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Assets and Assemblage in the Global Countryside

In the north-western corner of Tasmania lies the 22,000 hectare Woolnorth property, the largest dairy farm in the southern hemisphere. In 2016, Woolnorth was acquired by Moon Lake Investments, a company owned by a Chinese window-blind manufacturer with no prior experience of farming, for AUS\$220m (US\$170m). The sale was controversial, provoking outrage in the Australian press, questions in parliament and a counter-bid led by a Tasmanian entrepreneur. Yet, for many local residents, the transaction was business as normal for Woolnorth, a property that had always been in foreign, corporate ownership.

The case of Woolnorth, which I encountered in research on globalization and rural localities (Woods, 2021), repeatedly came to mind as I read Stefan Ouma's compelling study of farmland financialization, *Farming as Financial Asset*. Ouma's forensic analysis of the structures and practices through which agricultural asset management is operationalized resonated with the story of Woolnorth, but more than that it provided an insight into the opaque world of global finance that sat behind the Woolnorth case and by extension into the role that finance plays in producing the contemporary global countryside.

Transnational land investments are a distinctive and contentious feature of twenty-first century globalization and financialization is an important driver of the trend, as documented in a burgeoning academic literature. Ouma departs from this literature, critically noting challenges of restricted historical and geographical perspectives and limited engagements with the politics of data and questions of how the agri-focused financial industry works in practice. For instance, he critiques the 'restricted historical optic' of much work on financialization and counters with a scholarly exposition of the significance of financial investment in farmland to colonialism through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In places such as Woolnorth – 'established' in 1823 by the Van Dieman's Land Company formed by gentlemen London investors – colonization and development as a European-style agricultural landscape owed less to raw imperialism than to 'the transformative, and often state-backed, powers of globalized financial relations' (Ouma, 2020: 42).

Yet, evidence of historical continuity is not deployed by Ouma to present contemporary land investment as neo-colonialism, as argued in some elements of the 'land-grabbing' literature. Rather, Ouma traces the evolution of modern agri-focused financialization through bubbles of domestic farmland investment in 1960s United States and 1970s Britain to the post-2008 'global land rush'. From this perspective, transnational land investment is an expression of capitalist, more than colonialist, logic, with modern industry practices reflecting the refinement of strategies to extract the dual capital and income-generating value of land as an asset.

Along the way, agricultural land has become an institutional asset, acquired and managed by financial institutions for the purpose of delivering profits to their array of investors. Indeed, farmland investment

could be considered to have ‘gone global’ in more than one sense: through spatial reach, but also as a universal practice, involving millions of private pension-holders, bank customers, and small-time investors. The effect is to further increase the density of transnational connections, linking not only institutions and land, but Canadian teachers with dairy farms in New Zealand, or in an anecdote recounted by Ouma, retired German doctors with deforestation Brazil, in ways that are not commonly known to the individuals concerned. Even the vendors of Woolnorth in 2016 were ultimately the citizens of a New Zealand city, whose council’s investment arm had acquired the Van Dieman’s Land Company in 1993 after decades of private ownership by wealthy individuals and families.

The relative invisibility of global finance in farmland makes it one of the most insidious dimensions of contemporary globalization. There is a lack of detailed, comprehensive data on investments in farmland, and the opaque character of the asset management industry obscures the dynamics of capital flows and ownership that sit behind it. Ouma tackles both these issues, articulating a powerful critique of data availability and data politics, and shedding light on the workings of asset management through painstaking ethnographic and analytical research. Through the latter, Ouma documents how transnational networks of farmland financialization are assembled, and whilst he eschews the language of assemblage in this volume there are evident resonances with his earlier research on assembling agricultural export markets (Ouma, 2015) as well as with Tania Murray Li’s work on the global land assemblage (Li 2014). In the process, Ouma grounds and de-reifies financialization, revealing it to be the outcome of the contingent interactions, calculations, decisions and actions of individuals located in specific places. Among the many notable insights is that some of the most significant challenges to speculation in farmland have come not from regulators or social movements, but from sceptical voices within the asset management industry.

