Bushcraft as Cultural Continuity in 'English' Hunter-Gathering

Keywords
Bushcraft, 'English', hunter-gatherer, cultural continuity, queer/trans theory, land-based survival skills.

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Abstract

This paper argues that the relationship bushcraft creates between artisan, landscape, and tools to enable the acquisition of food and spatial mobility, expresses a broadly-based environmental cultural continuity in English foraging practices. The perspective of bushcraft practitioners has rarely been represented in academic literature, partly, perhaps, because it cuts across many different sectors of research and practice. Accordingly, we bring a transdisciplinary approach, utilising queer theory and trans theory as a helpful methodology for examining marginalised communities. Recognising the problematic nature of 'slippery' terms like 'bushcraft', 'hunter-gatherer', and 'indigenous', we explain the key concepts and terms used to delineate an ethos of 'discontinuous continuity' in bushcraft practices over time.

Limiting our geographical context to England, we provide a historical record of the disenfranchisement of endemic English people from their traditional rights to hunting and gathering, subsequently extended under Norman rule by Forest Law, demonstrating a detailed record of increasing suppression of local traditional foraging practices in the early Medieval period. We focus first on the historical record of these practices before making comparisons with those in the prehistoric Mesolithic, to counter ethnonationalist fantasies of 'Englishness' as defined by unbroken racial or linguistic purity.

Moving to the modern period, we identify this continuity of foraging as forms of knowledge, practice, and a counter-cultural movement, represented by the contemporary bushcraft movement's creation of a place for reconnection with traditional knowledge. We thereby challenge pop-survival television's depiction of bushcraft, which positions the natural world as dangerous and something to be feared. Current restrictions on land-use act against this reclamation and exploration of foraging skills in England. Nevertheless, contemporary bushcraft provides a valuable education in resilience and a sustaining vision of kinship between those wishing to re-establish at least some parts of the knowledge and skillsets which were once the only means to survive and thrive in the English landscape.

1. **Background**

Responding to this Special Issue's call to investigate political imaginaries in contexts outside of the academy, we draw from a range of disciplines, including the literary canon, to discuss contemporary bushcraft practices in England as a site of what might be termed 'hunter-gatherer inspiration' or, as the title to this Special Issue puts it, affinities. Practitioners of bushcraft skillsets and lifeways, who utilise the simplest of tools to travel through a natural landscape by employing a high level of craft skills and ecological knowledge, typically reference their practices to those of a similar kind in previous (pre)historical periods. However, although these skills and associations have informed ethnonationalist fantasies and their attendant colonial or neo-colonial appropriations, the perspective of practitioners themselves has hitherto rarely been represented in academic literature. In light of this, building on Fenton's (2016) research, and recognising with queer theorist Greta Gaard (2020:xx) that "a field is founded when questions are asked that cannot be answered within the purview of existing disciplines," we set out to explore bushcraft's espoused lineage within the limited context of history and culture(s) in England. Drawing from trans theory, we suggest that bushcraft's combination of simple tools, craft skill, and ecological knowledge provides a cultural continuity as an "ethos" (Stryker 2020: xviii) which the profession traces from the earliest human archaeological record to the present day. Although the continuity of this ethos has often been interrupted and restricted by increasing limitations on land access, it is nevertheless evident as a stream of historical practice. Through this narrative, and the utilisation of a range of theoretical standpoints, we identify bushcraft as a site of hunter-gatherer inspiration, as a novel ethnographic 'location' comprised of people who use archaeological, ethnographic, literary, and historical material in a rich, transformative, and politically informed way.

As authors, all three of us engage both practically and academically with bushcraft, a growing field of research in Britain which crosscuts many different sectors. Between us, we bring perspectives from radical education; outdoor education; medical education; English and Irish literature and history; queer, trans, and non-binary theory; human rights advocacy; the ethnosciences; prehistory; and experimental archaeology. Here, we utilise trans theory and queer theory, which redress the misrepresentation of marginal communities by delineating their temporalities and geographies as different from those of majority, cisheteronormative structures. These critiques developed as a means of articulating the lived experience of queer and trans communities and people as distinct from the negative portrayal of their lives by mainstream media (Playdon 2021:247-8), providing approaches that are helpful in understanding the lived experiences of bushcraft practitioners and the ethos of their practice. In trans and queer theory, "ethos" refers to a habitual way of life which "is not given in advance but rather produced through bodily acts, whose qualities are governed by the habitat in which they transpire" (Stryker 2020: xviii). Ethos thus denotes elements of ethics, character, and place in a practice distinguished by "the problematic of one's embodied place in the world" (Diprose 1994:19). As Gaard (2020: xxi) indicates, these problematics are visible in ecofeminist explorations of "environmental policies and intersections among colonialism, heterosexism, and the assault on indigenous humans, animals, and environments." As we will argue, bushcraft's ethos resides in what Bedford (2020:6) identifies as "places of trans identity and art that eschew 'crossing' and insist instead upon impurity and mixing."

We also wish to share concerns about the present gap between the value placed upon practical knowledge and that placed on academic knowledge, and about the institutionalised separation of scientific, technological, engineering and mathematical disciplines [STEM] from the social sciences, humanities and the arts for people and the economy [SHAPE] disciplines. We view the segregation and mismatch between the values placed on 'practical crafts' versus 'visual arts' as part of a 'high cultural' ideal, which can be traced back to the 19th century (Classen & Howes 2006). In this article, we explore a resolution of these binaries, recognising that bushcraft is about both knowledge and skills, and that its postgraduate study requires engagement across the sciences and the humanities.

Queer and trans theory is methodologically helpful in this task since it "weaves critique with imagination to dream belonging otherwise" (Bradway & Freeman 2022:2), especially in its approaches to kinship as a radical field of relational experiment. It shifts away from cisheteronormative familial approaches that distinguish between 'real' and 'fictive' kinship (Schneider 1984), espousing Franklin and McKinnon's (2001:17) view that "kinship is thus neither natural nor cultural but rather names the specific power-bound oscillation between these categories." Queer kinship operates through what Ingold (2011) terms a 'meshwork' that leaks across formal and uncodified social bonds alike. Consequently, it manifests as 'kinematics', the relationship between imagining kinship differently and expressing it as social practice, providing a history in which affect may be as significant as effect. This reflects bushcraft practitioners' location of their land-based practices as part of a historical continuity. In this context, the skilful artisanship which forms the 'craft' of bushcraft operates as 'kinaesthetics', the imbrication of inclusion/exclusion with aesthetics as a material and symbolic artistic organisation. Bushcraft practitioners' virtuosity in making traditional artefacts that are both attractive and utilitarian, using only natural materials and a simple cutting edge, reflect this kinaesthetics. Queer and trans relationality then appears as a 'kincoherence' which is defined by the impossibility of forming traditional relationships or forbidden by overdetermined notions of what constitutes 'real' connection. The bushcraft scene's kinematic sense of "a connection to 'our primal ancestors'" as an imaginative expression of its "core interests in self-reliance *and* nature connection" (Fenton 2016:110) is supported by the kinaesthetics of practitioners' land-based material craft, which acts to disturb the hegemonic linearity of 'straight time' narratives. In effect, this creates an ethos of bushcraft practice that is kincoherent, "a story riddled with ruptures, and whatever ties are made are built on the basis of that discontinuity, longing for repair" (Butler 2022:47).

The relative newness of queer and trans theory, perhaps, provides an interpretative stability and less contested set of understandings than what Norbury (2021:1) calls the "slippery notion" of the term 'nature', and other slippery terms we shall deploy, all indispensable but impossible, all immediately understood and fiercely debated: 'feminist', 'cultural continuity', 'ecology', 'hunter-gatherer', 'indigenous knowledge', and, of course, 'bushcraft'. We intend that these terms will be read in the practice-based context of the paper overall. At the same time, we believe that their inherent slipperiness, and the consequent difficulties in sharing understandings, exemplifies our subject, for it is in such difficult contexts, we suggest, that cultural continuity is evident as a 'discontinuous continuity': in the breaks, breaches, and fractured histories of skilled, knowledgeable, embodied relationships between practitioner, landscape, tool, and craft, which in contemporary life are re-imagined, rediscovered, and reinvented as bushcraft.

