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# Planetary rural geographies: Towards a research agenda

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## Abstract

This author reply responds to the commentaries on our article, ‘Planetary rural geographies’, exploring intersections with neo-Marxist political economy, post-colonialism, and digital geographies. The critiques raise questions about the portrayal of rural spaces as sources of planetary crises. We emphasize the intention of the planetary rural geographies framework to avoid a simplistic rural – urban dichotomy and argue for a nuanced understanding of planetary crises. Our response delves into the role of agency in a neoliberal capitalist context, incorporating post-humanist perspectives. It also examines the complex relationship between rural populism, conflicts, and planetary crises. Planetary rural geographies seek to integrate diverse perspectives as a research agenda, acknowledging the need for empirical tools to translate theoretical insights into meaningful interventions for just, equitable transitions.

## Keywords

Planetary rural geographies, posthumanism, ruralization, urbanization, urban – rural relations

## Introduction

In proposing the notion of planetary rural geographies (Wang et al., 2023), we aimed to challenge the emasculation of the rural implied in planetary urbanization but also to move beyond a narrow and anthropocentric understanding of ruralization. Our intention was not to produce a grand theory or a rigid blueprint, but rather to inspire debate and innovation with a framework that is open to epistemic plurality. We are delighted that the commentaries have responded to the original paper in this spirit, exploring connections between planetary rural geographies and perspectives from

neo-Marxist political economy (McCarthy, 2023), post-colonialism (Kolawole, 2023), and digital geographies (He, 2023), as well as issues involving dispersed dispossession and farmland abandonment (Vorbrugg, 2023) and the geographies of race, power, violence, and colonialism (Williams, 2023). Collectively, these

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interventions together with the original paper begin to map out the terrain of what a research agenda for planetary rural geographies might look like. They highlight opportunities for planetary rural geographies research, but question and critique aspects of our argument, as is appropriate. In this short reply, we focus on four aspects emphasized by the commentators, providing clarification where relevant and engaging with the insights gained to consolidate the robustness of the planetary rural geographies framework and consider implications for future research.

### **‘Rural’ as the source of planetary crisis?**

Kolawole (2023), McCarthy (2023), and Williams (2023) all raise questions around the formulation of the rural as a space and source of planetary crises in Wang et al. (2023). Kolawole (2023) contends that portraying the rural as a crisis-ridden space is both ‘disparaging and restrictive’, as many human crises can be traced back to the actions of urban elites and their intrusive impacts on rural environments. In this context, Kolawole suggests, portraying the ‘rural’ as a crisis-ridden space implies that the crises in rural areas are exclusively driven by internal factors, essentially arising from self-created issues. McCarthy (2023) and Williams (2023) echo this critique by advocating for the interconnectedness between rural and urban areas instead of emphasizing the precedence of one spatial type over the other.

However, it is important to note that our comprehension of planetary crises goes beyond merely restating simplistic and unidirectional views of rural – urban relations. Instead of essentializing the rural, the framework that we proposed underscores the idea that agencies extend across both rural and urban settings, involving, crucially, both human and nonhuman elements and encompassing dynamics of both urbanization and ruralization. From this standpoint, emphasizing the significance of the ‘rural’ does not exempt urban areas from accountability or disconnect rural issues from urban ones. Our goal is to demonstrate that rural areas serve as locations, and more precisely ‘volumetric assemblages’, where planetary crises emerge due to

global interconnections and flows, which can originate from urban to rural as well as from rural to rural. For instance, ethnographic research highlights how Triqui indigenous migrant workers mitigated the labour shortage in the US countryside (Holmes, 2013), and geographers have disclosed the restructuring of rural communities through rural-to-rural connections (Chen, 2020). This is not to deny the role of urban elites encroaching into rural areas as a source of crisis, as Kolawole highlights; rather, it is to assert that planetary crises have not exclusively been created by urbanization (or urban capital), but are multi-directional and emerge from configurations of urban and rural agency.

### **Agency, capitalism, and posthumanism**

In the contemporary world, the assembling of rural and urban agency in this way predominantly takes place in a political-economic context shaped by neoliberal capitalism (McCarthy, 2023), as well as the violent legacies of colonialism, slavery, and the plantation system (Williams, 2023). Planetary connections between rural areas have primarily been forged, as McCarthy observes, to generate nature-based commodities for the global economy. As such, we recognize that political economy and political ecology perspectives and concepts such as the Anthropocene and the Plantationocene provide important insights that inform research and understanding within the planetary rural geographies framework.

