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Out of Place and Out of Time: Queering the Polish Countryside in the Work of Adam Łucki

Abstract: The text discusses the work of the Polish artist Adam Łucki in the context of the "rural turn" in queer studies and visual arts. Referring to the notion of "metronormativity" and the American discourse of the "anti-idyll," I examine how these concepts can be applied to discuss the Polish rural queer experience and cultural constructions of the Polish countryside. In my interpretation of Łucki's work, I argue that visual practices engaged in queering the countryside work against existing stereotypical perceptions of the rural space as backward and hostile. I also show how, in Łucki's artistic practice, the countryside as a space and the rural as a temporal construct become symbolically decolonised through a performative queer appropriation.

Keywords: Adam Łucki, Polish countryside, rural queer, performing whiteness, queering history

Introduction

In a recent discussion of the European Social Survey and its results regarding the perception of LGBTQ+ communities in rural areas, it has been emphasised that the majority (52 per cent) of rural population in Poland declare positive attitudes to LGBTQ+ people, which clearly contrasts with the common perception of the Polish countryside as uniformly hostile and intolerant.[1] The results of the survey, although interpreted as marking a positive change, suggest nevertheless that the experience of being queer in the Polish countryside might and often is difficult, as confirmed by numerous accounts and recently published texts and documentary programmes.[2] The nature of these difficulties has been discussed by

1. Europejski Sondaż Społeczny, 3.02.2023, https://ess.ifispan.pl/pierwsze-wyniki-10-rundy-europejskiego-sondazu-spolecznego/ (12.11.2023).

2. See, for example: *Niewidoczne (dla) społeczności. Sytuacja społeczna lesbijek i kobiet biseksualnych mieszkających na terenach wiejskich i w małych miastach w Polsce. Raport z badań*,

and in reference to one of the most well-known Polish visual artists who address the issue of being queer in the Polish countryside, Daniel Rycharski. Rycharski's commitment to fighting homophobia through his work has lent him the status of *the* advocate of queer rights in non-urban Poland. However, as Adam Bodnar aptly notes, Rycharski did not capitalise on his status of a "victimised village gay artist" or develop his career merely by telling stories of rural backwardness and homophobia. Instead, he came back to his home village of Kurówko to continue working with the local community. Bodnar interprets this as a sign that, in Rycharski's view, there is more at stake than LGBTQ+ rights: "This is the fight for the identity of the Polish countryside and for its recognition on the Polish cultural and social map."[3] Although this text discusses how the issue of being queer in rural Poland has been addressed in visual arts in recent years, I will not examine the work of Rycharski, whose artistic practice has been extensively analysed in reference to issues such as Catholic religiosity, LGBTQ+ visibility, and community arts, among others.[4] My reference point will be the work of Adam Łucki, a visual artist and scenographer, whose multimedia practice plays with the stereotypical imagery of Polish rural space, addressing Polish rural history, personal identity, as well as issues of gender, class, and belonging. Łucki's work will help me argue that visual practices engaged in queering the countryside can be read as doing more than articulating the need for increased LGBTQ+ visibility and equality in rural areas in that they simultaneously work against existing stereotypical perceptions of the rural space as backward and hostile. Drawing on recent studies on how discourses of class and race informed the construction of Polish rural space, I will also show how, in Łucki's practice, the countryside as a space and the rural as a temporal construct become symbolically decolonised through a performative queer appropriation.

Metronormativity and the Discourse of the Anti-idyll

In *Queer Bodies and the Production of Space*, Gill Valentine traces the early research on "gay ghettos," which linked their emergence to "prejudice and bigotry" of small towns and painted "a bleak picture" of gay life in rural Ame-

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ed. Justyna Struzik and Ewa Furgał (Szczawnica: Fundacja Przestrzeń Kobiet, 2012); *Queer w małym mieście*, dir. Tomasz-Marcin Wrona, TVN24, 12.08.2023, https://tvn24.pl/go/programy,7/tylko-w-tvn24-go-odcinki,283316/odcinek-3185,S00E3185,1134292 (12.11.2023).

3. Adam Bodnar, "Kościół, LGBT, Wieś, Dialog," *na:Temat*, 9.11.2021, https://natemat.pl/383253,adam-bodnar-z-tym-kosciolem-jaki-by-nie-byl-trzeba-wspolpracowac (12.11.2023).

