of manure perfumed the hot dry air as the pigs sloshed around in the mud.

One childhood memory left an indelible impression. The neighbor's kids showed him a dark shed in the backyard. Inside, at chest level, were elongated huts with wire-mesh roofs sitting along both sides of a small path. Peering into the roofs, he saw rabbits furtively hopping about, munching bits of food. They looked oh-so-cute, but his neighbor explained—they'd be used for meat. His mother heard about the rabbits. She sighed, 「かわいいぞう!」¹⁰

⁷Boring by nature, the use of infrastructures is transparent and taken for granted (Star 1999).

⁸In his ethnography of a village less than two hours from London, Bell (1994, p. 35) observes, "A number of residents suggested that class divisions were in fact stronger in country villages ... than in the cities ... poorer people find class differences stronger in the countryside".

⁹Star (1999) notes how infrastructures become apparent when they break down. I would also add that they become apparent when we *feel* unease.

¹⁰"Poor rabbits" in Japanese.

5 Life and Death

He's had four stray cats. The first was a mackerel tabby. She often rubbed up against his leg, meowing for food. She was affectionate but carried herself in a dignified manner.

She soon became pregnant. Her nipples were red, and her tummy swelled up. He vividly remembered when she gave birth. Frankly, she seemed confused. Her eyes went wide, and she ran about the backyard deck with her baby hanging out. The baby swung about, like a trailer loosely attached to a hitch.

The litter of babies was helpless. Squinty eyed—all the while hissing—they clumsily crawled around, nervously pawing in the air for milk from their mother. We started calling the mackerel tabby the “mother cat.”

His family couldn't afford to take care of all the cats, so the kittens and the mother cat were sent to the shelter. He remembers turning around as he left the shelter and seeing the mother cat in a cage, meowing. His mom couldn't bear to look at her.

They kept one black kitten, a male. He later died after being run over by a car. His body was buried in the backyard. The dog would often sniff around the dirt there.

Later, after he left to college and work, they adopted another stray cat. She was not affectionate. She was wary. They'd see a splotch of white off in the distance. The mom worked hard to gain her trust, leaving scraps of food and wandering away to allow the cat to safely eat in solitude. She named her Shirochan.¹¹ Eventually, Shirochan trusted his mother enough to come by every morning for food. She warmed up to being petted and even held—though, he thinks his mom enjoyed it most!

She got old. Her meowing, always a wheeze, became a whisper. An old ear injury suddenly came alive. As if covered in acid, everyday her ear dissolved, until bit-by-bit it nearly went to her head. She couldn't eat food well, chewing it gingerly, avoiding places where her teeth hurt. Eventually, she stopped coming by every morning. His mom would call for Shirochan, but to no avail. They knew she had probably gone off somewhere and died.

He thinks the cat's death hit his mom pretty hard. His mom explained, Shirochan was a *wild* cat. She had been in fights. She had seen a lot. She was street smart and survived. Yet, even with that tough exterior, she let them be her semi-family.

Lately, his mom has been taming another cat. Sometimes, she calls him Shirochan by mistake.

6 Posthuman Bodies

Cities subjugate humans, but moreso other beings. Trees are contorted with wire mesh to squeeze in dirt plots surrounded by sidewalks. Animals scavenge like thieves. Only at dusk do you see the glowing eyes of wolves on roads. Rat traps are smeared with peanut butter. Feral cats are ear tipped. Anti-roosting spikes adorn skyscrapers. We

¹¹A affectionate nickname using the word for white, “shiro” (白), in Japanese.

rarely encounter animals except when they are expected—when they are leashed or deconstructed into pieces of meat, processed for sale. Of course, despite these attempts to reign in our non-human neighbors, many, like pigeons, adapt and thrive in urban landscapes.

In the country, we can't entirely avoid the trajectories of other beings. Roadkill lingers longer. A first timer can't get around that they've just killed an animal in the hunt, even if you call it "harvesting." Bugs buzz around, biting you. This isn't glamping.

7 Neighborly Hospitality

When their family first moved to San Martin, the neighbor next door gave them a carton of eggs, fresh from their chickens. They also gave them jam made from their apricot tree. It was a nice welcome. Both were delicious. Well, the eggs—they tasted the same as store bought, but they had beautiful, sunset yolks.

8 Horses for Meat

As children, they'd spy on the neighbor's yard through the knotholes of the fence. Their dog also spied with them.

The farthest edge of the backyard was only loosely fenced. The neighbors had a makeshift, wooden stable followed by a large, patchy dirt field. When you peered over the fence, the horse would gaily trot over. It readily took apples and carrots. Its long, grubby lips would reach over like hands. Lots of drool. He still remembers the horse merrily gnawing away.

Much later, they saw a large truck with a horse trailer come by on the side road by the backyard. He and his brother ran over to see strange men from the truck coax the horse to the trailer. The horse did not want to go. He later heard a rumor that the horse was to be slaughtered for dog food. What once was a neighbor was now fodder.

9 The Backyard Outdoors

His BB gun was a Red Ryder. With his brother, they picked off empty soda cans filled with water on wooden posts. The water gushing out proved they were sharpshooters. They'd occasionally pick more "natural" targets, like fallen walnuts from the tree. They were a harder to hit.

The NRA gun safety guidelines advised placing backing to catch missed shots. He was a methodical child and worried about shooting without the backing. But,

they shot anyways. The original fencing in our backyard is leaning now, rotted away. But one can still see copper BBs stubbornly embedded in it.

