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Cooked Nature: What Three Classic Books on the American Lawn Can Tell Us About Our Current Struggle to Mitigate Climate Change

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SUSTCOMM 533: Urban Greening Theory & Practice
Research Project - Greg Poelker-McKee

**COOKED NATURE:
WHAT THREE CLASSIC BOOKS ON THE AMERICAN LAWN CAN TELL US
ABOUT OUR CURRENT STRUGGLE TO MITIGATE CLIMATE CHANGE**

Jenkins, Virginia Scott. *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

Robbins, Paul. *Lawn People How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are*. Temple University Press, 2012.

Steinberg, Theodore. *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn*. W.W. Norton, 2006.

The Creation

In the beginning, there were grasses. Then, we said, ‘Let there be lawns;’ and there were lawns. And we saw the lawns — that they were good; and we divided the lawns from the grasses.

According to the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, the work of civilization is to change nature into culture, “transforming the raw into the cooked” (Pollan 2007, 264). The American lawn seems to defy this conjecture in its combination of both the natural and cultural. Is the American lawn nature, or cooked nature? Is it a natural result of our evolution as human beings, or something else? It has been said that the best way to find life on other planets is to look for a reduction in entropy – a pattern in the otherwise lifeless chaos that would indicate the work of a living being (Lovelock 1979, 2). If all life strives to reduce chaos, then is the desire for a forever green, meticulously mowed, monoculture as natural as life itself?

Many scholars have attempted to frame the lawn in evolutionary terms. The leading theory comes from landscape architect Jay Appleton, who proposes that we have a genetic predisposition towards wide open spaces due to our evolution on the savanna (Appleton 1975; Steinberg 2006, 9). Under this framework, the lawn harnesses our primal desire for a wide-open and grassy hunting ground. However, critics point out that “not only is there little empirical support for this theory, but recent evidence on early habitats in Africa suggests that human evolution may well have occurred in wooded regions, not grassy ones” (9). This theory also leaves unexplained why much of the rest of the modern world has not developed a fetish for turfgrass in the same way Americans have.

It becomes clear, then, that the American lawn cannot be explained in terms of nature - it must be explained in terms of culture, as many scholars have also attempted to do. Virginia Scott Jenkins began this tradition in 1994 with *The Lawn: A History of An American Obsession*, which tells a meticulous history of the phenomenon, with emphasis on how recently the lawn developed, despite “the landscape [seeming] so quintessentially normal and timeless to so many of us” (Robbins 2012, xvi). Ted Steinberg followed in Jenkins’ footsteps with his 2006 environmental history, *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn*. While Steinberg was able to distill Jenkins’ exhaustive history down to a more readable form, readers were still dissatisfied with his conclusions. A review in *The New York Times* complained:

There is something more complex going on in America's lawn-care psyche than Steinberg, who teaches history at Case Western Reserve University, addresses. Plenty of lawn-obsessed people read the paper, have college degrees, support the Nature Conservancy; they cannot possibly think the chemicals they dump on their grass are good for their children or wildlife or groundwater, yet they dump them anyway. If you're one of those people, you'll get lots of interesting history and amusing anecdotes in ‘American Green,’ but you won't get an explanation for your own self-contradictory behavior (Genzlinger, 2006).

Critiques such as these prompted Paul Robbins to write *Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are*. Published in 2012, *Lawn People* uses the lens of urban political ecology to analyze the rise and continued dominance of the lawn within American society with the goal of explaining those very contradictions that left readers of *American Green* scratching their heads.

In an era of climate change and environmental destruction, understanding the psychology of these contradictions may be essential to shifting American values towards the ideals of sustainability and eco-consciousness – for there is truly something peculiar at work across the American suburbs. As Paul Robbins comments, “*all* consumer products reflect equally dense and lengthy chains, but the lawn is remarkable for the diversity and extent of its required inputs. Few other home features require both the biotic and nonbiotic inputs and ongoing levels of sustained energy in the way turfgrass does” (2012, 75). So what exactly is going on in the yards of America?

Early Desires Fall Short of Perfection

“Beautiful lawns don’t just happen (Steinberg 2006, 3).” – The Scotts Company

To understand the modern lawn, one must travel back in time to the late 19th century. As the Reconstruction era came to a close, Frederick Law Olmstead had an idea. Repulsed by the “high dead-walls’ of England which he felt made a row of homes there seem ‘as of a series of private madhouses,’” Olmstead designed Riverside, “one of the first planned suburban communities in America,” so that “each owner would maintain one or two trees and a lawn that would flow seamlessly into his neighbors,’ creating the impression that all lived together in a single park” (Pollan 1989). Olmstead’s innovation captured the American imagination at a time when many people wished to get away from cities, which were seen as congested and full of crime (Jenkins 1994, 20). While Olmstead himself emphasized the communitarian aspects of the lawn, most scholars agree that its true appeal was not that it did away with the physical barrier of the English garden wall, but that it emulated the landscape of English manor-houses (Jenkins 1994, 25). This desire to emulate the wealthy coincides with the transformation of America from a “producer society to a consumer society, from a culture urging self-restraint to one built on immediate gratification through ownership of goods and pursuit of leisure time” (63). In short, the Reconstruction period brought about a strong desire by the poor to live like the rich.