2. **Introduction**

In its popular cultural representation, bushcraft covers a range of traditional skills and outdoor survival techniques. These include emergency and military survival skills (often drawn upon fantastically for media purposes); land-based living skills such as foraging, hunting and gathering, fire making, and shelter improvisation; craft-bases such as green wood carving, making containers from natural materials, and making simple 'backwoods' tools; and fieldcraft and animal tracking, trailing, and trapping skills (Fenton 2016). The mass-popularisation of the term 'bushcraft' to encompass this skillset arose early this century, largely from the work of Ray Mears, especially his best-selling book, *Bushcraft: An Inspirational Guide to Surviving the Wilderness* (2002) and the BBC television series, *Ray Mears' Bushcraft* (2004-2005). However, the term was sufficiently well-known in the nineteenth century for explorer and anthropologist Francis Galton to consider 'Bushcraft and the Science of Travel' as a title for the work he eventually published as *The Art of Travel or Shifts and Contrivances Available in Wild Countries* (1854). In medieval England, the same group of skills were referred to as 'woodcraft' (Marvin 2006). Understanding this broad historical context for the development of bushcraft helps to explain its current popularity, and identifies the knowledge-gap it is filling, through its appealing reconnection with traditional practices which have largely fallen out of general use. There is a lack of understanding amongst many modern urban dwellers in England about where food comes from, and an even more pronounced lack of proficiency in hunting and gathering subsistence skills. In this paper, we explore what modern bushcraft means, suggest a route to identifying its cultural continuity in England, and recognise that the geographical area now termed 'England' has had many waves of incoming peoples, including a wholesale occupation and appropriation by the Normans which formalized the limitation of access to traditional hunting and gathering opportunities.[1]

It is important to understand how we are thinking about 'hunting and gathering' as an issue for modern bushcrafters. Though 'hunter-gatherer' is a recognised term for the purposes of scholarly discussion within anthropology, including within the title of this journal, it is not a simple category, nor could it ever be. In the geographical location of present-day England alone there are some 900,000 years in which the lifestyle of people who lived in this area relied solely on taking undomesticated plants and animals from the environment to meet their subsistence needs. In both archaeological and anthropological terms, 'hunter-gatherer' covers a range of exploitation practices which can be broken down further. Other authors have outlined the diversity of 'hunter-gatherer', or 'hunter-gatherer-fisher' strategies for extracting resources from the environment (e.g. Panter-Brick et al. 2001; Finlayson & Warren 2017). Bender (1978) suggests reversing the order of the nomenclature to 'gatherer-hunter' so as to better reflect the relative significance of plant foods among foraging peoples, but this idea has not gained traction within the literature. In any case, subsistence within hunter-gatherer communities often involves a complex intersection of gathering plants, along with small and big game hunting and trapping, fishing, and the use of aquatic resources. These vary on broad ecological grounds, and the relative weighting of these components often differs across the seasons. Even within the last 'hunter-gatherer' archaeological period of the Mesolithic in what is now England, there is no reason to suppose a homogeneous strategy across a period which itself spans multiple millennia and at any one point in time contained multiple ecological zones. Indeed, within this period, human beings' engagement in "niche construction" – the process through which organisms change their local environment - may have altered aspects of the ecology through their behaviour (Bishop et al. 2015; Groß et al. 2019). Moreover, within the Neolithic farming period there were multiple transformations

and variations in prevalent exploitation strategies, but there is evidence that wild resources continued to be used and consumed (Cummings & Harris 2014: Raemaekers 2014; Warren 2014).

The use of analogies between hunter-gatherer lifeways and other ways of living, as based upon the ethnographic record, has been critiqued within the scholarly literature (Jordan 2006; Lane 2014; Warren 2017; Wylie 1985). The ethnographic accounting of hunter-gatherer lifeways in contemporary environments is limited, largely constrained to those areas where farming has had minimal impact (Kelly 2013; Price & Brown 1985). Some hunter-gatherer societies continue to reside in their traditional environments, but many others have moved or been forcibly removed by colonial settlers. The resources which were traditionally exploited by these people have thus changed, been restricted, or banned; first by European colonists and later the hegemonic powers and centralised institutions that they produced. This discontinuity and restriction are clearly evident in the well-populated and urbanised areas of temperate Europe. These discussions show the need for strengthening arguments in support of any ethnographic analogy used to aid interpretation of archaeological evidence and an acute awareness of the limits of the archaeological record (see Raemaekers 2014).

Ideally, here we would use direct archaeological evidence to fill in details of a continuing hunter-gather set of practices in the territory of present-day England. However, reviewing this evidence would take many books, while many practices leave no material traces. Further, the archaeological record itself cannot be used in any simple way to equate 'presence' with direct exploitation patterns. Some plant and animal evidence suggests theories of climatic conditions, some provide broad or local environmental information, and some indicate direct exploitation for subsistence or material culture. The remains of nuts and berries and animal bones found on archaeological sites are sometimes able to be interpreted as having been exploited, but there are many plants for which the evidence is biased (e.g. hazelnut shells are robust and generally considered to be over-represented, while pollen diagrams are generally used as background environmental evidence even though some plants produce little pollen, or the pollen produced is not as robust as some other species [Hurcombe 2014:5]). Furthermore, there are some plants such as nettles, *Urtica dioica*, which are important for their medical, nutritional, and fibre properties, but whose presence within archaeological strata will often be parsed as merely a portion of the background local environment rather than evidence of direct exploitation (Hurcombe 2014:161-162). It must be understood that although the archaeological evidence itself necessarily undergoes a process of interpretation, there remain some useful coherencies and knowns. Various sources (e.g. Greives 1998; Mabey 2001, Milliken and Bridgewater 2006) outline for us the nutritional and medicinal value of plants. We understand from existing or recent practices a range of possible exploitation patterns and, to some extent at least, how these might feature in archaeological remains. There is in this sense not a 'cultural indigenous continuity' but a broadly-based set of environmental knowledge bases from which we can draw in connecting contemporary bushcraft with local knowledges.

Recognizing these problematics but following the brief for this themed volume - to think differently - our focus is on the use of ethnography, archaeology, law, and literature as 'inspiration' for present-day bushcraft practices. In this range of disciplines there is the means to consider perspectives and social constructs (literature, laws) that complement more established hunter-gatherer sources which have their own structural biases (ethnography, archaeology). Acknowledging that modern bushcraft is not a unified discipline any more than these others are, we also recognize that bushcraft practitioners are under no obligation to

conform to the academic pressures of archaeological evidence or ethnographic analogy. They are at liberty to "dream belonging otherwise", as outlined above, in an imaginative kinship which informs the bodily acts denoting bushcraft's ethos. We suggest, therefore, that applying concepts from queer and trans theory to the practice of bushcraft re-examines some of the knowledge and skills relevant for hunter-gathering, that its present 'kinaesthetic' practice references hunter-gatherer traditions in a 'kinematic' way, and its 'ethos' thus provides a 'kincoherent' cultural continuity.

3. The Early English Cultural Context

In the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, a monster called Grendel stalks from the wilderness into the feasting hall of Heorot and kills and eats the Danish warriors within. He is defeated only by the hero, Beowulf himself, whose powerful grip pulls off Grendel's arm and shoulder, wounding him so badly that he dies. To avenge her dead son, Grendel's mother leaves the cave in the bottom of a lake where she lives and kills more of the Heorot warriors. Beowulf hunts down and kills her too.