A neighbor told them to be careful when shooting, lest those stray bullets nick someone's behind or, as the movie goes, pokes someone's eye out. They opted for safety glasses.

Once, someone's chicken escaped and ended up on the rooftop. He aimed high and shot at it with the BB gun. He wasn't sure if he hit it. Strangely enough, he and his brother couldn't find the chicken—maybe it ran off.

Even to this day, he feels guilty about shooting it. Guilty about not finding it.

10 Locating the Outdoors

What is the outdoors? Camping, hiking, and fishing are how we encounter the rough and tumble of the outdoors. A certain kind of cultural outdoors is wrapped up in RVs, tents, Thermoses, campfires, and s'mores. A brimming sense of freedom. A place where you can write your own *Travels with Charley*.

The backyard is a readily accessible microcosm of the outdoors. Between the backyard and the indoors is a glass door. The glass door gives us a glimpse of new possibilities and new constraints. You can see if it's worth going outside, if the weather suits.

Landscaping, gardening, patios, pools, flower beds, mulch, bird feeders, gopher traps, and more allow us to design the backyard. But things fail. Squirrels climb up bird feeders. Other things need upkeep. Mulch is overrun by weeds.

When we speak of the country or the outdoors, we probably all have it, even if it's just a flowerpot. Every home has an indoor and outdoor. Some of us dwell outdoors more, maintaining and shaping gardens. Some simply dabble, sitting on patio chairs, sipping mimosas, or drinking beers. Some outdoors feel cold and tidy. Others feel warm and disheveled.

11 Dark Skies

Tonight is the Perseid meteor shower. With nary a cloud in sight, it's promised to be a particularly good showing. His friend called, "Hey, can we go to your parents' to see it? Too much light pollution here to get a good view."

They set up a few lawn chairs in the front yard, got out some binoculars and telescopes, drank some hot cocoa, and were illuminated by a wonderful galactic viewing in the rural, pitch dark sky.

12 Like a Videogame

A short car ride away from his home is the “Coyote Valley Sporting Clays.” It’s loads of fun. Last time he took his Swiss friend there. He took him there to experience Americana.

He got a two-barreled shotgun, and his friend had a pump-action shotgun. Disks fly out, and they shoot. It’s like a video game. You need a certain strategy—trace the path of the clay, get a little bit ahead of it, control your breathing, press the trigger, and hopefully the shotgun pellets hit and satisfyingly break apart the clay. If you miss, you only get one more shot to quickly hit the bird. Each station simulates a different animal. One drops a clay and it bounces along a hillside path, simulating a rabbit. Others mimic pigeons.

Once, when going up to the station, he lazily swung—not on purpose of course—the barrel toward his friend. “Whoa, watch where you’re pointing that thing.” He suddenly felt unnerved at the thought that he could kill someone instantly. He still thinks of that moment from time to time.

His shoulders were sore from the recoil for days after.

13 Just Accept It



Every time he goes home he expects it. Web pages load at a crawling pace, so much so that he notices the order in which text and images download and display, starting from the upper left. Sometimes the browser spits out a webpage from the modem, letting them know their connection was lost. The Internet is unstable,¹² like

¹²Internet stability is often more valued than mere access (Burrell 2018).

the pitted asphalt of country roads. It says to click a button to try and resolve the problem. He clicks once and, often, several times before it reconnects. Sometimes he just gets up and unplugs and replugs the modem. He complains to his parents that their Internet sucks but he knows it isn't their fault. They think it is plenty fast, but he can't work. Even with Zoom—the latest and coolest videoconferencing software—he grumpily turns off the video when joining remote meetings with colleagues. Too choppy and grainy.

He browses the slow Internet looking for faster internet. “Cable San Martin” or “Internet San Martin” yield few results. Every time he enters their home address, it says they don't have broadband access there.

One day, he goes to Charter's website and types in their address. It says there is a cable package. \$45 for 100 Mbps. They are paying the same for 6 Mbps. He signs up, schedules a day for installation, but at the last step they say he needs to chat with customer support. They ask for his address again and they tell him sorry, we don't have service for your zip code. He was *so* excited, and now he is so disappointed. All the possibilities—zippy cloud backups, responsive websites stuffed with dynamic content, not having to tell the parents to stop watching videos so he could work—gone.

His dad shows him flyers from Viasat, exclaiming a “SERVICE ALERT” for “speeds (up to) 10x faster than typical DSL” at his address. The flyer has a photo of country homes with spacious land, lush trees, and cute sheds, all bathed in rays of sunlight. Presumably Viasat is this beacon of hope for the rural. He sees that it's for *satellite* service. \$50 the first 3 months, but increases to \$70 afterward. Sigh. What a rip off. He feels trapped and the companies know it too, the desperation in the air.

The other day he drove down the road off the highway to his home. At a four-way intersection, hammered to a wooden post was a sign declaring, “Fast Internet (Viasat).” The internet companies certainly know how to reach their market population. They don't advertise “virtually.” They know how to materialize affect. He fumes.

14 South Pride for the North?

When he interviewed, the university picked him up in a hired limousine. Apparently, these hired cars are commonly used for schlepping job interviewees as well as prom dates. At an intersection was a pickup truck with a huge confederate flag propped up in its bed. The flag flapped back and forth violently in the air. He tried to catch the driver's face but failed. He tried but couldn't imagine the same truck in California. It was like seeing something from the news, happening live in front of him. In the midst of small talk, he asked the driver about the confederate flag. The driver said, “There are a lot of stupid people here.”