The effects of the abolition of slavery cannot be discounted when analyzing this new cultural shift. With American slavery being a racial phenomenon, poor whites had long had material evidence that they were supposedly socially superior to poor blacks. The story of how this sense of superiority came about is one lost from the modern consciousness. Contrary to popular belief, in the early colonial period there was at some level a sense of comradery between whites suffering as indentured servants and blacks suffering as slaves. Historian Howard Zinn writes in *A People’s History of the United States* that, “it was the potential combination of poor whites and blacks that caused the most fear among the wealthy white planters” (1980, 55). After the manifestation of this fear in Bacon’s Rebellion, the colonial elites decided to give amnesty only to white rebels, in order to divide them from the blacks, and prevent further revolt. Laws began to take shape to cement new class distinctions – “negroes were forbidden to carry any arms, while whites finishing their servitude would get muskets, along with corn and cash” (56). By drawing class distinctions along the color lines of indentured servitude and slavery, the

colonies cultivated a sense of dignity for poor whites, allowing them to feel firmly above enslaved blacks, and thus not be in the lowest class of society. The dissolution of slavery 200 years later – abolishing the distinctions which held poor whites above poor blacks – created an urgent desire for the creation of a new color line, this time to be written in turfgrass.

While one may think this phenomenon would be limited to the South, the process – called redlining – occurred around the country in the decades after abolition (Plumer 2020). As African Americans began living in semi-rural areas as independent farmers, lower class whites doing the same sought to distance themselves not only geographically (through the creation of ‘White’s Only’ neighborhoods such as Levittown), but also by creating a new, separate landscape aesthetic (Lambert 1997). While a newly emancipated (and moneyless) African American family might use their front yard to grow food, the lawn aesthetic demanded that “front lawns no longer produced fodder for domestic animals [or] grow vegetables for the family” (Jenkins 1994, 63). In this new aesthetic,

The home meadows that provided hay for the family horse or cow, scorned by many horticultural writers, slowly gave way to ... close-cropped grass... These new lawns were examples of conspicuous consumption. They showed the passerby that the homeowner was well-to-do and aesthetically advanced. Thorstein Veblen noted that grazing animals were no longer acceptable on the lawns in the late nineteenth century because they were too suggestive of thrift or usefulness (32).

Newly christened suburbanites used the institution of the lawn to prove their wealth, rejecting their role as producers and embracing the new identity of the consumer. This movement was driven by the birth of garden clubs, horticultural magazines, and turfgrass research by new United States Dept. of Agriculture, all promoting the notion of a beautiful America based around the cultivation of lawns (Jenkins 1994, 39, 56). Residents of these new suburban communities, called ‘consumption communities’ by historian Daniel Boorstin, used their lawns not only as a way to distance themselves from freed blacks, but also as a way to exercise their own racist desires (66). Jenkins observes that early lawn advertising played upon racist instincts:

One mower advertisement asked, ‘Which House’s Boss Has a Clemson? The one with the well-trimmed grass, every time.’ ‘Boss’ was a masculine term; the lawn mower, and by extension the lawn, belonged to the boss. Lawn mowers were named the Dandy Boy,

the Lawn Boy, and the Lazy Boy. An electric lawn trimmer, the Edger-Boy, was advertised in 1958. Naming these machines ‘boy’ ... appealed to the racial stereotypes held by white Americans, as in a Filipino ‘house boy’ or an African American ‘yard boy’ (128).

Much like the popularization of the term ‘master bedroom,’ the act of mowing your lawn allowed the white suburbanite to regain his pre-abolition position as master, or boss. Much like how the plantation ‘boss’ commanded his ‘boys’ to harvest his crops, the suburban ‘boss’ of the early 20th century commanded his ‘Lawn Boy’ to cut his grass.

While confronting this aspect of lawn history may be disturbing, it is important to realize that the lawn of the post-Reconstruction period is a lawn still nascent in its cultural development. While suburban neighborhoods today remain surprisingly segregated, this does not mean that the lawn itself, as a cultural object, plays upon the same desires it did over 100 years ago. As we will soon see, the lawn went through many phases of marketing, frequently changing what it represented to its owner. This initial foray into inoculating cultural meaning into turf was relatively short-lived, and also incomplete.

While early suburbanization may have occurred as a reaction to Reconstruction, most new suburbanites were still too poor to afford the lawn aesthetic. In fact, with the beginning of the Great Depression in the 1930’s, the lawn almost disappeared from public consciousness altogether. At the time, “working-class suburbanites- struggling to put food on the table – micro-farmed their property. ... Even for those higher up on the social scale who had lawns, the idea of a *perfect* yard, neatly manicured and devoid of weeds, was more of an aspiration than a reality” (Steinberg 2006, 12-13). At the time it may have seemed that the heyday of the lawn had come and gone. Perhaps the suburban experiment in turfgrass would be deemed a racist failure, to be done away with due to its extravagance and waste. This may have been the result, if not for the sweeping economic and technological changes brought about by two consecutive world wars.