The first manuscript of *Beowulf* dates from c. 900 AD but it is thought to have existed as an oral composition at least two hundred years earlier. On the face of it, the epic is a superhero narrative, casting Beowulf as a Herculean figure facing down his repellent adversary and saving the peaceful Danes of Heorot. Beowulf and Grendel are positioned as archetypes of the Warrior Hero and the Monster and indeed, this is how the story is played out in popular film adaptions today (*Beowulf and Grendel* 2005; *Beowulf* 2007; *Grendel* 2012).

But as medieval historian William Perry Marvin points out, another reading is available. The name of the Danes' feasting-hall, Heorot, means 'place of the hart', named after the hart – that is, the red deer – on which they feast. Before the incursion of Danish people into what is presently England, hunting law operated on the basis of Roman law's principle of 'free-capture', that is, anyone could hunt anywhere and what they caught was their own. But in England, the encroachment of Danish overlords on the hunting rights of local people was well known. As Marvin puts it, "The customs . . . enabling individual freedom to range over and harvest from an open world of free-capture, were narrowed by laws that tied hunting rights to owning land" (2006:29). Read in this context, Grendel becomes representative of a colonised people, protesting against their dispossession, and avenging it by feasting on the Danes in place of their newly-forbidden deer. In this reading, it is Grendel who is the tragic hero and Beowulf the villain cruelly crushing his protest.

In England the relationship between land ownership and hunting rights was formalised by Danish King Cnut (c. 1016-35 AD) in secular ordinance 30, stating that "euery free man may take his own vert and venison or hunting that hee can get upon his owne ground, or in his owne fields, being out of my Chase" (Marvin 2006:28). Cnut's stipulation that only landowners could hunt anticipated the draconian Forest Law introduced a hundred years later by Norman invaders. The Norman colonisers exerted their ownership of land by listing its whereabouts, worth, and ownership in the Domesday Book and reserved to their nobility and King the right to hunt deer and boar. Meanwhile, 'laws of warren' similarly reserved rights to hunt game birds, hares, rabbits, and foxes. To ensure that this reserved game thrived, its habitat was both extended and protected at the expense of pre-existing human populations. For example, the Norman creation of the New Forest – it still bears that name – in the south of England, involved forcible resettlement of natives of that area (Marvin 2006:50):

> Following soon upon the conquest King William afforested 75,000 acres of thinly inhabited woodland in Hampshire. The sandy soils of this region rendered the land unsuitable for clearance, but typical woodland industries had supported small villages in other parts. About 500 families were affected by a second afforestation that supplemented the preserve by some 20,000 acres. At that point about 2,000 people were deported. Later, a further 30,000 acres would be added to complete the king's ideal hunting ground.

The term 'forest' included both woodland and moorland, and by 1118 AD it was illegal for ordinary people to encroach on deer coverts or thickets when clearing land, to capture goshawks or falcons, or to carry a bow or spear through the forest. Penalties for breaching forest law included blinding, castration, and death. The local population had their dogs forcibly 'lawed' – lamed by chopping three claws off each of their forefeet, to prevent them chasing deer – and were obliged to pay for the previously free privileges of collecting wood, herding cattle on forest heather, feeding swine on acorns, and harvesting honey and salt. Forest usage became a major source of revenue for the Crown, through tax, payment, and fine. Consequently, local people's hunting and gathering, which had augmented agriculture or income from crafts such as charcoal-burning, basketry, and blacksmithing, became increasingly circumscribed.

Beowulf imaginatively foreshadows an actual historical appropriation of land rights by colonisation, settlement, and the crushing of protest. It might be supposed that the Danes and Normans were engaging in an early form of forest and wildlife management, establishing proto-national parks with highly restricted entry. But like most military colonisers, their ruthless self-interest was achieved at the expense of indigenous people and the Normans, especially, were simply fulfilling "a sportsman's dream of an isolate wilderness, a sanctuary free of common intrusion, the payoff of conquest" (Marvin 2006:50). To ensure the continuity of this disenfranchisement, and to put his barons in perpetual obligation to him, William I established the principle of primogeniture, the law that still today dictates that certain estates and titles can only be inherited by the next male in line and never by a woman. If land could be inherited by a Norman daughter, she might marry an English man and ownership pass from her hands into his: women were regarded more *as* property rather than able to own property (Buckstaff 1839). Even the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, which allowed women to own and dispose of land in their own right, did not affect estates limited by male line or male preference primogeniture (Erickson 1989). Primogeniture created and perpetuated the idea that elite families had inalienable rights to specific lands, sequestering them to the use of the few, irrespective of those who had used the land for generations, when it was held in common by all, as was previously the case. The kinship relationship that local peoples had developed with this land over centuries was dominated by forceful appropriation. In this location the distinction between a politically enforced 'real' and 'fictive' kinship, as a power-strategy for controlling land access, becomes evident. This point at which the botanical or geographical identity of 'forest' is displaced by a legal definition which sought to circumscribe traditional land-based activities, constitutes a major rupture in bushcraft's kincoherent narrative.

The advantage of discussing foraging in the medieval periods is that it is part of documented history, making it relatively easy to track its changing political stages, evidence its political and material affordances, and identify local responses to new restrictions. It provides an accessible basis for demonstrating the kinaesthetics of material practice and the kincoherence

of bushcraft's cultural history, which form its ethos. However, the idea of the 'hunter-gatherer' in the United Kingdom [UK] is more usually associated with the prehistoric communities of these islands, as opposed to the foragers of this period, whose economies were differing in that they operated in conjunction with agriculture and money-based production.[2]

4. Prehistoric Hunter-Gathering

Our argument is that bushcraft's broadly based environmental cultural continuity in English foraging is expressed by a skilled and knowledgeable relationship between artisan, landscape, tool, and artefact which enables food acquisition and spatial mobility. At its heart lie deep understandings of flora and fauna; the soils, climates, and seasonalities that determine their presence or absence; high levels of craft skills; and the ability to respond to changing conditions, whether produced by climate fluctuation, human intervention, or intentional movement into new biomes. In this article, it is impossible to detail all of the different hunter-gatherer traditions, but some perspectives are provided by considering some of the best-known sites from the Lower Palaeolithic of present-day Britain when occupation was still discontinuous, and a well-studied site from the Mesolithic, the last hunter-gatherer period.

The key requirement to exploit a landscape's affordances is tools, and prehistoric stone tool production provides a touchstone for bushcraft's kinaesthetics. The role of stone tools in human evolution and dispersal has many facets (Kuhn 2021).The earliest site in northern Europe in which tools produced by members of the homo genus have been found—Happisburgh, Norfolk — has 78 flint tools (cores and flakes) dating from c. 900,000 BP (Parfitt et al. 2010) and lies beside what was a particular type of conifer forest not currently seen in contemporary Europe (Farjon et al. 2020). Although it is not found at this site, the best-known prehistoric tool is the Palaeolithic hand axe, first made in East Africa at sites such as Olduvai Gorge about 1.5 million years ago (Leakey 1971). Skilfully produced, these hand axes' versatile design, with bilateral convergent cutting edges and a broader base, made them a key tool for a million years, facilitating the dispersal of humans across continents. Wear traces on Acheulean toolsets, which include hand axes, have shown their use for a diversity of tasks (Bello-Alonso et al. 2021) and Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, regards the hand axe as the "only one thing that you needed in order to travel" (2010). These tools are efficient for skinning, filleting, and disjointing meat, preparing hide, boring holes for thonging, scraping bark, or cutting plant materials. If modern UK bushcrafters want to work with stone tools it is often this iconic type that they have in mind, not the cores and flakes found at the earliest site in England.