Later, his wife Googled Indiana’s history. “It was part of the Union!”¹³ He wondered if the people flying the flag knew that. But he later learned that Indiana has always been a state in flux, with one foot in the South and one in the North.

15 His Own Country



Photo by Kathryn E. Graber (used with permission)

The backyard is where the microcosm of the rural is constructed. It is a comfortable and convenient outdoors. Feel tired? Feel hot? Go back “inside.” It’s a way for suburbia to experience nature. Stray animals on the run.

The wildness of suburbia is made apparent through the neighborhood mailing list. Missing dogs. Found cats. Sightings of foxes.

An email is sent to the neighborhood mailing list with the subject header, “Chickens loose in street.” A photo is attached showing a black and brown chicken at opposite ends running, in a blur against a static backdrop. Suburban cars, sidewalks, flowers, campaign signs, and trees are captured with crystal clarity. The chickens are the decisive moment, like the businessman of *Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare* caught in eternity galloping across a pool of water. He still gets giddy showing the email to everyone.

¹³The flag can just be a sign of white supremacy, not necessarily the strict historical meaning of aligning with the North or the South during the Civil War.

16 Unexpected Sights at Walmart

As he pushed his cart past racks of clothes in Walmart, he saw a lanky fellow with a white t-shirt tucked into blue jeans covering leather cowboy boots. The man had a white, bushy mustache, perfectly manicured. Along the man’s hip was a leather holster brazenly holding a silver revolver. The revolver glinted in the fluorescent lights. He blinked a few times to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. It was like a surreal scene from a movie featuring the actor Sam Elliot. He expected to see some unique characters at Walmart, but not a gun. People around didn’t seem to care (or at least pretended not to care). You can carry a gun around in Indiana with a permit.

He’s noticed that people wear camo to Walmart, to the grocery store, etc., much like folks in Silicon Valley, California wear yoga gear to Whole Foods.

17 The Gad-a-bout Newspaper

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SGT. BOWLING ASKS, "ARE MULTIPLE VEHICLE CRASHES THE NEW NORM?" SEE PG 6-7

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Shawn, a local bow hunter, recommended that he speak with Dr. Fred Philips, DVM (Doctor of Veterinary Medicine). He pointed out a local Indiana newspaper where Dr. Philips writes a column on trapping, *The Gad-a-bout* (what a name!). The byline is “Archery, camping, fishing, hunting, horses, humor, military, trapping, travel, events, opinions, etc.” It encourages you to “Take One It’s Free.” It is full of advertisements—furniture shops, boat shops, farm equipment, fishing guides, gun repair, restaurants, and more. The column by Dr. Philips detailed the latest sales at a local fur sale.

- Thirty-two trappers selling 1,272 pelts to nine buyers for a total of \$4,500.00
- Beaver XXL/XXXL had \$20 offered / no sale
- Coyote Grease: \$20.00
- Muskrats XL: \$1.00–\$4.00
- etc ...

Dr. Philips ends with “Watch your top knot. Keep your eyes along the skyline.”

He loves *The Gad-a-bout*. You can easily get lost in it. It provides a central peek into a part of Indiana he is not often exposed to. They have a nice website with all the previous issues in PDF.

Their Facebook presence is minimal. He felt a tinge of sadness reading a post by the editor:

Well it’s like this, I’m a writer who has little time to write. I’m 76, not getting any younger. It takes most of my time publishing *The Gad-a-bout* Newspaper and the rest delivering and preparing for the next one. All the things Facebook indicates I should do, I do in my paper. I have created 336 issues since 1990 and working on the 337th one this week, it will be printed on March 12th. I wanted to live long enough to create 500 issues, but to do that I have to publish for 14 more years and have little hope of being able to meet that goal.

He admires the editor’s dedication.

His initial thought was “wow this newspaper is like Facebook.” He did an about-face, rather—it is the other way around of course!

As he scrolls down, he sees other posts—about *Fox News*, about concerns with tearing down Christopher Columbus statues, about the second amendment.

This turns his stomach a bit, but one can admire while disagreeing, no?

18 Rural King

When friends and family from the West Coast come to visit, he takes them to Rural King. Where else can you instantly understand what “rural” is than in its eponymous store?

Go in and the smell of popcorn wafts. Scoop up the yellow-stained popcorn into the paper bag.

One section has sturdy, thick work boots.

Another has camo clothing, crossbows, and rifles.



Walking along, one can smell a musty amalgam of different livestock feed—chicken, rabbit, swine.

At the very back of the store a different kind of smell permeates—that of small livestock. In what essentially look like miniature horse troughs sit small chicks illuminated by heat lamps. You’ve got Barred Rock, Rhode Island Red, Ameraucana, all kinds of different chicks. Each trough is labeled with the chicken’s statistics, like a baseball card. You also get a snapshot of what color the eggs will be. You’ve got the quintessential yellow chick. Ones with black and white stripes. Some of them at 99 cents a pop. There are a few rabbits there, too.

A large sign warns: “THE BABY BIRDS WILL GROW TO BE ADULT BIRDS.” Presumably this is to warn city slickers that these animals are not just cute little pets.

Some of the chicks vigorously peck away at the feeder tray. Some are snuggling with their siblings, gently dozing.

The eye instinctively moves to the chicks that stay still. They look like loners. He bends down to get a closer look. Their beaks agape, eyes closed, one wonders how they died. Were they malnourished? Did the other chicks kill them? When will someone at the store come to clean away this sight?