Lawn Hegemony

“The lawnmower man had removed his clothes - every stitch. They were folded neatly in the empty birdbath that was at the center of the back lawn. Naked and grass-stained, he was crawling along about five feet behind the mower, eating the cut grass. Green juice ran down his

chin and dripped on to his pendulous belly. And every time the lawnmower whirled around a corner, he rose and did an odd, skipping jump before prostrating himself again (King 2012).” – Stephen King’s “The Lawnmower Man”

Most people do not understand the true impact the early twentieth century had on the modern world. While the *political* outcomes of the wars are widely recognized, talk of *technological* outcomes is often focused only on the development of the nuclear bomb. In fact, the effects of the bomb upon the world pale in contrast to the effects of creating synthetic nitrate, an innovation of German-Jewish scientist Fritz Haber.¹ While Haber’s discovery came before WWI, in 1909, it was the necessity of the war effort, both in WWI and WWII, which industrialized the process, setting the stage for new forms of widespread use in the post-war period (Pollan 2007, 42, 43). Haber’s innovation was put to use in the manufacture of bombs (and other weapons), eliminating the need for costly nitrate mining operations (43).

But after the wars’ end, this created a problem. Across the world, factories stood ready to produce nitrate, but there were no people to bomb with it. In the United States, the solution to this issue of supply and demand was the Green Revolution – to popularize the use of synthetic nitrate as an agricultural fertilizer. Up until this turning point, “the size of crops and therefore [number of] human bodies – was limited by the amount of nitrogen that bacteria and lightning could fix” (43). Increasing the amount of usable nitrogen in existence threw off the chains of Earth’s natural carrying capacity from the human race. With millions of young men returning home from war, the United States was ripe to embrace this “something of a Faustian bargain” which is ultimately the only reason why “two of every five humans on earth today” are alive (43).

With the Baby Boom ushering in a brave new era of population growth in the United States, the ideal of the suburbs – as a safe haven for new families – returned to the American consciousness. But the chemical fertilizer industry, hard at work feeding this new swath of Americans, had a problem. In the years immediately following WWII, their plants were “operating at peak production yet still falling short of demand, and concerns about food production versus population growth were being voiced in industry and government circles”

¹ It seems important to note that Fritz Haber also invented Zyklon B, the poison gas used in Hitler’s concentration camps (Pollan 2007, 43).

(Whitney 2010, 662). In an effort to keep the US government from using its wartime plants to produce additional fertilizer (this was seen as socialist), industry drove up its own production capacity, hard. In fact, the fertilizer industry overcompensated for its initial lack of production – soon they were producing far more than they could sell (662).

But what if there was a way to increase suburban nitrate consumption? For this, they had to look no further than the American lawn (664). All they had to do was convince Americans that it was worth their money to fertilize their grass. While borrowing the ideal of the Reconstruction lawn – to convey a sense of status and wealth – the aesthetic of the post-war lawn evolved (Steinberg 2006, 92). In order to make fertilizers (and, soon after, pesticides and herbicides) essential, “the ideal of a single type of grass that will stay green year round” came into being (Jenkins 1994, 104, 158; Steinberg 2006, 13).

As we can see, the world of the suburbs is a world shaped by industry. Built by the real estate industry, fed by the industrial agriculture industry, it can also be argued that suburban life itself was shaped by a third industry – the culture industry, consisting of the advertising and entertainment apparatus that lubricated the bearings of consumption. This concept, coined by sociologist Theodor Adorno in 1944, described how industry “did away with yesterday’s rubbish by its own perfection ... forbidding and domesticating the amateurish” (1944, 16). In other words, the culture industry used the technical perfection of mass produced goods to reshape American consumer expectations, encouraging them to always expect nothing less than the industrial standard. The clever psychology of this was not lost on Adorno, who wrote that this allowed for industry to claim that “standards were based in the first place on consumers’ needs, and for that reason [they] were accepted with so little resistance. The result is [a] circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger” (2).

In the case of the lawn-care industry, this involved promoting the aesthetic of the perfect lawn not only through traditional advertising, but through entertainment as well. Steinberg writes that, “from *Father Knows Best* to *Leave It to Beaver*, the lawn came to symbolize the very essence of domestic tranquility. The yard became an expression of the ideal of unproblematic family togetherness that so dominated postwar culture” (2006, 44).