Tool use for food acquisition in specific landscapes is a defining purpose of bushcraft. The Lower Palaeolithic sites in Britain rarely show sufficient evidence for determining specific predation patterns but Boxgrove in West Sussex provides both direct evidence for flintknapping to make hand axes (Roberts & Parfitt 1999) and faunal remains indicating cut marks and exploitation patterns consistent with skinning, butchery and marrow extraction (Smith 2013). Though there is environmental evidence in broad terms, direct evidence for plant and animal exploitation patterns for the fringes of Northwest Europe are rare (Pettitt & White 2012). More evidence exists for the Upper Palaeolithic, but the area was still abandoned in colder periods, although more continuous occupation is thought to have taken place from the Mesolithic onwards (9,500 to 4,000 cal BCE, Conneller 2021).

Geographically, for most of that period, Britain was still part of the larger European landmass. With lower sea levels, hunter-gatherers crossed the land-bridge of lakes, rivers and wetlands known as Doggerland (named after the Dogger Bank in the present-day North Sea), adapting to a gradually expanding forest environment, and creating new tools and artefacts. The Mesolithic has now been recognised as a period of increasing regional variations (Conneller 2022), and climatic fluctuations continued to change the landscape and its flora and fauna. As the landscape changed, grasslands gave way to woodlands, and hunter-gatherers had to adapt to new floral and faunal species. People developed new technology, including the use of microliths or small blades, trimmed into multiple shapes to use as tips, barbs, and cutting tools by setting them into wooden hafts. Further, at the well-studied site of Star Carr, North Yorkshire, there is also evidence for a purposeful curation of the land and its natural resources through "deliberate, repeated burning of wetland and woodland flora" (Milner et al 2018:6). This could have been carried out to remove invasive plants and improve the quality of reed beds for craft materials, while a similar strategy applied to woodlands would have had the effect of attracting animals to browse on the new growth. Conneller (2022:392-395) has pointed out that early Mesolithic burning seems to focus on wetland areas whereas later Mesolithic burning seems more focused on the control or management of woodland and clearings.

Spatial mobility remained important. Deposits at Star Carr demonstrate that materials such as good quality flint travelled long distances, although how it was acquired is less clear (Baker & Swope 2021). Other evidence from Star Carr shows that those living there visited other parts of the landscape to hunt game: deer in the woodland, for example, and beaver in the lake where their settlement was located. But this evidence alone does not provide a coherent narrative of land use, as hunter-gatherers engage in a range of different subsistence practices (Kelly 2013). Comparative ethnographic evidence from extant hunter-gatherer communities suggests several possibilities, such as seasonal movement between a summer hunting and gathering camp and a winter shelter for producing or repairing garments, tools, and artefacts, and perhaps for enacting ritual. Mesolithic practices may have been more varied than this and were necessarily subject to regional variations according to each landscape's affordances (see Conneller 2022). Star Carr, for example, has clear evidence of occupation and activities in episodes of varying intensity over an 800-year period from c. 9300 BCE onwards. However, most of the evidence originates from the lake edge wetland-preserved deposits, and thus the relationship between wet site and dryland aspects of the pattern of occupation and the specific nature of the episodes is still something not fully known. Nonetheless, the location is a 'persistent place', enduring as favoured site within the landscape (Milner et al. 2018).

This evidence of manipulation of the environment during the Mesolithic indicates a purposeful curation of the landscape which could have scaffolded a gradual transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic lifestyles (Perrin & Manen 2021; Lawrence et al. 2022). For Britain, the Neolithic transition is thought to have been sharper as it involved the introduction of new domesticated species of animals and plants. Perhaps as importantly, genetic evidence indicates significant human population replacement in Britain (Brace et al. 2019). However, wild resources continued to be exploited, and a softer social transition of traditional exploitation practices has been argued for, with novel domesticated plants and animals being incorporated into existing subsistence practices in a more complementary way (Cummings & Harris 2011). The Mesolithic, as the last 'hunter-gatherer' period, was complex but at least some of the wild resource exploitation continued into the Neolithic and beyond. The transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age and Iron Age saw many social changes and some other introduced domesticates, while overall the landscape became more intensively

occupied, especially the land suitable for farming. For the authors, the element of continuity exists not as cultural populations of people (clearly, there have been changes), nor as intensity of exploitation but as propensity for exploiting the landscape – at least some wild resources were still being exploited.

The prehistory of English hunter-gathering is necessarily a partial, interrupted, and interpreted narrative. One way of nevertheless creating a degree of continuity therein is with the kincoherence approach that we suggest for bushcraft. Bushcraft practitioners may find a kinematic cultural continuity with prehistory through a shared emphasis on carrying minimal equipment. Furthermore, while most practitioners use modern tools, a small subset have flintknapping skills or stone tools as part of their bushcraft practice (e.g. Cawley 2009), while training courses in flint-knapping continue to proliferate in Britain (e.g. woodlandways.co.uk). Additionally, bushcraft focuses on knowing how to extract food from wild resources, and how to provide shelter and fire. Much of this knowledge is not a direct reflection of the archaeological realities of the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherer periods, but a reflection of cognate practical skills and knowledge of plant and animal exploitation across different habitats and seasons. Though only a few bushcrafters would go out armed with only a hand axe or a Mesolithic flake axe, most would understand how willow and hazel offered different affordances, which woods give better fires, and what flora might be gathered and in which habitats and seasons. Fewer would be able to put into practice their knowledge of faunal exploitation, or management of woodland by fire, however, because of restrictions resulting from modern laws and rights. Though the expansion of urban populations has brought about a decrease in the percentage of the population who would have this kind of practical understanding of environmental affordances, there are still those who have grown up with this knowledge and corollary skills. However, there are far fewer people with this knowledge and expertise than in previous periods, and the range of both has decreased, although it has not been extinguished. In this sense, modern bushcraft does express contiguity with British prehistory in a cultural continuity defined by an awareness and practice of relevant skills.

5. Land Use and Woodcraft

Before exploring historical continuity further, it is important to clarify the meaning we attach to ‘English’ in the context of this paper. The relative paucity of evidence allows contemporary culture to project ethno-nationalist fantasies and racist mythologies of ‘originality’ and ‘purity’ onto prehistoric, Romano-British, early medieval, and medieval communities. Such projections “are not uncommon among contemporary racists and white supremacists who seek to anchor their claims to national priority in the language of blood and soil” (Pitcher 2022:112). In reality, however, England has never been uninterruptedly occupied by a racially and genetically continuous group of peoples, but rather has been subject to waves of migration, colonisation, and conquest. By 43 CE, the date of the Roman invasion of England, its strongly Celtic civilization was organised into distinctive tribal communities, which were forcibly suppressed and homogenised under a centralised Roman rule and law. After the withdrawal of centralised Roman control, around 400 CE, England was subject to a series of incursions, first from Irish raiders to the west and Picts from the north, and subsequently from Angles, Saxons and Jutes from across the North Sea. By 500 CE, Germanic speakers were settled deep in England, creating ‘Englishness’ by shaping an English language that eventually overtook pre-existing Celtic dialects and came to define the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ – *Beowulf’s* people. In their turn, they were subjugated by Danes as part of a series of Viking invasions from 790 CE onwards, so that by 1016 CE, the Danish King Cnut

had made England part of a Scandinavian empire. Just fifty years later, Norman invasion and colonisation irretrievably altered the political, cultural, and linguistic features of people living in England. The people whose land was appropriated, and who were forcibly resettled by Norman Forest Law, were a mixture of Scandinavian, Germanic and Iberian peoples combined with the Roman conquest's admixture of people from all over Europe, Africa, and Asia, and by migrating groups for thousands of years before that.