A large cut-out board advertising a poultry feed brand shows a rooster saying “Best chick pic ever!” with a small chick. Their friend and his wife stick their faces through the holes and he snaps a photo. He chuckles at the double entendre, but wonders if it is sexist.

19 Bloomington Deer Collars

In Bloomington, the deer are not scared. They have full reign over their yards. They eat flowers, destroy gardens, and butt through fences.

They lay in their yard. When he comes out, they perk up and look at him. Sometimes, the younger ones run off, gracefully flying over fences. Most of the time, though, the older ones just look up, maybe grunt, but otherwise go about grazing or enjoying our manicured lawns.

The local biologists tag them, presumably to track their movements. There was talk of culling deer. They have an overpopulation of deer here. But the hipsters and animal lovers in Bloomington don't want to kill Bambi. It'll never happen.

20 A Child Among Children

He decided to take the Indiana Hunter Education class. It wasn't legally required, but he wanted to get a better grasp of what would be entailed. He drove on a backroad to a lodge. Inside, he felt sheepish—he saw mostly children. Well, he saw some adults, but they were the parents of the children taking the class. He was definitely the only Asian American there.

The instructor explained the parts of the gun to everyone. He spoke like a primary school teacher to his students. Many of the kids were already familiar with the information.

He scanned the room to see if there were other adult beginners like him. Nope, didn't look like it.

They gave everyone a nice booklet. He figured he could get what he needed from it. The class was too slow (for the kids' sake). At the break, he thanked the instructor and left.

21 Researching Gutting

Before the hunt, they had to consider the possibility they would actually harvest a deer. Where do they field dress it?

He did some research about field dressing a deer. The YouTube video was daunting. In the hot weather, you are in a race with time, and accidentally cutting the wrong organs could ruin the meat and make the work harder. If you don't dress quickly enough, the flies will take over the carcass, laying eggs, etc.

A deer is huge. The organs you pull out are massive, some looking like a pale white waterskin. He can't imagine the stench.

22 The Old Boys Club

He conducts an interview with Sam, a former employee at the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). He asks Sam whether being a biologist but not a long-time hunter was challenging at his workplace:

Within Fish and Wildlife, there is definitely a culture of that. I would go a little bit further and say if you're an adult onset hunter, there is still bias against you. Even though I'd started deer hunting in 2010 [6 years ago] and turkey hunting in 2011, it was still like, "Oh, you're a new hunter and what could you possibly know? How can you teach hunting?"

There are these confrontational type of questions that really showed the bias of, "Yeah, we want to teach people how to hunt, but even with our new hunters, we're not going to let them into our clique or our fold." So that's something that I'm facing professionally.

I don't know if you could extend that to everyone or if that's just they don't like me ...

A lot of our staff, at least in Fish and Wildlife, this is the natural extension of their love for hunting, is they go into it professionally. For me, it will always be just one more outdoor recreational pursuit.

When Sam joined the DNR, he knew he wasn't part of the old boys club. It smarted. Those kids in the hunter ed class knew they were in the club.

23 Hunger Games

They signed up for a family archery workshop out in the Mt. Vernon Conservation Club. They went into a large cabin. There seemed to only be a few folks there already sitting, chatting, and laughing. The DNR officials seemed to know them already. When they came they greeted them warmly, but left. It seems like they were the only ones there for "official" business, for the class.

They went to a small area outside of the cabin set up for the archery practice. A makeshift target board propped up on the ground had a tarp, like an old blanket out to dry, behind it.

His wife was the better shot from the get-go. She was good at pulling the bright neon colored compound bow and getting the arrow to hit the target straight on. It was fun.

One of the officials told them that archery and bowhunting was especially popular with women. Women were inspired by the bow and arrow-wielding main character in *Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen.

24 A Mentor

They signed up for the Family Dove Hunt event. They took a rough, rocky road into the wildlife area, and found some laborers who directed them to a field full of knee-high grass off the main road.

They were the only ones driving a Subaru SUV. The rest had hulking, tough trucks. They all had their own guns and camo. Some came with families. Lots of kids.

They were the only absolute beginners. They were paired with John as their dove hunting mentor.

John gave him a 20-gauge shotgun, designed for youths. He also brought a bucket with a padded cushion seat to screw on the top. He had some extra lawn seats to sit on. John gave a quick lesson on holding, loading, and safely using the shotgun.

During the dove hunt, his wife didn't participate—she didn't want to kill an animal. John sympathized, saying that his own wife was hesitant but eventually warmed up to hunting, and now wants to do deer hunting.

He also told them that people often refuse to kill “beautiful” animals but are fine shooting “ugly” animals.

John worked as a biologist in private industry. It was a lot of hours, he made good money, and climbed the career ladder. But, he was tired of spending time indoors filling out forms.

He likes introducing people to hunting, especially adults who weren't exposed to this environment. He was a helper, like Mr. Rogers always talked about.

25 Not So Smart

Doves are not very smart. You shoot at them. They fly away. Five minutes past and the same birds are back where you shot them. They don't realize that someone is trying to kill them.

He also often heard that turkeys are dumb. Apparently, they have a pea-sized brain.

Hunters are always trying to get in the mindset of animals. They are centaurs. What is it like to be a duck or deer? Deer smell good but have bad eyesight. Ducks like seeing other ducks. Turkeys are the opposite of deer—they see well but have a laughably weak sense of smell.