Where we respectfully differ with McCarthy is in the centrality afforded to human agency. This is also a key point of divergence from the planetary urbanization literature and reflects engagement with the potentialities offered by posthumanist articulations of planetary thinking (e.g. Clark and Szerszynski, 2021; Hinchliffe et al., 2017; Tsing, 2017). For us, a core feature of planetary rural geographies is acknowledgement that rural entities enrolled in planetary assemblages (whether people, crops, animals, minerals, etc.) are not docile or inert conscripts, but are vibrant, active participants. The overall narrative may be scripted by humans, but non-human agency can affect outcomes through either reinforcement or dissent – as evidenced, for example, by Barua’s (2023) analysis of vegetal

agency in plantation systems, or Elton's (2023) work on the relational agency of plants in supply chains during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The alignment of planetary rural geographies with posthumanist accounts of agriculture, such as Guthman (2019), is noted by Williams (2023), who provides a pertinent reminder that the recent planetary crisis cannot be detached from industrial agriculture and the capitalist exploitation of nature. Williams therefore suggests an interesting avenue for planetary rural geographies research. However, we contend that such research must avoid the trap of a totalizing concept of capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Substituting urbanization or ruralization with capitalism not only widens the gap between capitalist and non-capitalist economies but also weakens the mutually constitutive material and expressive aspects of rural life. Planetary rural geographies posits that the dynamic interaction between individuals and the planet, exemplified in practices like farming or fishing, is a pivotal factor in shaping the social construction of rural identities. These cultural identities hold emotional and political significance, with the potential to disrupt and shape rural – urban relations. By emphasizing the co-constitution of both material and discursive elements of ruralness, we give equal importance to the production and consumption aspects of ruralities.

## **Populism and the rural as space of conflict**

As noted in the commentaries, conflict is an important and complex theme in planetary rural geographies, embedded in wider politics and histories of globalization and resistance. Conflicts may emerge around many different issues, at different scales, take a variety of forms, and involve a diverse range of protagonists, but we are grateful to McCarthy (2023) for drawing attention in particular to associations with populism.

The resurgence of populism globally has been commonly linked to support from disaffected rural populations (although this correlation has been critiqued by some analyses). Rural discontent has further been positioned as a reaction to globalization, experienced either through economic marginalization,

immigration, or perceived threats to 'authentic' rural cultures. Populism provides a ready vehicle for such sentiments with its rhetoric of 'them' and 'us' adaptable to casting rural people as victims of spatial injustice perpetrated by urban or global elites. Accordingly, rural-based populism can be represented as an example of rural agency disrupting planetary urbanization, and the populist capture of governments or political discourse as instances of the ruralization of politics. The simplicity of this narrative is complicated by ties between populist leaders and capitalist interests, reproducing neoliberal logics. In India, for example, authoritarian populist leaders often used urban-centred rhetoric and technologically utopian imageries to advance so-called 'smart city projects', leading to the dispossession of the rural people they profess to be benefiting (Akhtar, 2023; Bunnell, 2015).

Populism also exploits rural concerns over the post-carbon transition and fears that rural livelihoods and landscapes are being sacrificed to protect urban interests. This has been expressed in the rejection of nitrate controls by Dutch farmers, support for coal-mining in Australia and the United States, Bolsonaro's dismantling of environmental protections and acceleration of deforestation in Brazil, and opposition to renewable energy projects in numerous countries (Dechézelles and Scotti, 2022). In these cases, populism is directly concerned with the configuration of human and nonhuman entities in rural settings, their enrolment in planetary assemblages, and their contribution to planetary crises. As rural populism threatens to derail actions to address the climate crisis, it gives understanding planetary rural geographies a political imperative, with changing rural opinions a necessary precondition for restoring planetary wellbeing.

## **Planetary rural geographies: a research agenda**

We proposed planetary rural geographies not as a theory but as a research agenda. The commentaries provide glimpses as to how such an agenda might develop, notably the contributions by He (2023) and Vorbrugg (2023). In line with the principles of planetary rural geographies, Vorbrugg argues

that farmland abandonment is not solely linked to intensification and expansion, citing a case study of the Soviet agrarian system. One particularly intriguing issue raised by Vorbrugg pertains to the recent proposition of using abandoned land to address global warming. While farmland abandonment signifies rural areas as spaces of hope, it also highlights conflicts arising from different claims about the use of rural space.

While Vorbrugg foregrounds planetary rural geographies' characterization of the rural as a relational space of both crisis and hope, He (2023) identifies correspondences with the field of digital geographies in planetary rural geographies' emphasis on connectivity and human – nonhuman assemblages. He's discussion of how digital technologies shape and mediate rural – urban dynamics warrants further investigation. Undoubtedly, we recognize the potential for cross-fertilization between the planetary rural geographies and digital geographies in certain aspects, but we need to approach this prospect cautiously, taking into account the concerns related to technological determinism. Issues have been raised, for example, about the privatization of data, the distributive politics of digital agriculture, and the risks and dependencies that digital technologies have engendered (Carolan, 2020; Ingram and Maye, 2023; Rotz et al., 2019).

In closing, we reiterate our thanks and appreciation to the five interlocutors for their excellent, provocative interventions that have generously engaged with our ideas and provided helpful, if at times critical, guidance for taking the planetary rural geographies agenda forward. The next step is to translate these new planetary ontologies into epistemological and methodological tools for empirical engagement. We strongly encourage this next phase of work, using this dialogue as a framework and agenda to support just, equitable transitions for people, places, and, above all, the planet.




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