Through the use of this new ‘cultural marketing,’ the lawn-care industry was able to connect, in the mind of the consumer, the desire for “family and community” to the otherwise

separate desire for “stewardship to the landscape itself,” allowing the lawn to serve “as a bridge between” “the social-communitarian subject and ... the economic-consuming subject” (Robbins 2012, 115). Additionally, this type of marketing created convincing arguments for the necessity of new lawn-care products “by convincing [the reader] that they should do something new or in a different way” (Jenkins 1994, 67). Adorno would say that this is the culture industry at work. By merging advertising with culture, the “mechanical repetition of the same culture product has come to be the same as that of the [repetition of the] propaganda slogan. [And, by] the language [the consumer] speaks, he makes his own contribution to culture as publicity” (1944, 25-26). At this point the cycle is almost self-sustaining – advertising shapes culture and in turn culture shapes advertising. But what cultural meaning does the industrial lawn hold? What lies beneath the ideas of ‘family and community’ in 1950’s America? Quite a lot, in fact.

While we had to go back to the time of slavery to explain the Reconstruction lawn, we must go even farther backwards – to the time of American colonization – to understand the meaning of the post-war lawn. The idea of the wilderness, first developing in the colonial period, has always been central to the American zeitgeist, eliciting the dual emotions of both awestruck curiosity and fear of the unknown. Jenkins writes that,

Men’s energy has been used to defeat the wilderness in nature and control it in human nature throughout the history of civilization. Cleared land, the symbol of civilization, took enormous effort. ... The intellectual legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition shaped the way that Europeans approached the ‘wilderness’ and left a lasting imprint on American thought. ... A recent study has shown that American frontier women dreamed about locating their homes and communities within a cultivated garden. In contrast, men’s fantasies involved the massive exploitation, alteration, and control of the land (1994, 117).

Left unspoken in this explanation is the action of the frontier upon the wilderness. Early American settlers distinguished themselves from their European counterparts in their bravery to confront the unknown, to delve into the wilderness and domesticate it. The rapacious notion of dominating nature itself appealed strongly to the colonists, and it may very well live on in the American lawn. As Michael Pollan writes in his 1989 essay “Why Mow?” “that subtle yet unmistakable frontier, where the closely shaved lawn rubs up against a shaggy one, is a scar on

the face of suburbia, an intolerable hint of trouble in paradise” (1989). Mowing one’s lawn came to represent a form of manifest destiny at a time when men conditioned by the frontier lifestyle of the Western Front in World War II had to come to terms with their new lives in the domesticated environment of the American suburbs. With no real frontier to settle, cutting back the lawn would have to do. If this idea seems far-fetched, one must consider that there was a real effort to replace grass lawns with plastic alternatives (which would not require mowing), but these “never became rivals to living grass lawns” (Jenkins 1994, 144). This may indicate that the idea of controlling nature was much more appealing than replacing it, even if it meant more work.

But even this, however, does not explain how the culture industry was able to sell Americans on the idea of *monoculture* – convincing homeowners’ to subscribe to the aesthetic ideal of only a *single species* of grass in their yards. Assumably, one could exercise their fantasies of frontier-ism on a lawn consisting of mixed grasses just as well as one consisting of a single type of turf. Indeed, to explain the obsession with monoculture, one must look instead to the political culture of Cold War America.

The Golden Age of Turf

A specter is haunting America – the specter of crabgrass.

Upon examination it is clear that the post-war lawn is no longer a sink for racial fears but for new, political ones, namely Marx’s specter of communism. This meaning, interestingly, was not planted by industry, but originated from the government itself – more specifically the turfgrass research divisions of the USDA. Jenkins writes that “the emphasis on pure cultures of single varieties of grass was new to Americans. Government scientists helped develop a new lawn aesthetic that would become predominant in the twentieth century” (1994, 50). The lawn industry itself was nothing if not eager to promote this new vision through its advertising channels, since it would certainly require more work, and subsequently more products, to create. Michael Pollan compares these government “design-reformers” to “Puritan ministers, laying down rigid conventions governing our relationship to the land, our observance of which would henceforth be taken as an index of our character” (1989). Bill Levitt, the famous developer who created Levittown, seemed to agree with this, as he loved to proclaim that ““no man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist. He has too much to do”” (Steinberg 2006, 30).

By laying monoculture down as landscape law, suburbanites now had a system for evaluating each other's patriotism. In the Cold War dialogue of Us vs. Them, it became increasingly clear that how one treated their turf could be a litmus test for whether they were one of Us or one of Them. This is because, when it comes to weeds, "intensive care by one [lawn owner] merely moves problems around; only coordinated action can control 'outbreaks' and achieve uniformity. In this sense, lawn care differs from other kinds of individual investment in community, such as Christmas lights, painting, or other efforts" (Robbins 2012, 99). Maintaining monoculture also differs from maintaining a certain height of grass in this same way. While a grass-cutting scofflaw might depreciate the aesthetic of their own lawn, a weeding scofflaw may also depreciate their neighbors' lawns, because weeds can spread from yard to yard. In short, every household must conform. In this way, the cultural dynamics of the anti-communism lawn differ radically from the dynamics of the frontier-ism lawn. At a time when Americans believed their communities were infested with communists, the spreading of weeds from a non-conforming lawn provided physical evidence for the otherwise intangible threat of political opposition. At this point, lawn-care was no longer a cultural pastime but instead a cultural mandate. Even today, the legacy of the anti-communist lawn lives on. Robbins observes that, "awareness of [the environmental consequences of lawn-care] weighs lightly in individual decision-making relative to the normative power of the community" (131). This in-group mentality of landscaping, cemented by the Cold War, begins to reveal the lawns' resistance to any change.