26 Finishing Them Off

When you get a clean shot, everything is simple. But a few times when he went to get the dove, it was still alive. Its chest was raising and falling. The instructor said you twist the neck. It was easy to do, its neck bones cracked, like twisting and breaking a bunch of dried, hollow reeds.

One time, the instructor twisted the neck, inadvertently decapitating the head. Blood was spurting everywhere with gusto. This was unexpected. The dove's wings were flailing wildly.

With ducks, the injured ones—upon falling from the sky—will splash water everywhere as their wings beat violently against the surface of the pond. Doug, his hunting partner, went up to the ducks and shot them point blank. The water fell still. This disturbed him.

27 Peeling for Supermarket Meat



Processing doves is surprisingly easy. You make a small cut and just start peeling away the feathers. The bird is so delicate and light. Peeled feathers fly erratically like dandelion seeds in the wind. Some stick on his pant legs.

It's also surprising because the meat seems to simply "appear." You must, however, get past a moment of revulsion—the tentative first step where you first dig in and puncture the skin with your fingernails to pull away the skin with its feathers. It is a visceral feeling to transform an animal into a piece of meat that would feel natural plopped onto Styrofoam, shrink wrapped, labeled, and sitting in a supermarket. The surprise is that transformation—how readily his mind shifted to seeing the dove he killed as food.

Once you've peeled enough by hand, a sharp knife scrapes up and breaks the meat away from the muscle and bones.

The knife slips and he gets a pretty nasty gash. It's a dull pain. He's embarrassed, but they give him some gauze and tape to stop the bleeding. Looking at this finger now, it is smooth where the skin has healed.

28 Driving with Doug

At 9:30AM, he met Doug at Suzie's Diner in Solsberry, Indiana. He parked in a large, unpaved parking lot by the diner. The diner looked connected to a gas station. Doug came along with a large, powerful white pickup truck.

They'd go together to the draw. It's kind of like the lottery. The draw tells you where you'll hunt waterfowl. He recently looked up the diner on Google. It now says "recorded closed at this location." Apparently, it is now Sasha's Pancake House.

On the way to Linton, they drove by a gas station. The gas prices were *cheap*. "The gas here is always really cheap," Doug told him.

Doug also told him about his new boss at the DNR, some Purdue-educated guy. He didn't respect what Doug and the others knew about land management, like how to clear away invasive species.

As they neared the Goose Pond visitor center, Doug pulled his truck up on the side of State HWY 59, nearby the edge of the pond. They saw a few ducks and water chickens. He said, "This would be an easy place to hunt cause it's not too far from the parking lot." People don't want a long hike back while lugging their game. Pointing further down, past the pond, he explained, "There's a good place down there. Harder to get to though with all the water."

29 Improvising

They drove to a gravelly parking lot to walk to the draw location. Doug gave him a pair of old waders (his son's) with boots attached to them. He knew they'd be too big for him, so he inserted some carpet scraps at the bottom so that they would fit.

Doug and Benny brought some cut oak from the surrounding area. They broke down the oak branches and stuck them in the grass to provide cover from ducks.

30 Becoming Nature

The water doesn't just appear. Patches in the Goose Pond dry up. They have a system now to pump water into areas to encourage ducks and other waterfowl to come. They don't need to rely on the rainfall anymore.

Neighboring farms help out too. They plant corn and other crops, harvest them, and leave some for animals. The crops are put in place before the floods.

31 Fucking Pricks Everywhere

The mud was a thick slurry. It was damn sticky. Each step he took off the mud, if he wasn't nimble, large strings of the wet slurry refused to let go. Sometimes his socks would come out of the boots.

Wading through the mud, his arms brushed prickly bushes and grasses. The hunters he tagged along with gave him a stool with legs that served as stakes you drove into the slurry. It wasn't the most comfortable stool, but it worked.

One time, he fell down in the mud onto his knees. Doug chuckled, "At least you didn't fall face flat into the mud!"

At home, he found his hiking pants and shirt infested with burs, those insect-like seeds called "beggar's ticks." For a few days after, he developed rashes everywhere on his arms. He slathered ice-cold aloe from the fridge onto his arms to soothe the itchiness.

32 Trumpeting Comfort

"Cognitive dissonance" is what pops into his mind.

In a momentary lull during the duck hunt, one of the rangers asked, "What do you all think of Trump?" They all agreed he was a bit of a loon, but, boy, they hated Hillary. Hillary was going to take their guns away. They didn't trust her.

He wondered how anyone could support Trump. The hunters he met were kind and generous with their time. They weren't like Trump. Yet, strewn about their homes were magazine articles trumpeting Trump.

In those conversations out in the marsh, he learned. People didn't necessarily like Trump. They knew Trump was mercurial, childish, and unqualified. They weren't idiots. They just hated Hillary. He would never vote for Trump, but he *understood* why sane others might.

33 Sunset

Duck hunting is allowed until sunset. Bob's smartphone tells them it is sunset. Hunting's over. They begin to pack up their gear for the day. Doug points out—the sun's still up! Do you want to stay an hour more? They all chuckle. It's the first time they've misjudged sunset. Those damned devices telling them when it is.

34 Target Bags

He stuffed the ducks whole into the reusable Target bags in the trunk of his car. They had some heft.

He arrived back home in the dead of night and called to his wife. “I’ve got some ducks I need to gut! Help!” Coming out to the carport, she wasn’t happy he used those bags. She said they were ruined. They were permanently tainted by the ducks’ death and blood.