However, the relatively invisibility of farmland financialization also takes more material form in relation to its presence in the landscape. The ownership of farmland is not commonly advertised with signs or notices (the Woolnorth property being an exception), and the transfer of land between one corporate owner and another does not necessarily lead to changes the style or type of farming or the appearance of the landscape. Although Ouma riffs on the dual meaning of ‘institutional landscapes’ – as the material superficial form of farmland as well as the metaphorical ‘landscape’ constituted by corporations, funds and organizations – and although he describes diverse management strategies adopted by institutional investors that involve varying degrees of modification to farming practice, the material dimensions of the farmland investment assemblage are comparatively underplayed in this study. This could be read as an omission, but it can also be viewed as an opportunity to connect Ouma’s analysis with more materially-focused approaches in rural studies, political ecology and economic geography, to mutual benefit.

For instance, from a more explicitly Deleuzian or DeLanda assemblage perspective, such as that employed in our research on the global countryside, investment capital can be understood as an ‘assemblage converter’ (Bennett, 2010; Woods et al., 2021), a critical component that brings other components together and reconfigures them to achieve transformation in the properties and capacities of the assemblage as a whole. Yet, the processes by which capital comes to be attached to an assemblage can be difficult to grasp. Ouma accordingly adds value to such analyses by opening up the ‘black-box’ of investment capital, revealing the assemblage of the asset management industry that sits behind it and dynamics of translation and coding that are intrinsic to its operation. At the same time, an assemblage analysis can add value to Ouma’s study by emphasizing the material elements that facilitate farmland investment, or act as a constraint on it. These include not only the fences, walls, roads, buildings, machinery, chemicals and so on that enable the enclosure and exploitation of land for agriculture, but also the technologies that translate land and its agricultural productivity into ‘immutable mobiles’ (Latour, 2005) communicated as data back to investors and asset managers to inform their decision-making. Moreover, the value of farmland as an asset is contingent on other material assemblages that connect it to markets for the commodities produced. The attractiveness of New Zealand for farmland investment, detailed by Ouma, has been closely tied to the expansion of its dairying industry, driven by demand from China, but enacted through the introduction or conversion of material components including processing plants, ships, enhanced port facilities, strengthened roads, electricity cables, milking sheds and irrigation systems. Similarly, the appreciation in value of Woolnorth as an asset of New Plymouth Council’s investment fund was assisted by the introduction of the same material components as its management company converted the property from sheep-farming to dairying; whilst Moon Lake Investments’ interest in 2016 was contingent on these pre-existing facilities but also accessibility to the external infrastructure of processing plants, roads and airports that enabled its project of exporting fresh milk to China.

Failures of these material components can compromise the value of farmland as an asset, but so can disputes around the meanings represented by and attached to land assemblages, referred to in assemblage thinking as expressive components. Promotional materials for some land investment opportunities can dress up schemes as altruistic rural development, conservation, or food security projects, supported by photographs of smiling local communities, just as the environmental impacts of other schemes may be challenged by activist members of pension funds. Local receptions to farmland investments may equally be conditioned by differential responses to domestic and international capital, or to different types of investors. Ouma describes hostility to Chinese land investments in New Zealand (which arguably overstates their significance relative to the scale of US or European investments that are rarely contested) and political opposition to Moon Lake’s acquisition of Woolnorth contrasted with the absence of controversy attached to its long line of previous foreign owners. The alternative consortium of Australian investors assembled to compete with Moon Lake drew on sinophobic

sentiments, but significantly also outlined a vision for rewilding parts of Woolnorth, foreshadowing Ouma's call to explore "the potential for harnessing the massive amounts of financial wealth accumulated in the present for greener and more just food futures" (p 179). Yet, tellingly, local residents backed Moon Lake, precisely because its plans more closely reflected an enduring frontier discourse of taming nature and using land productively.

The politics of land in the global countryside are complex and multi-faceted and require multiple strategies for analysis. As such, Ouma's rich and thought-provoking study is a valuable and welcome addition to the research armory.

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