It is at this juncture that some of Adorno's more radical claims begin to make sense. He asserts that, "the attitude of the public, which ostensibly and actually favors the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system and not an excuse for it" (1944, 3). The enforcement of monoculture through its association with patriotism certainly seems to fit this bill. It is not that the public necessarily desired this – their compliance with the system is not motivated by a personal desire to own a 'perfect lawn' but by a fear of being the only one *without* a 'perfect lawn.' Adorno suggests:

"The analysis [Alexis de] Tocqueville offered [long ago] has ... proved wholly accurate. Under the private culture monopoly it is a fact that 'tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul. The ruler no longer says: You must think as I do or die. He

says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us” (14).

It is important to note here that Theodor Adorno’s writings on mass culture were not directed at the lawn-care industry. In fact, “The Culture Industry” was published at a time when the suburbs had yet to explode across the nation. Each and every critique he offers was directed at the culture of Los Angeles in the early 1940’s – one can only imagine what he felt a decade later. Would he have felt validated, horrified, or both?

Either way, his predictions have proved far more accurate than he must have ever supposed they would be. He writes that “amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. ... What happens at work, in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped from by approximation to it in one’s leisure time” (18). In this framework, the lawn – requiring constant maintenance – reinforces upon its owner their identity as a worker. The lawn owner may not know why they mow the grass, but they know that they must. With the communist threat now come and gone, this idea of *yardwork* is what remains of lawn psychology. Steinberg writes that “from the White House lawn to the baseball field, perfect grass is ... a civic religion.” (2006, 202). This idea, of America being united by a ‘civic religion,’ has been well documented by Villanova University Professor Eugene McCarragher, in his book *The Enchantments of Mammon*. Rejecting the notion of a truly secular society, McCarragher theorizes that the United States worships capitalism as a sort of quasi-religion, which attributes “‘ontological power to money and ... existential sublimity to its possessors” (Walden 2020). The lawn – being a cultural artifact founded on the idea of “conspicuous consumption” for the purposes of demonstrating one’s wealth – is ripe with capitalist religiosity (Jenkins 1994, 32). Stripped by time of its Cold War cultural meaning, the lawn becomes the church of capitalism – the only difference being that instead of indulgences, we buy fertilizer. One may not have to go to work on Sunday, but they certainly must go to church – by mowing the grass. Robbins observes that “whole collective neighborhood rhythms are disciplined around [the cycles of lawn care] annually, seasonally, and weekly” (2012, 129). Through our collective societal maintenance of it, the lawn can be seen as a subtle form of quasi-religious conditioning, reminding us of our role as workers while we ‘recreate’ on the weekends.

Will Ecological Armageddon End the Lawn?

“*We cannot in fairness rail against those who destroy the rain forest or threaten the spotted owl when we have made our own yards uninhabitable*” (Steinberg 2006, 196). – Sarah Stein, *Noah’s Garden*

Does this description of American lawn-care – as a ‘civic religion’ – seem too Orwellian? It should, because there is one important aspect of reality that has heretofore gone unmentioned in our look at the lawn – that *most people* do not have perfect ones. As Steinberg writes, “Trying to maintain lawn perfection across the diverse range of soil and climatic conditions found in the United States, in other words, is a Sisphyean task” (2006, 211). This fact is not lost on the industry itself, as the constant stream of ads “promising that lawn care [will] be fun and easy if only a certain product [is] used indicate that many men [rebel] against the time and hard work that [is] necessary to achieve a socially acceptable lawn” (Jenkins 1994, 129). But is the failure of the lawn owners truly a failure for the lawn industry?

According to Jenkins, it is much the opposite. Taking everything into account, she acknowledges that although “there are many more acres of lawn grass in the United States at the end of the century than there were at the beginning ... relatively few people actually spend the time, money and labor necessary to achieve velvety green perfection despite, or perhaps because of, the best efforts of the lawn-care industry” (157). But in her analysis, this is a most desirable situation, from an industrial perspective. It is not the ability of the consumer to keep up with the Joneses of the culture industry that drives profits, but precisely their *lack of ability* that does. The lawn industry profits from our knowledge that we will never be able to, in Adorno’s words, turn the “amateurish” into the professional (1944, 16). Knowing that they are always falling short of expectations, the consumer is driven to purchase more and more products to half-heartedly attempt to achieve the aesthetic demanded of them by the culture industry (Jenkins 1994, 158). The lawn industry doesn’t need, or even want, every lawn owner to achieve a perfect lawn – if all of the lawn owners in America occasionally buy fertilizer, a pesticide, and an odd herbicide for their turf then the industry is more than monetarily satisfied.