Doug called him on the phone, “I forgot to tell you, don’t get spooked by the water bugs on the birds. They often hitch rides on birds to go to different areas of Goose Pond.”

The porch light wasn’t bright enough. She held the flashlight for him while he gutted the duck under the carport. It wasn’t as easy as peeling away doves. The ducks were larger and tougher to process. Something about their heft and size made their death more apparent. The loose duck feathers were buzzing all around them like a tornado, sticking to their clothes. It felt strange to be gutting ducks under the moonlight on the concrete.

35 Gamey

Teal is prized for its taste. Shovelers are the junkiest birds because they will eat anything. Ducks taste like what they eat.

Per Doug’s advice, they brined the duck meat in salt for a couple of days to remove the blood. The internet warned not to overcook duck—keep it medium rare. They BBQ’d it on a gas grill with Aldi’s steak seasoning and seasoning salt.

Still, it was too gamey. Maybe he needed a better recipe? Maybe he should’ve tried to cook it with the skin or fat? He longed for chicken. He was tempted not to eat it all but knew he had to. He felt a responsibility to eat what he killed.

John suggested cooking dove meat wrapped in bacon. When cooked in the cast iron it tasted good, better than the duck. His wife said, “I wouldn’t classify it as good, but it was edible.”

36 Retracing with the Help of His Google Friends

The outdoors is something he’s researching. He was writing his fieldnotes like any good ethnographer would but wasn’t able to keep track of where they went in that truck ride with Doug. On a whim, he opened Google Maps. Lo and behold Google had been diligently tracking him. The timeline beautifully showed the route—the U-turns taken, and the twisty, ad hoc route they traversed.

37 Old Tech at a Farm



Mike showed us an “Ohio Brooder.” It is described in a 1942 circular by the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station as a “type of brooder ...designed upon the basic principle that chicks ...can be depended upon to adapt themselves readily to their heat and air requirements when ample heat and air are provided.” The boxes can adapt to different weather conditions—for example, by raising them to accommodate different or more mature chicks that are taller.

He marveled at the elegance of the design. It supported the agency of the chicks. Sure, it wasn’t *the* most efficient way to raise chicks, but it was *an* efficient way that makes them happy!

38 Hospitality: Ladies First

The chicken farmers—a husband and wife—were *really* nice. He asked to use their bathroom before the interview. The toilet looked like it had been recently cleaned. The water had that distinctive blue color. The whole house was spotless. His research collaborator, Professor Dvorak, remarked, “I think they most definitely cleaned up the place for us.” That was nice!

As they were leaving—despite their protestations—the couple insisted on giving them each a carton of eggs, fresh from their chickens. It was a sweet gesture, and he felt guilty for taking both their time and their eggs.

But the kindness of strangers is not uncommon in this rural context.

Professor Dvorak got in the driver’s side of the car—naturally, to drive them back to the university. The wife remarked, “Oh she’s driving? That’s new.” They smiled. He was taken aback by the comment.

39 Citizen of Starbucks International

He emailed back and forth to recruit a local bowhunter, Peter. They decided to meet in Martinsville. People at his university always talked about Martinsville's history with the KKK and racism. Vestiges of that past are no longer visible but serve to affect the entire city. No doubt the residents are aware of their city's lingering reputation. But, he isn't aware of their awareness.

He arranged to do the interview at Starbucks.

Starbucks sticks out like a sore thumb compared to the other restaurants in Martinsville. The "No. 1 Chinese Restaurant." The "Traderbaker Flea Market." Starbucks by contrast is bougie. Nonetheless, every time he passes by on the way to the Indy airport, he sees a long line of cars for the drive-thru snaking around that Starbucks. Go figure!

He met Peter at Starbucks, ordered his own latte, and asked him what he wanted, "my treat." Peter looked up and was overwhelmed by the coffee choices and lingo—tall, grande, flat white, etc. Scratching his head, Peter asked if they had hot chocolate.

He was bemused that Peter didn't know how to order at Starbucks.

Looking back, he wondered why he was bemused. He is ashamed. When he first started drinking coffee, he was confused by its choices. Of course, Starbucks is its own country with strange words like "Frappuccino" and "venti." He should look at his own consumerist-generation X commodification, having become a citizen of Starbucks International.

40 You Speak Good English

He met another bowhunter, Carl, at the local police station. They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Carl then remarked, "You speak really good English." Taken aback, he snidely replied, "Well I should, I was born and raised in California." During the interview, Carl also made allusions to Chinese bowhunters he was familiar with. Why bring that up? He's not Chinese.¹⁴

41 Ethnography in HCI

This chapter takes as inspiration Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007). It represents an attempt to employ a style of ethnographic writing not always encountered in the discipline of human-computer interaction (or anthropology). Ethnography, at its heart as well as etymologically, is the writing of culture. When we think of ethnography in HCI we often think of a certain structure to writing—introduction, related work, methodology (e.g., grounded theory), findings (the so-called thick

¹⁴The outdoors is frequently racialized as white (Finney 2014).

description (Geertz 1973)), and discussion (e.g., How does this transfer? What are the design implications? What are the sensitizing concepts? What are the theoretical claims?). At the risk of overgeneralizing, ethnographic styles of writing in HCI often predominately draw from the Chicago School. In the world of HCI, ethnography connotes certain legitimated repertoires of doing, reporting, and disseminating research.