There is no 'true English race', therefore, but an eclectic mixture of mobile populations arriving over millennia. In the same way, the English language is a melting pot of proto-Indo-European, proto-Celtic, common Britonic and the robust leftovers of Roman, Gaelic, Anglo-Saxon, Danish, Norwegian, and Norman French. To be English, therefore, is to have neither racial continuity nor linguistic purity but to accept one's genetic and linguistic cosmopolitanism. Being 'English', therefore, is to have, in Bedford's (2006:6) terms, a "trans identity", an "impurity and mixing" which refuses ethnocentric exceptionalism. The early medieval populations, therefore, were 'English' in a political sense, rather than a genetic or linguistic sense, defined by an Englishness that was a cultural counter to their invaders' brutal appropriation. In that sense, theirs was essentially an imagined indigeneity. It is unsurprising, then, that a counter to Norman oppression arose from their political imaginary: the legendary figure of Robin Hood.[3]

In English folklore, Hood is an English nobleman, the Earl of Loxley, who has been dispossessed by Norman tyranny, and who thus becomes an outlaw, living in a greenwood forest as leader of a band that defies Forest Law, reinstates free use of the commons, including the free-capture of game, and carries out charitable acts. Hood's band of 'Merry Men' exemplifies a queer kinship operating outside cisheteronormative institutions of reproduction and family, and in his embodiment of the 'Good Outlaw' archetype, we find a hunter-gatherer imaginary meeting and resisting the material practices and restrictions of life in medieval England through a vibrant story. This tale has been termed 'mythos' by contemporary philosopher Jules Cashford, a story "passed down the generations, offering an image of the deep heart of the cosmos and the place of humankind within it, exploring how to live with joy and meaning" (Cashford n.d.; see also Matthews 1993). The imaginative power invested in legends and traditions about Robin Hood, his knowledgeable ability to live in Sherwood Forest, and his resonant image of freedom, have been played out in Hollywood for a hundred years, with actor portrayals from Douglas Fairbanks and Russell Crowe, amongst others. His image and his attributes of a bow and arrows "with pecok wel idyght" – well-fletched with peacock feathers – (Anon *A Gest*) is instantly recognisable in the description of the fictional Knight's Yeoman given by fourteenth century poet Geoffrey Chaucer in his *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Robinson 1957:18):

A Yeman hadde he and servantz namo
At that tyme, for hym liste ryde so,
And he was clad in cote and hood of grene.
A sheef of pecok arwes, bright and kene,
Under his belt he bar ful thriftily,
(Wel could he dress his takel yemanly:
His arwes drouped noght with fetheres lowe)
And in his hand he baar a myghty bowe.
A not heed hadde he, with a broun visage.
Of wodecraft wel koude he al the usage.
Upon his arm he baar a gay bracer,

And by his syde a swerd and a bokeler,
And on that oother syde a gay daggere
Harneised wel and sharp as point of spere;
A Cristopher on his brest of silver sheene.
An horn he bar, the bawdryk was of grene;
A forster was he, soothly, as I gesse.[4]

Chaucer's Yeoman is a richly ambiguous figure, potentially both poacher and gamekeeper, protecting the Knight's game but hunting on other people's land to supply food during the Knight's pilgrimage (Thompson 2006:390). The tales of this figure join Robin Hood ballads to reflect the political and practical concerns of England in the fourteenth century. Even after their suppression, hunting and gathering remained crucial elements of a counter-cultural political movement and subsequently endured through a mythic imaginary which was grounded in material practice. The counter-hegemonic response to Forest Law was what was termed in Norman French 'bricolage': poaching (Bechmann 1990:36). This was "a respectable means of trying to push for some equitable balance in areas covered by forest law", enabling people to find "a way to get their fair share", on the grounds "that being forbidden to hunt was unnatural" (Marvin 2006:162). Politically, demands for fairer land use gave rise to riots in St Albans in 1381 CE, while the demands of Wat Tyler, leader of the so-called 'Peasant's Revolt', to Richard II at Smithfield included:

> that all preserves of water, parks and woods should be made common to all: so that throughout the kingdom the poor as well as the rich should be free to take game in water, fish ponds, woods and forests, as well as to hunt hares in the fields – and to do these and many other things without impediment. (Dobson 1970:186)

These riots' implicit attacks on social hierarchy were put down ruthlessly, as was Sir William Beckwith's Northern Rebellion in 1389 CE. Beckwith's claim to his ancestral hunting rights in Knaresborough, in Yorkshire, had been denied by landowner John of Gaunt, precipitating a private war waged by Beckwith and his disaffected supporters. In 1391 CE, Gaunt drove Beckwith and 500 of his followers into forest outlawry, and by 1392 CE, Beckwith had been killed.

These political acts, the mythic image of Robin Hood, and the simple need to augment household economies, held such force because hunting and gathering were expressions of what Chaucer calls 'wodecraft', and medieval historian William Perry Marvin (2006:130) defines as:

> the lore of the fathers from back in the day when men hunted without constraint . . . a formalized, highly traditional knowledge that includes insights into both "vert" and "venison" within a single competency . . . part of the ancient culture of the common chase. Hunters and foresters can have taken woodcraft only to new levels of commitment and training, but not actually changed its basic lore or character, which derived from the immemorial antiquity of tracking game through the woodlands. Woodcraft at its core, therefore, relates only tentatively to laws of the forest and their attendant culture of authority, or perhaps not at all, because woodcraft is about freedom.

Early medieval woodcraft speaks to a kinematic material indigeneity of English life through a kinaesthetic continuity of crafts, materials, tasks, and tools. Archaeological and historical records show continuity of basic tool functions, such as cutting, boring, scraping and piercing; of structural materials such as wood, stone, bindings and thatchings; of necessary tasks such as fire-making, water-collection, and food acquisition; and of fundamental crafts such as weaving, sewing, pottery making, sculpting, and painting. Variation existed, and still exists today, according to the affordance provided by local land resources: willow might be replaced by hazel or even by oak if that was the material available. The same craft skills are still taught and practised today, often as specialised studies such as green woodworking, basketry, bow-making, knife-smithing, hide-tanning, and traditional herbalism. But from the perspective of ethnobiology – the study of dynamic relationships among people, biota and environments – the closest practices to the hunting and gathering engaged in a thousand years ago in what is now England, and arguably providing cultural continuity with their Mesolithic antecedents ten thousand years ago, are the generalised practices collectively termed 'woodcraft' in the medieval period and the contemporary practices termed 'bushcraft'. All three sets of practices—hunting and gathering, woodcraft, and bushcraft—share a central concern for mastery of a suite of skills and a range of knowledges that enable journeying through a natural landscape while utilising the simplest of tools and carrying a minimum of equipment. Ideally, food is supplied by trapping, fishing, and foraging; shelter can be constructed ad hoc from materials at hand; and for senior practitioners, the equipment required for all activities is capable of being made using a simple cutting-edge and point.

It is in this embodied and material relationship between artisan, artefact, landscape, and craft, developed through a knowledgeable relationship with flora and fauna, and the skilled use of them, that bushcraft expresses a kinematic cultural continuity in hunter-gathering, in contrast to England's eclectic genetic, political, and linguistic heritage. Bushcraft's ethos is traceable through kinaesthetics that provide an identifiable continuity for its kincoherent narrative.