Left alone, this odd marketing strategy might easily fade away as American culture continues to march onward, but a slew of laws have made sure this will never occur. Robbins observes that “in virtually every municipality in the United States, homeowners are required by

law to cut their grass on a regular basis and keep the property in a ‘neat and clean’ manner, usually setting a maximum lawn height of six to eight inches” (2012, 122). These lawn laws are most often enforced like any other municipal regulation would be, with opposition to them usually resulting in failure (122-123). With this kind of legal regulation, the lawn becomes a piece of infrastructure rather than a cultural object, as it once was. Tending the lawn is akin to maintaining the electricity and plumbing of one’s house, except that unlike the state of one’s electricity and plumbing, the state of one’s lawn has little material effect on one’s life. But is there anything really *wrong* about this? The lawn-as-infrastructure certainly has some value, by creating and maintaining a unified landscape aesthetic for our nation. Is there a cost to the lawn, in addition to the money paid to maintain it?

In Steinberg’s view, the externalities of the lawn are “plenty” (216). Unfortunately, “good business – at least when it comes to perfect lawns- is not necessarily good for nature” (80). The perfect lawn, it turns out, has brought a perfect storm upon the planet. Through our use of chemicals – in the forms of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides – we have precipitated “Frankenstein-like algae blooms – monstrous masses of green that die and, in the process of decomposing, suck vast amounts of oxygen out of lakes, asphyxiating fish and other aquatic life” (203-204). The consequences of this are disastrous, not only to the ecology of these coastal waters, but also to the ecology of Earth as a whole. James Lovelock, in his classic book *Gaia*, which looks at Earth’s biosphere as a self-regulating organism, writes that:

It seems ... that the principal dangers to our planet arising from man’s activities may not be the special and singular evils of his urbanized industrial existence. When the urban industrial man does something ecologically bad he notices it and tends to put things right again. The really critical areas which need careful watching are more likely to be the tropics and the seas close to the continental shores. It is in these regions, where few do watch, that harmful practices may be pursued to the point of no-return before their dangers are recognized; and so it is in these regions that unpleasant surprises are most likely to emerge (1979, 113-114).

Because these regions, according to Lovelock, contain some of the most important mechanisms of self-regulation when it comes to the climate of the biosphere, they must be priority number one of any preservation effort. He writes that it is in these coastal waters that

“man may sap the vitality of Gaia by reducing productivity and by deleting key species in her life-support system; and he may then exacerbate the situation by releasing into the air or the sea abnormal quantities of compounds which are potentially dangerous on a global scale” (114). The loss of these key marine species, which regulate the levels of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere, leaves the rest of the biosphere even more vulnerable to our CO₂ emissions. Much like the fossil fuel industry, the chemical lawn industry has been aware of its products’ dangers for decades. A 1961 article in the trade journal *Agricultural Chemicals* predicted that these Earth-threatening algal blooms, precipitated by chemical run-off from America’s lawns, would provide new markets for ““marine herbicides”” (Whitney 2010, 661). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the consumers themselves. Jenkins notes that “the public’s naiveté about the environment and the long-term effects of indiscriminate use of chemicals on lawns was phenomenal” (1994, 146). While suburbanites have applied “more herbicides per acre on lawns than most farmers spread to grow crops,” they have largely not – until the publication of books such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* – begun to understand the true consequences of chemical-based lawn-care (Steinberg 2006, 8; Jenkins 1994, 155).

But today, when “seven in 10” Americans believe “human activity contributes a lot or some to climate change” and most feel that “they have a personal responsibility to do something about it” it is strange that we still apply chemicals to our lawns (Backus *et al.*, 2019). Stranger still is Robbins’ report that, while Americans have established this “more ecological sensibility,” they are also holding their lawns to “higher management expectations than ever before” (2012, 55). Perhaps this is because the culture industry has effectively eliminated individualism from our public consciousness, at least in the material sense. If this sounds far-fetched, consider that the purpose of the lawn project in the United States is to create total aesthetic conformity within the suburbs. To deviate from this conformity is to break the law. Is it possible that, through doing the constant work required to maintain this shared goal of total monoculture we have each lost, in some way, our sense of individual identity? What else can explain the disconnect between one’s use of lawn chemicals and one’s concern for the environment? It is only when one’s individual sense of cause and effect is lost that this could occur on such a wide scale. Are we individuals, or are we a collective?

Professor McCarragher, writing on the similarities between our capitalist society and the Holy Roman Empire, might identify this disconnect between our individual opinions and the ecological effects of our collective actions as evidence of the religiosity of our society. Historian Jacob Burckhardt, in his classic book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, noted that under the control of the Catholic Church the idea of the individual was superseded by the idea of the collective. He writes that “man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category” (1958, 40). This collectivization of society was enabled by the dual functionality of the Vatican being both church and state. While the Holy Roman Empire was a pre-dominantly religious body which became the political state, McCarragher would theorize that in today’s society it is the other way around – the pre-dominantly political body of American capitalism has also become our church. The parallel in power structures between the Holy Roman Empire and the current United States is striking; Adorno notes that “the technical contrast [today] between the few production centers and the large number of widely dispersed consumption points is said to demand organization and planning by management” (1944, 2). Whether or not you accept McCarragher’s framing of capitalism as religion, this extreme degree of top-down control is likely having some sort of effect upon the individuals of our society. Adorno certainly thought it did, writing that the actions of individuals “have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion ... The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (29).