Arguably, this dominant mode of writing, fruitful though it has been, ultimately is what Jansen (2016, p. 65) labels as “representational thinking and evaluative critique—reduction, demystification, totalisation.”¹⁵ To put in simpler terms, the Strunk and White ethnography must handhold the reader. It must collapse findings into “themes” and, further, the discussion must explicitly tie in with these themes. Or, it may map findings to all-encompassing theories that explain and predict. In *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus 1986, p. 2), James Clifford similarly points out that despite its centrality, writing in ethnography has been bowdlerized by “the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience.” In other words, writing is rendered unproblematic.

I do not mean to disparage how we write ethnography in HCI. I also do not intend this chapter to bring innovative critiques on research at the crossroads of ethnography and HCI (Crabtree et al. 2009; Dourish 2006, 2014; Randall 2018). Rather, I seek to imagine an alternative “ethnographic” study in HCI, just as anthropologists have already reimagined what ethnographic writing should look like. This is a kind of writing that leads the reader but does not wholly foreclose interpretation. It leaves the work open to new connections, invites readers’ active,¹⁶ generative engagement, not just passive consumption.¹⁷

Stewart’s approach harkens back, perhaps in ethnography’s most raw form, to the making of texts. This tack makes transparent that the “self is an instrument of knowing” (Dourish 2014). A consequence of this viewpoint is that “data” from an ethnography consists not only what the researcher “observes,” but also their own feelings and affect.

In *Ordinary Affects*, Stewart’s subject is of everyday life in America. The book does not provide detailed instructions nor motivations for her “method” of writing. Her work blurs the boundaries between the social sciences, anthropology, and humanities. What is obvious is that her work deals with “affect.” This affective turn has been talked about at length. Affect is “the feeling of having a feeling, a potential that emerges” (Rutherford 2016). Gould (2009, p. 19) defines affect’s amorphous, visceral qualities—it is “nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body.” Thus, affect gets at the opaqueness of feelings—its can’t-quite-put-into-words force.

¹⁵A similar critique can be found in organizational studies: “Much of our writing is washed by a thick spray of claimed objectivity since artful delights and forms are seen by many ...to interfere with the presentation of what is actually there in a given social world” (Maanen 1995).

¹⁶Reader reception theory makes a similar claim in the realm of literary theory (Su 2013).

¹⁷I am indebted for Ellie Harmon’s feedback here, which I shamelessly quote verbatim.

Emotion then is a result of affect being reified, concretized into a nameable expression shaped (but not defined) by culture (Gould 2009, p. 20). The “affect is what makes you *feel* an emotion” (Gould 2009, p. 22). In spite of affect’s causal role in expressing and identifying emotion, affect remains difficult to pinpoint. Moreover, affect and emotion are not so easily teased apart. By unpacking the film *Bend it Like Beckham*, Ahmed (2007) illustrates that the affect of happiness, particularly the happiness of multiculturalism, is often gendered. In that work, affect means almost the same as feeling. There is no one way to make the affective turn.

Here, I have adopted this dominant conception of affect as preceding feeling. Thus, affect attends to what leads us to feel and where that leading happens. This is one way understanding people in HCI can go beyond seeing and hearing what they do. Instead, it can begin to examine the subjective experiences of others and ourselves.

For me, there are two aspects that are most striking about Stewart’s text—first, it reads like a collection of loosely tangled vignettes. Each is titled and differ in length (some are only a few sentences long). Some vignettes are explicitly linked to others. Some sound more “theoretical,” talking about abstract concepts like the Scenes of Impact, Extreme Trajectories, and the Affective Subject, while others are more concrete and descriptive like a travelog. Overall, they are written in a blasé style that *feels* very different from traditional ethnographies in HCI. Stewart’s work reads like something in between non-fiction and fiction.

Second, the writing is excruciatingly “tentative, speculative” (Jansen 2016, p. 70). It is an experiment to devise a new anthropological mode of writing (Jansen 2016, p. 63). To best depict affect, Stewart chooses to make the reader sweat. For the most part, the reader needs to digest and make sense of the vignettes themselves. There are no sections. No subsections. No thematic outline. No introductory paragraphs that signpost a quasi-theoretical framing of the ethnographic results. No figures. It deliberately avoids truth claims. This ethereal, yet nervous, quality of her writing is partially achieved through judicious use of words to convey affect: potentialities, trajectories, intensities, emergence, surges, immanent forces, pulsations, and the visceral. These words help us experience affect and its foreshadowing of the emotions we might feel.

Stewart’s writing may frustrate the reader—it attempts to perform affect but nonetheless the reading experience never seems to sharply capture affect. It slips through the fingers. It is sly and sneaky, withering away just as it appears. It walks in the “ambivalent and contradictory nature of our feelings,” including their intertwining with our bodily senses and cultural surroundings (Gould 2009, p. 26).

Taken together, these two aspects attempt to “slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique ... by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate” (Stewart 2008). In other words, Stewart wants us to dwell on the ethnographic writing without the writing dwelling

for us.¹⁸ Yes, the writing does perform, but only to give us a taste of the affect that so interested her (and us). It is a performance open to multiple interpretations.