6. Colonialism and decolonisation

The Normans' positioning of English people as potential outlaws requiring careful control is consistent with the historical 'Othering' of colonised peoples whose modes of subsistence were thought of as undeveloped. Roman historian Tacitus, for example, demonstrates the exclusionary and dehumanising delineation of the Other as repellent and fascinating, pathetic and remarkable, shockingly primitive yet mysteriously superior, in his proto-ethnographic description of the Northern European Fenni people. He writes:

> The Fenni are astonishingly savage and disgustingly poor. They have no proper weapons, no horses, no homes. They eat wild herbs, dress in skins, and sleep on the ground. Their only hope of getting better fare lies in their arrows, which, for lack of iron, they tip with bone. The women support themselves by hunting, exactly like the men; they accompany them everywhere and insist on taking their share in bringing down the game. The only way they have of protecting their infants against wild beasts or bad weather is to hide them under a makeshift covering of interlaced branches. Such is the shelter to which the young folk come back and in which the old must die. Yet they count their lot happier than that of others who groan over field labour, sweat over house-building, or hazard their own and other men's fortunes in the hope of profit and the fear of loss. Unafraid of anything that man or god can do to them, they have reached a state that few human beings can attain: for these men are so well content that they do not even need to pray for anything. (Tacitus 1970:141)

Othering is a fundamental tactic in colonial expansion, through which lands are identified within colonial mindsets as 'terra nullius' and their indigenous people thus framed as 'homo nullius' creating elite and subaltern positions that justify appropriation (Pannell 1996). This is the mindset that Rome brought to its territorial conquests, including England. A cultural fetishization of the 'unspoiled' moral simplicity of the subaltern is combined with anxiety about their ferocity, physical strength, and endurance, so that for Tacitus, the saving grace of the Fenni is that their contentment means that they offer no threat to Empire. The Fenni's Othering is paralleled by Mirabilia literature—books illustrating supposed wonders and oddities of nature, such as *The Book of Monsters*—beginning in the 7th century CE (Orchard 1995), emerging eventually as the European colonial trope of the 'noble savage' that populates English novels from *Robinson Crusoe* onwards (Street 1975). Land was Othered as well as people, providing English literature's characterisation of non-urban environments as "wasteland or wonderland" (Hardyment 2012). Where the Fenni provide an early historical example of the material and embodied mutual thriving of a people and their environment, later literary representations of 'wildness' were, at times, explicitly political locations intended to represent spaces beyond the control of a dominant power. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* for example, the usurped Duke Senior has retreated to an Arcadian Forest of Arden in a movement "to liberty, and not to banishment" (*As You Like It* 1:3, 137) paralleling the political identity of early medieval woodcraft as "the lore of the fathers from back in the day when men hunted without constraint" (Marvin 2006:130) and speaking to a desire for independence that reflects woodcraft's counter-cultural land-rights activism of subsistence poaching – taking fish or game not to sell but to supply that day's meal.

Contemporaneously with Shakespeare, English military and commercial expansionism was extending earlier coastal trading into inland conquest and settlement on other continents, enabled by the system of Royal Charters, which had originated with the Normans, and continued to be used to privilege a ruling elite. A Royal Charter confers an independent legal personality on an organization, so that its members are not personally liable for its debts or legal actions. The landowning class who constituted English government utilised such Charters to limit their financial liability for colonial projects, for example, by creating the monopolies of the East India Company in 1600, the Virginia Company in 1606, and the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. A workforce was needed to support these colonial projects: in England, land clearances for sheep farming had displaced and removed the livelihood of many working people, religious intolerance had made others refugees, others were 'press-ganged' – kidnapped and pressed to work on the ships and in the military – while in 1788, the first convicts were transported to Botany Bay penal colony in Australia. Many of these people carried with them a wealth of local, traditional knowledge, familiar with collecting herbs for medicine, catching fish and wildlife for the pot, and crafting the artefacts they used in everyday life, so that their skilled knowledge and practice in woodcraft was conscripted into the colonial project along with their bodies. In England, however, they were familiar with their local flora, fauna, landscape, and climate: in different locations they were dependent for survival on the generosity of Indigenous people, such as the Cherokee, in sharing their own local knowledge. Both settlers and Cherokee recognised that their crafts were firmly linked to a specific landscape, and this sharing of land-based knowledge expressed the friendship between them, "prior to the destructive period of the American Revolution" (Smithers 2017:614). Formed from existing local traditional knowledge transposed to an unfamiliar biota, and extended by a solidarity with Indigenous people, bushcraft's antecedents were not therefore inevitably colonial. Rather, their reshaping by colonial encounters exemplifying trans theory's "relational structures that enable trans

communities to survive, nurture one another, share knowledge", part of an "affective kinematics that flourish in the shadow of colonialism" (Bradway & Freeman 2022:13,14). This is not to say that the co-opted English practitioners of those skills were not complicit in the colonial project, or to claim a special 'innocence' for bushcraft practice. Instead, it is to highlight trans theory's principle that acknowledging complicity is to refuse binarized relations of guilt and innocence, since "thinking through complicity centres openness to alliances, frictions and arguments, a readiness to question the organisation of practices" and may promote "a willingness to change without guilt or defensiveness" (Raha & Van Der Drift, 2024:34). Trans theory's focus on complicity requires a shared concern about structures of power, to identify what needs to be refused, and to engage fruitfully with the problem at hand.

Meanwhile, in the domestic arena, English traditional skills and ways of life also continued to change and develop, in response to the changing landscapes of England affected by climatic variation, population dispersion, settlement, and shifts in the country's economic bases from agrarian to industrial and rural to urban, up to the present day.[5] Limitations on these traditional practices grew, especially for food acquisition, as legal access to land diminished, free-capture was redefined by landowners as poaching, and foraging increasingly became defined as theft. As Hayes writes:

> By the end of the seventeenth century, the forest wardens of the Middle Ages had mutated into gamekeepers, employed in great numbers as private security guards to patrol their masters' fences. (2022:210)

The further policing of these boundaries could result in severe consequences for those who broached them, as Griffiths indicates:

> By 1816, poachers, including children of nine or ten, were given punishments of imprisonment or transportation for offences against the Game Laws, enacted to protect the hunting rights of the wealthy . . . by 1830, one in three criminal convictions was for a crime against the Game Laws. (2014:20)

Over time, the severity of these sanctions reduced, but access to land has become increasingly limited by right-wing legislation, including the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act which created a new offence of aggravated trespass. Most recently, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act of 2022 has made trespass potentially a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment of up to four months and/or a fine of up to £2,500. At present, only 8% of English countryside is open access as defined by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000, and even this right to roam is restricted to passing through, not working with, the land (Hayes 2022:10). The threat to the cultural continuity of English hunting and gathering is not only an absence of skill or will to practice it, therefore, but access to a landscape in which it may be practised. As a result of these increasing restrictions and consequences, bushcraft is now often practiced as a profession, operating as education, expedition training, and military survival training. However, its crafts, and the deep ethnobotanical and ethnobiological knowledge underpinning them, continue to provide cultural continuity even in our contemporary period when English land access is far more limited than it was under Norman Forest Law.

Bushcraft, therefore, may be understood as a decolonising movement, supporting and propagating ethnobiological practices which bring individuals into direct skilled relationship with their landscape. It operates to mitigate an increasing disenfranchisement of English people from fauna and flora, seeking to ensure that the knowledge base for fruitful interaction with what Abram terms the "more than human world" (1996) is not lost. Like the medieval popularity of Robin Hood, these skills often appear in the imaginary of contemporary television in the guise of experts demonstrating their skill and thus suggesting possibilities of fruitful resistance to separation from the natural world. These may be reality demonstrations, such as the multiple television series led by bushcraft expert Ray Mears, or documentaries celebrating similar skills in other cultures, such as naturalist David Attenborough's early *The Tribal Eye* (1975). In both cases, the dramatic emphasis is on the presenters' detailed knowledge and close attention to the landscape and its affordances as a basis for human and animal thriving.