4. See, for example: *Daniel Rycharski. Strachy. Wybrane działania 2008–2019*, ed. Szymon Maliborski (Warszawa: Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, 2019); Weronika Plińska, *Sprawczość sztuki* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, 2021), 139–160.

rica.[5] In 1995, Kath Weston compelled gay men and women to "get thee to a big city" as a recourse from the pressures of hostile rural society.[6] This way, Valentine summarises, "the urban/rural dichotomy" was constructed as "crucial to making sense of lesbian and gay identities."[7] It became particularly important as a foundation for personal "coming out" stories, structured around the "closet-to-out," country to city trajectory.[8] As Katherine Schweighofer contends, "This narrative also provides structure and connection for lesbian and gay lives, grounding them in ritual and history."[9] The focus on urban space as *the locus* of queer culture and community had far-reaching and long-lasting consequences, also for queer studies as a discipline. In *Men Like That*, John Howard argues that the urban bias of queer historiography produced histories that mirror urban history.[10] In 2005, Judith Halberstam famously described this urban-orientated framework as "metronormativity."[11] Since then, queer scholarship sought to expand the geographically limited scope of research and question the validity of the urban versus rural dichotomy. Scott Herring, for instance, called for a "queer anti-urbanism," proposing a rural turn not only as a shift in academic interest, but also as a reorientation and revision of theoretical foundations of queer studies that he criticised as too eager to become "urban planning, even as so much of its theoretical architecture is already urban planned."[12] Metronormativity as a hegemonic discourse establishes and maintains the lack of visibility of rural queers because "the absence of visibility is required as a structural component of metronormativity."[13] The rural has been constructed as the absence of visibility, but, even more so, as a space where queer life is altogether impossible. By that I do not imply what Herring called

5. Gill Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space," in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, ed. Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (London–Thousand Oaks–New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 146.

6. Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2 (1995), 253–277.

7. Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space," 145.

8. Katherine Schweighofer, "Rethinking the Closet: Queer Life in Rural Geographies," in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, ed. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley (New York–London: New York University Press, 2016), 227.

9. Schweighofer, "Rethinking the Closet," 227.

10. John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12.

11. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York–London: New York University Press, 2005), 36–38.

12. Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York–London: New York University Press, 2010), 5.

13. Colin R. Johnson, Brian J. Gillery, and Mary L. Gray, "Introduction," in *Queering the Countryside*, 14.

"a queer form of social death."[14] I refer to what Stina Soderling has suggested in reference to the debate around the notorious cases of murders of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard: "In urban-centred queer theorisations of time, the rural is the end, the space-time of death. [...] Those who are stupid enough to not leave for the city are to blame for their own death."[15]

Voicing the tenets of the recent rural turn in queer studies, Colin R. Johnson, Brian J. Gillery, and Mary L. Gray suggest that the urban/rural binary requires thorough examination and deconstruction:

> This structure, despite being inadequate for describing queer rural lives, masks the ways in which the imaginary of urban gay emancipation and the imaginary of a heteropatriarchal rural life co-construct one another. [...] Co-constructed imaginaries allow each pole of geographically queer distance to 'otherly' reify one another.[16]

Numerous studies on queer rural history emphasise that the reified rural space came to be conceived as temporally fixed, but also geographically undifferentiated.[17] Despite its much greater physical diversity than that of any city, the binary optic renders the rural homogenous. Johnson, Gillery, and Gray argue that the urban/rural dichotomy made rural space problematic (even queer) both as a term and a geographical entity: "It is simultaneously everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. It is ever-present and yet a thing of the past."[18]

Metronormativity is, certainly, hardly restricted to queer studies and queer culture. Modernity, both as an international Western project and in its local national variants (with few notable exceptions) was generally urban-based and urban focused. Significantly, denigrating depictions of the countryside, fixated on that which is taken as token of its backwardness and moral corruption, crystallise with the advancement of modernity. In his book, *Peculiar Places*, Ryan Lee Cartwright expands on the notion of the "anti-idyll," proposed by David Bell in his essay on "rural horror" films,[19]

14. Herring, *Another Country*, 1.

15. Stina Soderling, "Queer Rurality and the Materiality of Time," in *Queering the Countryside*, 343.

16. Johnson, Gillery, and Gray, "Introduction," 12.

17. See the critique of the treatment of rural space as geographically and socially homogenous in: Colin R. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 18; Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York–London: New York University Press, 2009), 89; Carly Thomsen, *Visibility Interrupted: Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 132.

18. Johnson, Gillery, and Gray, "Introduction," 4.

19. David Bell, "Anti-Idyll: Rural Horror," in *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, ed. Paul Cloke and Jo Little (London–New York: Routledge, 1997), 93–104.