This would certainly explain the confusion that that *New York Times* reviewer had after reading Steinberg’s *American Green*, when he observed that there is “something more complex going on in America’s lawn-care psyche ... than Steinberg ... addresses” (Genzlinger 2006). Indeed, like the feudal peasants of the Middle Ages, today’s lawn owners suffer beneath a new version of Burckhardt’s religious “veil ... woven of faith” (1958, 40). The only difference is that while the consequences of the peasant’s actions are largely limited to themselves, the consequences of the lawn owner’s actions are poised to affect the world on a global scale.

Non-point source pollution, under which lawn chemical runoff is classified, is “the most significant source of pollution overall in the country” according to the EPA (Whitney 2010, 662). This type of pollution is also notoriously hard to regulate, as it does not flow from one

source, such as a factory, but from many, such as all of the lawns across America. This chemical runoff is exacerbating the ecosystem-destroying effects of climate change, because with the loss of marine biodiversity the Earth's modes of bioregulation are dropping away, species by species (Kolbert 2019). Ultimately, this loss in biodiversity will accelerate climate change, as well as make its effects worse. According to prominent climate journalist Bill McKibben, we are currently headed on a "trajectory ... for 3 or 4 degrees of warming. [At that point] we simply won't have a civilization like we do now" (Hussain 2019). The stakes, it seems, are quite high.

Could Our Lawns Save the World?

"Hope and the future for me are not in lawns" (Steinberg 2006, 201). – Henry David Thoreau

It is a little known fact that grasslands are amazing sinks for atmospheric carbon. But to understand this, we first must understand the differences between the lawn and the pasture. Michael Pollan writes, while visiting Joel Salatin's Polyface Farm, that:

Side-by-side comparisons of intensive and continuously grazed pastures have demonstrated that intensive grazing increases the diversity of species in pastures. That's because rotated cattle don't eliminate favored species by over grazing them and their equal-opportunity shearing ensures that no one species of grass ever dominates by rising to hog all the sunlight. This biodiversity confers a great many benefits to all parties. At the most fundamental level, it allows the farm's land to capture the maximum amount of solar energy, since one kind of photosynthesizer or another is occupying every conceivable niche – niches in spaces as well as time. For example, when the early season grasses slow down in June, the late season grasses step in, and when drought hits, the deep-rooted species will take over from the shallower ones. A diverse enough polyculture of grasses can withstand virtually any shock and in some places will produce in a year nearly as much total biomass as a forest receiving the same amount of rainfall (2007, 197).

In a polyculture such as this, the relationship between pasture management and climate mitigation is quite profound. Not only does the grazing of cattle turn otherwise unproductive land into land that can provide valuable food for one's family, it also captures atmospheric carbon. In the case of Polyface Farm,

Joel's pasture will, like his woodlots, remove thousands of pounds of carbon from the atmosphere each year; instead of sequestering all that carbon in trees, however, grasslands store most of it underground, in the form of soil humus. In fact, grassing over that portion of the world's cropland now being used to grow grain to feed ruminants would offset fossil fuel emissions appreciably (197-198).

Another solution could be, perhaps, the 'grazing over' of the world's lawns, by mowing as often as Joel lets his cattle feed. If you think this proposition is too radical, think back to the history of the lawn. For all of its power, the culture industry must always answer to the will of the American people. While advertisers have become quite adept at *shaping* culture, they cannot create it. The lawn has always responded first and foremost to the fears of the American people – whether they be the emancipation of African Americans, the frontier, or communism. Could we be entering into an age dominated by a new fear – a fear of climate change?

If we are, then change may not be as far out of reach as we may think. In today's politically divided landscape, saving the bees is an issue with strong bipartisan support. There is strong evidence for this in the White House, where, while Michelle Obama may have installed the first beehive, it was Mary Pence who publicized and expanded her predecessor's campaign (Harwood 2017). Transforming the American lawn may be the key to this movement, as "researchers [have] found that taking a 'lazy lawn mower' approach and mowing every two weeks rather than weekly can help encourage bee habitat in suburban lawns by allowing flowers to bloom" (Lerman 2018). This strategy would also allow for the kind of carbon sequestration seen in Joel's pastures to occur across our lawns. With this, we can look at our lawns in a new light, not as a useless landscape left unnoticed except when attention is required for maintenance, but as a place of bounty for the family, and as a valuable tool for fighting climate change – lying right in front of all of us.