This material stands in contrast to the 'fantasy hunter-gatherer' of 'pop-survival' television shows such as Bear Grylls' *The Island*, a genre that focuses on "a nostalgic, apocalyptic wish, that is, a perverse desire for catastrophe, judgement and renewal, particularly in regard to the category of masculinity or what 'makes' a man" (Doyle 2012). A usual part of these depictions is a "Tough Guy Outsider" trope, epitomising a hypermasculinity which enables the protagonist to survive in a supposedly hostile natural world, while the unskilled and untrained contestants, which the critic Doyle categorizes as the "Yuppy in Crisis", are set up to fail. As the series progresses, this failure becomes a ritualised confession of personal inadequacy, absolved only by an acquiescent endurance of humiliation. Such programmes pose the constant challenge – could *you* survive? – simultaneously inviting in the viewer and repudiating their ability to emulate the presenter. In so doing, *The Island* turns its paradisical location into an inaccessible, postlapsarian Eden of suffering, discouraging engagement with the natural world by positioning it as hostile and unapproachable, and thereby reinstating the authority of urban social norms. It lends unstated support to limitations on land access by the emotional appeal of depicting natural environments as dangerous, while also presenting them as paradisical, in the familiar dual movement of Othering. Its effect is to create a neo-primitivist nostalgic fantasy, "a paradoxical longing for a lost something that it must at the same time preserve as an absence" (Li 2006:40). Concurrently, the pop-survival Tough Guy protagonist asserts the political value which Pratt (2008:38) terms "anti-conquest", a "Utopian, innocent vision of European global authority" which claims to be both above other people and acting in their best interest, while ignoring or denying the impact of colonisation. Succinctly, where the cultural continuity provided by bushcraft skills seeks to decolonise, the 'fantasy hunter-gatherer' genre recolonises.

7. **Bushcraft, hunter-gatherers, and traditional knowledge**

Hunter-gatherers are often defined by scholars with reference to their exploitation of wild species, with the concurrent absence of a reliance on domesticated species. However, this does not mean that these practices do not include types of manipulation of the environment, from periodic burning of the land, to more directed management of wild resources of both plants and animals (Price & Brown 1985). These human-plant-animal relationships are complicated and can operate at different levels of intensity (Hurcombe 2014). Ecologist M. Kat Anderson (2005), who has documented some of the traditional Indigenous Californian practices of plant resource maintenance in part through interviews with those whose families used to practice these ways, has termed these relationships ones of "tending the wild." She relays the ways in which the behaviours of various Indigenous groups acted to favour the

growth of particular species and encourage the exact growth patterns that allowed those resources to be in the best possible condition to meet human needs. These were wild resources, and yet they were manipulated to serve hunter-gatherer requirements. Another demonstration of the ways in which tending 'the wild' in this manner troubles the boundaries of our concepts is provided by anthropologist and human ecologist Roy Ellen (2004), who has studied the management of Sago palms (*Metroxylon sagu)* by the Nuaulu people of central Seram, Eastern Indonesia. Ellen's research demonstrates that whilst sago is managed as an important food source, there is no attempt by the Nuaulu to grow the palm from seedlings, therefore "the distinction between cultivated and non-cultivated becomes a difficult one to make" (Ellen 2006). Anthropologist Laura Rival (1998) presents a similar case-study of peach palm (*Bactris gasipaes*) which is also managed through ritual use by the Huaorani, an Amazonian hunter-gatherer group, but again is not cultivated by them. These case studies illustrate that the categories 'wild' and 'domesticated' are heterogeneous, which makes any simple divisions between the two, and the terminology that reflects those divisions, discontinuous and complex.

This same ethic of relational tending applies equally to the other definitional term of this grouping: hunting. Choices made with regard to animal exploitation patterns can favour the availability of prey: archaeologists such as Peter Rowley-Conwy (2001) have been very clear that simple choices made during a hunt may ensure that there are more resources to be harvested in future years, rather than depleting those animals on which hunters depend. Archaeologists have long discussed mobility patterns according to the kind of resources available in the environment, and the extent to which the human societies exploiting them have to be moving more or less frequently around the landscape. Consequently, the conclusion of scholarship based on the archaeological and ethnographic record is that the pattern of hunter-gatherer exploitation of environmental resources is neither a single concept, nor simple. There are hunter-gatherer lifeways which depend upon a largely sedentary existence in a warm and substantial shelter to survive the winter weather conditions. There are other landscapes which cannot sustain long-term exploitation, consequently impelling their hunter-gatherer residents to move more frequently. Torrence (1983) goes further, explaining the way tended and untended artefacts that aid hunting and fishing (e.g. snares and traps) might have maximised resource harvests, and that different kinds of tools are an important part of how different landscapes can be exploited, with quickly-repaired composite tools aiding adaptability.

In spite of their intimate adaptations, hunter-gatherer societies certainly still suffer from periodic poor years, such as those when buffalo were not plentiful in the American Great Plains, as Forde details:

> There were considerable periods in which no herds were found or successfully attacked, and there was always the risk that herds forsaking their established trails might desert a tract of country for long periods. Serious famines could and did occur long before the buffalo were slaughtered wholesale by white hunters at the end of the last century. (1934:67)

Even in relatively affluent societies there can be peaks and troughs in resource availability. In recent years, a concern with climate change has caused many of us to appreciate more fully patterns in the weather and the variation in harvests which might be associated with these global shifts. Archaeologists have studied cultural responses to risk as 'bad year economics' since, even in affluent hunter-gatherer societies, it might be important to put food resources

to one side in a good year to even out those seasons and years when resources are poorer than usual (Halstead & O'Shea 1989), perhaps exemplifying Woodburn's (1982) well-known distinction between immediate and delayed return economies.

Bushcraft covers both the knowledge that is used to harvest wild plant and animal resources for food, and also the materials in the environment which can be used to meet the need for tools, shelter, and tasks such as fire-making or water-collection. However, although many bushcraft practitioners view a hunter-gatherer lifeway as one that sources everything needed within the natural environment, most bushcraft practitioners have favourite ranges of metal tools that they would routinely carry with them. The concept of hunter-gatherer, as the name suggests, focuses on the style of subsistence while excluding the means of obtaining it. Archaeologists and bushcraft practitioners alike know that these are inextricably linked, but bushcrafters, like contemporary hunter-gatherer populations, often use more modern tools, according to their needs, as contemporary ethnographers are well-familiar. 'Bushcraft' is not a universal, unitary concept any more than 'hunter-gatherers': both encompass practices that are relational and contingent, rather than essentialist and uniform.

Many more bushcrafters understand how to make fire, construct a shelter, and collect food, than have the knowledge and skills to make the tools that allow those activities to be successfully achieved. Several decades of teaching students to make artefacts across a range of materials has demonstrated to the authors that the most alien practice to the modern audience is flint knapping, because of students' general unfamiliarity with the material and the artefacts it produces. People may not have made baskets, pots or other material culture items themselves, but they have nonetheless used or seen them and know broadly how they are made. Even there, however, there are breaks in the chains of knowledge linking some elements familiar to the present day back to the resource in the environment. For example, a modern audience will know that wood behaves in a certain way; some may know how to recognise a particular piece of processed wood by its colour and grain, but few would be able to identify that particular tree species in the environment. This kind of lacuna in understanding speaks to a disconnection from the plants and animals which act as both food resources and craft resources, something which bushcraft seeks to remedy through knowledge and practical skill. We believe that this is one reason for bushcraft's current growth in popularity. Moreover, we hypothesise that its potential to reconnect people with landscapes, materials and knowledges is supported by scholarly work which posits a post-human process of 'making kin' with non-human lifeforms, such as Donna Haraway's *Staying With the Trouble* (2016) and by works of popular culture such as Nick Hayes's (2022) *The Trespasser's Companion: A Field Guide to Reclaiming What is Already Ours.*

Most communities in industrialized nations do not themselves hunt or even gather. In living memory, the decline in this knowledge has continued mostly in extremis. The most significant government-organised collection of wild foods within the UK arose from the shortages of food during the Second World War, and the need to creatively adapt to a punishing situation. Shipping was being destroyed, and food supplies were interrupted as priority was placed on the machinery of war. In this context, increasing health concern required a new awareness of local possibilities. Vitamin C can be obtained from rosehips, but in a labour market where women were encouraged to be part of the war effort, who was to be persuaded to go out and collect them? Children in communities with access to at least some countryside were encouraged to gather rosehips, which were then passed to collecting points (Houghton 2022; E. Hurcombe pers.comm).[6] Today, the most accessible 'gathering' activity in Britain is wild fruit collection, specifically blackberries, as this wild resource is easily

identifiable, and grows in both rural and urban ‘waste ground’ settings. Those who live with large gardens or space around them may grow their own food, and there is an increasing movement towards community gardens, but many English people have little knowledge of the wild resources available to them. As the urban population has grown across Britain, what little knowledge remained has only lessened, and the few spaces available for accessing wild resources have shrunk (Emery & Dyke 2006). A group of foraging instructors is working against this trend, cultivating a new set of knowledges, whilst legal rights to forage are being discussed (Lee & Garikpati 2011; Łuczaj et al. 2021).