I do not claim to have reached Stewart's heights, but I have endeavored to make this chapter one that "works best when you immerse yourself in it, when you let it affect you rather than trying to pin it down and force it to make sense" (Fannin et al. 2010).¹⁹ Like Stewart (2007), I refer to myself in the third person. This choice gives the author less authority, less legitimacy, allowing the reader to reach their own affect with conviction—a sort of indirect communication that Kierkegaard employed.²⁰

42 The Resonance of Multiple Ruralities

Michael Bell's (1994) beautiful ethnography of a country village, Childerley, warns us of pastoralism's allure:

Pastoralism has been widely rejected by academics. In America, critics will pejoratively call pastoralism the "rural myth"...the "rural idyll." Rural sociologists have pointed out that pastoralism romanticizes the poverty of farm workers and peasants, turning them into "merrie rustics" and obscuring the extent to which the economic political forces of the city keep them impoverished. (p. 125)

Yet, Bell acknowledges his informants in Childerley would not agree with this assessment. It is still a "powerful idea" (p. 126) that the villagers employ to their advantage.

Childerley, as he discovers, is simmering with tensions. City people versus country people. Moneyed people versus poor people. Locals versus fly-ins. Those who have or lack country competence (Desmond 2008). A country village is not a monolithic entity.

Bell seeks a middle ground to theorize about nature and morality in Childerley. First, he proposes that we come to grips with the fact that: "It is deeply reassuring to find one's sense of order, one's categories of understanding, there in what one takes to be a different realm" (Bell 1994, p. 236). In other words, despite the paucity and imperfections of one's categories, "reducing" is something we are drawn to. In strange places, it comforts us and allows us to proceed.

Bell is not saying there is only one ideal for the country. Rather, people in the country seek to find different ways of living that *resonate* with each other, much like different bells in a tower, each with their own pitch, ring in consonance with each other.

This metaphor of Bell's bell reflects a wider move within rural sociology and geography away from traditional, obdurate distinctions between the urban and the rural often focused on their differing physical characteristics (Halfacree 1993; Lobao

¹⁸Stewart (2008, p. 72) finds sympathy with "weak" theories that "take on a life of their own as problems of thought ...in contrast to a ...theory that ...dreams of a perfect parallelism between the analytic subject, her concept, and the world—a kind of razed earth for academic conversation."

¹⁹A student reported that this chapter's "writing grew on us, but like fungus."

²⁰Kierkegaard's writing style has potential as a strategy for design (Su and Stolterman 2016).

1996). This is motivated by a desire to reject reducing the rural to simplified stereotypes—e.g., small, marginalized, and financially strapped (Bell 2007).

Instead, we see an increased set of bells being “rung.” City people are adopting “rural” activities, particularly outdoor and nature activities, and symbols (e.g., camouflage clothing) (Lichter and Brown 2011), thereby invigorating businesses in rural counties (Flachs and Abel 2019). Farming is no longer a small enterprise endemic to the country but, rather, now part of a global, corporate agriculture (Hess 2009). Rural and urban areas have integrated “migrants” from one another (Salamon 2007; Smith et al. 2001), leading to both tension and appropriation (Lichter and Brown 2011). Scholars have argued that rural studies must examine particular conditions in particular settings (Hoggart 1990).

This cultural turn (Woods 2012) highlights the increasing intersection of rural geography, sociology, environment, and other disciplines (Woods 2009). Scholars now focus on how rural people perform and enact rurality (Woods 2010). For instance, they now emphasize their social interactions in communities, participation in loosely defined social movements, values, and management of rural identity (Woods 2003). These enactments of rurality are not merely in interactions or speech but also in the embodied practices such as those in agriculture, farmers’ markets, and agrotourism (Carolan 2008).

This chapter highlights the affects of different ruralities which swirl around each other. I would add that our bodies *feel* these ruralities everywhere, this resonance that Bell speaks of. But, more significantly, my writings highlight points in time when *my* affects have collided. This resonance is constantly teetering from consonance to dissonance. My bodily experiences are a mish-mash of multiple geographies of suburbans, urbans, and rurals. We want to reduce. I’m always marveling at similarities despite differences and differences despite similarities. They bump against each other, threatening an explosion of energy that reverberates. Taking Bell’s metaphor, these affects may be harmonious or dissonant, or, more likely, something in between.

The affective textures in my scenes are designs that invite one to flex their emotive muscles. I have conveyed how rural forces are felt, influenced by the urban, suburban, and rural histories ingrained in my own body. Moments will occur when the reader’s feelings resonate with mine. In other moments, the reader will feel a discordant chord. Like any design, my scenes—my texts²¹—are to be at once discussed and judged. At times, I was able to reflect on my own “emotional habitus.”²² Such writing thus offers the potential to reorient away from taken for granted attitudes and ways of feeling the rural. Yet, in many cases, I was a slave of emotions underlying my well-worn assumptions of the rural. It is my hope that the comfort or discomfort from reading designs like the scenes of this chapter give rise to other designs of variegated forms, mired in affect.

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²¹A parallel approach with images in HCI are pictorials (Blevins 2014).

²²“A template for what and how to feel.” (Gould 2009, p. 34).

meaningfully speak to a greater audience. I owe a debt to Scott McCrickard for so graciously cultivating a community of scholars passionate about the outdoors and HCI. My wonderful collaborators Majdah Alshehri, EunJeong Cheon, Lynn Dombrowski, and Rosemary Steup provided constructive critiques. Special thanks to Lilly Irani for pointing me toward affect theory. Colleen Jankovic deftly copyedited this chapter. Lastly, I am grateful to Michael Jones, Tim Stelter, and their students for their willingness to provide feedback by exposing their own affect. This work was supported in part by the National Science Foundation through CAREER grant IIS-1845964.

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