The reason why most Americans do not take personal action on climate change is because they feel that “they cannot afford to” (Backus 2019). This reimagining of the lawn would empower people to fight climate change while also saving themselves time (less mowing) and even money (they could trade their lawnmower for a flock of chickens, and eat eggs for free). When it comes to the American lawn, the real question is not ‘can you afford to fight climate change?’ but ‘can you afford not to?’ Remember that, since its conception, the only time the lawn truly collapsed was underneath the weight of necessity triggered by the Great Depression. Well, it seems that in 2020 we are now living in a new Great Depression. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, there has been widespread job loss and business closures, which has led to “seed companies and indoor farming startups ... seeing increased demand as more people opt to grow their own food” (Settembre 2020). As Michael Pollan reminds us,

... if lawn mowing feels like copying the same sentence over and over, gardening is like writing out new ones, an infinitely variable process of invention and discovery. Gardens also teach the necessary if rather un-American lesson that nature and culture can be compromised, that there might be some middle ground between the lawn and the forest ... between those who would complete the conquest of the planet in the name of progress, and those who believe it’s time we abdicated our rule and left the Earth in the care of its more innocent species. The garden suggests there might be a place where we can meet nature half way (1989).

If the American lawn is cooked nature – nature “under culture’s boot” – the pasture could prove a more progressive alternative, one that solves our problems instead of creating them (Steinberg 2006, 195). Landscape architect Joan Iverson Nassauer believes it can, as she theorizes that most people do not want to see any *particular* kind of cooked nature, they simply want to see nature that has been conspicuously cared for, in some way (1995). The home meadow, grazed with one’s mower (or one’s chickens) and gardened with one’s trowel certainly fulfills this need for care as well as the current lawn aesthetic does.

Despite this opportunity, one should never be so naïve as to think that the lawn industry would simply accept such a radical change in business. Industry has a different vision for the

future – one that preaches not fear of climate change, but fear of climate refugees. As Jenkins writes,

Privacy is becoming the new status symbol in a society that is increasingly crowded. As homeowners perceive a breakdown in the social order and must live closer to their neighbors, they are turning inward. In urban areas, fences go up around front lawns to keep the homeless from defecating on them. New walled suburban developments have gates and guard houses (1994, 187).

Instead of feeling as though ‘we are all in this together,’ Americans will increasingly be encouraged to take a hyper-individualistic view of the world, one in which the lawn may be seen as a trusty moat around their ever-crumbling castles. It is also important to know that, because a lawn is the cheapest way to beautify a new home for sale, “turf still rules in the speculative world of real estate capitalism” (Steinberg 2006, 190). In other words, “more people are *becoming lawn people* all the time” (Robbins 2012, 131). Further still, one must recognize that the next phase of the industrial lawn is already underway. Robbins comments on the problematic integration of genetically modified organisms into the lawn:

By genetically producing grasses that are immune to the effects of the currently more effective and useful herbicide(s) available, the likelihood of future weediness of these species is nearly assured. Beyond the potential harm that such an unchecked species might cause for local ecologies, the promulgation of such grasses assures the demand for continued innovation, production, and sale of *new chemical formulations* to control the species rendered uncontrollable through genetic engineering. This circle of ecological adaptation and ecological intervention is a familiar one in the history of the agro-chemical industry (60).

So, it seems we stand at a crossroads. On one path we see a future in which our impending ecological Armageddon unites the world as a community, bringing the economy back into the household by ushering in a new age of citizen gardeners and protecting the world’s remaining species through the ecological resiliency of grassy polycultures. On the other path we see the culture industry herald privacy as a new gospel, closing permanently the borders of the

developed world from the more climate-vulnerable developing countries, leaving them to suffer alone for our actions. Under this path we will be told that every American is an island, and that through technocratic usage of GMO's we can weather the storm of Gaia's revenge without ever deviating from our endless uninhibited consumption. The continuance of this dangerous illusion – and it is an illusion, of course – would bring the worst possible climate scenarios into reality, scarring the Earth for millennia after we are gone.

In all likelihood, both of these scenarios, to some degree, will occur in parallel. American society is not a monoculture, and some will adopt the path of community resiliency while others adopt the path of privacy. At the end of *Lawn People*, Paul Robbins offers this:

Happily, neither can [the lawn] nor [our visions of ourselves] be totally controlled, directed, anticipated, or foreseen; not subject to some sovereign power, some master plan because there are too many players, too many surprises. Influencing the 'objects' all around us may indeed be the easiest way to change ourselves. It might seem like an odd conclusion, both freeing and frightening, to suggest that the world is both profoundly structured but also totally malleable, that no one is driving this train and that it has no track, but this is exactly what the lawn suggests. Unthinking the lawn is only the beginning, it seems. So we really ought to start now (138).

It is easy to forget that while we cannot change the past, the future is always still undetermined. So now – at the eve of this great ecological challenge – is not the time to abandon hope. But it is also not the time to put our hope in the hands of politicians, scientists, and businessmen who say they are 'handling everything.' It is important to remember that celebrities are some of the more resource-rich people on the Earth, people who can truly be 'islands' in a climate-changed world. If we want to make any real attempt at ending climate change, it must be by altering the world we can control. And that world lies right outside our doorsteps, in the form of a boring little patch of turfgrass. Now is the time to put down the weedeater and take up the trowel, because human existence may truly depend on it.

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