Bushcraft creates a place for those in modern England and the rest of the UK to reconnect with the traditional knowledge that has existed for many millennia, but which has become disaggregated, disconnected and in some cases, its practice made illegal by complex trespass and land use laws. Since the turn of the new millennium, and with the simultaneous rise in popularity of bushcraft, media, and online technology, there has been a rapid movement towards the reclamation of English land-based knowledge. This has drawn on a multitude of sources and experiential applications in order to formulate, or re-formulate, a now vastly wider set and subset of skill-bases in England than was available post-Second World War. This emerging cornucopia of ethnobiological knowledge in areas such as ethnobotany of plants, greenwood crafting, and hide tanning, has been applied to traditional ecological skills such as dyeing, leatherworking, food gathering and preserving, fibre production, glues, and natural remedies; and to relate the practices of hunting, trapping, fishing to the knowledge of how to utilise resultant resources of hides, bones, sinews and edible parts from animals including fish.

Although modern bushcraft is no more a single concept than the term ‘hunter-gatherer’, its kinematics and kinaesthetics make it a popular and growing field that can re-establish at least some parts of the knowledge and skills sets which were once the only means to survive and thrive in the English landscape. It is a grassroots counter-cultural movement that has engaged the imaginary of the English populations through multiple different types of media. Countless TV programs, blogs, websites, courses, shows and fayres, magazine articles and tabloids have engaged with the imaginary expressed in such ideas. Bushcraft as concept and practice has influenced ideas about how we raise children and educate young people (Fenton et al. 2022), how we rewild ourselves and our landscapes (Fenton & Playdon 2023), how we stay healthy and benefit our wellbeing, ideas of ‘nature reconnections’, and green therapies. Yet, despite such a strong popular appeal both practically and imaginatively, little research has yet been carried out to explore the explicit relationships between these factors.

8 Conclusions

We conclude that it may be fruitful to consider the relationship between bushcraft and hunter-gathering in the English landscape as a ‘discontinuous continuity’, its defining characteristic being a skilled, knowledgeable, material, and embodied set of relationships between practitioner, landscape, tool, and craft apparent in stone age tool production, medieval woodcraft, and contemporary bushcraft. The need or desire to master a suite of skills and knowledge, to enable travel through natural landscapes, while utilising simple tools and carrying minimal equipment remain continuous, even as the territory itself changed due to climatic variation, population growth, conquest, and economic shifts to agrarianism, urbanisation, and new technologies. Queer and trans theory’s resistance to the historical delegitimization of queer and trans lives provides a helpful lens for understanding bushcraft’s ethos. The kinaesthetics of its craft, and the kinematics of its social practice, provides a

kincoherent narrative, in which bushcraft professionals' reclamation of lost traditional knowledge and skills is a defining feature of practice. If those traditional skills had not been lost, there would be no need for their reclamation through the craft and social practice of bushcraft, so that, as Butler puts it, "there seems to be no way to think the bonds of kinship without understanding first what breaks them. That breakability is the bond" (2017:21). By contrast, the idea of a singular 'English' identity is problematic, given the ebb and flow of peoples through time, language changes, contemporary multiculturalism, and the complex genetic, political and linguistic heritages all these factors speak to. But ethnobiologically based practices bringing individuals into direct skilled relationship with the natural landscape have continued into the contemporary period, expressed through a mythic imaginary that is grounded in material practice, and as a counter-cultural social movement and ideology, in spite of the limitations placed on land access.

We are claiming bushcraft as an example of cultural continuity, therefore, its kincoherence persisting in spite of cultural aporia, "the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage" (Derrida 1993:8), locating this claim as part of a larger stream of feminist, queer, and trans critique. Recognising and reworking cultural aporia has long been a central feminist strategy, whether as Virginia Woolf's (1993 [1938]) replacement of women's exclusion from professional and political life by an imagined community of Outsiders; or Rosi Braidotti's (1994) "nomadic" critical consciousness that refuses static social codes of thought and behaviour; or Haraway's (1991:195) demand for a "situated knowledge" in which partiality does not prevent rational knowledge claims from being heard. Currently, trans and non-binary perspectives extend this stream of feminist thinking into a refusal of binary positions and a valorisation of a fluidity that Tello terms "the and-and", able to "refuse static, essentialist modes of being" (2020:391,393). Queer and trans theory have exposed cisheteronormative ideologies, including colonialism as it has operated domestically as well as abroad (Playdon 2021:31-32), valorising individual and provisional identity, while also providing a coherent, communal identification.

By extending the concept of 'hunter-gathering' beyond its frequent, unitary usage, we intend that contemporary bushcraft may be understood as reclaiming lost knowledge and practice, by borrowing from practices remembered within cultural refugia, from historical accounts, from experimental archaeology, and from records and practices of other peoples living similarly in non-urbanised environments. Bushcraft practice is thus a kind of bricolage, incorporating knowledges and skills from a range of land-based crafts, its practitioner having the character of Levi-Strauss's "bricoleur" who "addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours" (1962:12). Its ethos is produced through bodily acts governed by the habitat where they take place, part of Butler's (2022:37) "political imaginary . . . a way of newly elaborating relationships that would counter the ascendent tendencies to base social relations on property relations; to reanimate old and persistent racism", which requires "ways to think beyond the horizons that bound our current conception of reality." In this reading, rather than a tragic disconnection from the past, contemporary bushcraft provides a valuable education in resilience and a sustaining vision of kinship which mitigates violent regulatory structures. Our hope is that further research into the origins and present-day expressions of these issues will be stimulated and supported by the broad historical perspective we provide here.

Endnotes

[1] We put ‘England’ into inverted commas to indicate its complicated historical identity. The boundaries of the topographical area now identified as England have shifted frequently, sometimes lost altogether by glacial submergence, sometimes redefined or contested politically, frequently confused with the terms ‘Great Britain’ and ‘the United Kingdom’, and since Elizabethan times, consistently mythologised as an Arcadian location.
[2] We use ‘United Kingdom [UK]’ here to resist extreme right-wing ‘blood and soil’ fantasies of ‘England’ and ‘English’, while retaining reference to England as a discrete geopolitical region separate from Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and its English inhabitants as similarly separate from Welsh, Scots, and Irish peoples.
[3] This paper follows the mainstream cultural narrative of the Robin Hood myth. For an alternative reading, see Hoyle 2017.
[4] In translation, Coghill (1951:22) renders this as:
This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen
And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while
For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,
His arrows never drooped with feathers low –
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
His head was like a nut, his face was brown.
He knew the whole of woodcraft up and down.
A saucy brace was on his arm to ward
It from the bow-string, and a shield and sword
Hung at one side, and at the other slipped
A jaunty dirk, spear-sharp and well-equipped.
A medal of St Christopher he wore
Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
That dangled from a baldrick of bright green.
He was a proper forester, I guess.
[5] *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) by W. G. Hoskins is the foundational book on reading changes in the English landscape; more recent works include *The History of the Countryside* (Rackham 1986); *The Making of the British Landscape* (Pryor 2010); *The Making of the British Landscape* (Crane 2015).
[6] One of the authors, Linda Hurcombe, learnt of this initiative from her mother Elizabeth Hurcombe telling her about her own memories as a child in WWII, and explaining how she learned her plant knowledge not just from her parents but from the friends and their older siblings that formed part of a neighbourhood group of children, and thus showing the process of living connections with plant knowledge and its transmission.

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