locates the early manifestations of the American anti-idyllic discourse around 1900, when "that trope became a national and nationalising discourse," and defines it as a "long-standing cultural trope and social optic that produces tales of white rural nonconformity."[20] Cartwright investigates a plethora of texts and images produced over the course of the 20th century, discussing the eugenic family studies of the 1910s, the 1930s photography documenting the rural poor, media coverage of serial killings in the 1950s, the 1970s "backwoods horror" films, and the 1990s documentary filmmaking. Although some of the materials discussed by Cartwright were produced out of philanthropic concerns, the author emphasises the specific type of lens used to present the countryside and its inhabitants: "an optic, a way of looking at white rural nonconformity with an estranged and sensationalising perspective."[21] While many of the narratives and visual works discussed in the book were based on factual events, the anti-idyllic discourse re-tells them as manifestations of the inherent characteristics of rural life, rather than individual, exceptional occurrences. As Cartwright summarises: "The anti-idyll distorts by degrading or degenerating, while the idyll distorts by idealising or romanticising."[22]

The Rural Turn in Visual Arts and the Queer Space of the Polish Countryside

Although admittedly different in their historic scope, employed media, and cultural implications, idyllic and anti-idyllic depictions of rural space in Poland have been as powerful in their impact as their American counterparts. In Poland, the discourse of the anti-idyll has been as persistent as its pastoral romantic reverse – the ideal of the countryside as the *locus* of Polishness. The anti-idyllic discourse has recently been the subject of debates that addressed its diverse manifestations in contemporary culture, from the denigrating slurs used in everyday language (interpreted as a sign of anti-rural bias or "chamofobia"[23]), through analyses of political sympathies and their geographical determinants, to the reception of cinematic depictions of rural and small-town life, for example, Wojciech Smarzowski's *Wesele*, 2004, or recent backwoods horror *W lesie dziś nie zaśnie nikt* (dir. Bartosz Kowalski, 2020). We have also seen a significant

20. Ryan Lee Cartwright, *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 4.

21. Cartwright, *Peculiar Places*, 17.

22. Cartwright, *Peculiar Places*, 17.

23. See "Chamofobia: debata Kontaktu," *Magazyn Kontakt*, 23.09.2013, https://magazynkontakt.pl/chamofobia-debata-kontaktu/ (12.11.2023).

development of rural social historiography and rural anthropology, coinciding with what has been called the "rural turn" in visual arts, popular culture, design, and architecture, which is part of a more global trend.[24] Interestingly, rural studies as a discipline underwent a shift as well. In their introduction to the volume *Contested Countryside Cultures*, Paul Cloke and Jo Little emphasise a significant shift in rural studies, particularly in the discipline's growing interest into the rural as a subject for investigating geographies of difference and otherness. This shift, they argue, came with a methodological change as well, whereby "scholars have moved from a fetishism with numeric data towards the interpretation of a kaleidoscope of different texts. There is now a more marked fascination with the imaginary texts of novels, paintings, photographs, films, television and radio."[25]

In what follows, I discuss the work of Adam Łucki, arguing that his artistic practice both reflects the rural turn in visual arts and queer studies, as well as proposes a perspective on the Polish countryside that reimagines it as a space of intersection of different temporalities and identities.[26] Recent solo exhibitions of Łucki's work, primarily *Twoje reguły czynią mnie drugim* [Your Rules Make Me the Other] at Kronika Gallery in Bytom (curated by Agata Cukierska and Katarzyna Kalina, 19.06.–6.08.2021) and *Chcem do pałacu* at BWA Gallery in Zielona Góra (25.08.–1.09.2020), featured multimedia works that problematise the issues of personal memory, childhood fantasies, environmental concerns, as well as alienation and discrimination experienced at school. In these shows, working with media such as painting, found object, fabrics and embroidery, installation and video, Łucki spins a narrative that is both poignant in its citation of homophobic slurs and recollection of schooltime traumas (*Ściana wotywna/Pedalska hołota* [Votive Wall/Faggot Scum], 2021, *Nasza klasa* [Our Class], 2021), as well as ironically detached in its camp treatment of childhood fantasies (*Pokój matki* [Mother's Room] 2020–2021, *Sleeping Beauty*, 2021) and rural landscape (*Bizon "Super"-Z-056*, 2021). Connecting issues and images seemingly unrelated, Łucki's work raises questions that avoid straightforward answers. He offers a scathing critique of rural homophobia, but also "appropriates" rural past and playfully reinvents himself as a nobleman and a registered arable farmer (*Adopcja herbowa* [Heraldic Adoption, 2020]). Employing the aesthetic strategies of high and low camp, he addresses

24. Agnieszka Sural, "Artists Turn to the Rural: An Interview with Maria Lind," *Culture.pl*, 2.09.2016, https://culture.pl/en/article/artists-turn-to-the-rural-an-interview-with-maria-lind (12.11.2023).

25. Paul Cloke and Jo Little, "Introduction: Other Countrysides?," in *Contested Countryside Cultures*, 3.

26. Łucki discusses an actual "rural turn" in his biography, consisting in moving to an idyllic countryside location, in an interview, see: Paweł Wątroba, "Dwa koguty na jednym gnoju," *Replika*, no. 94 (November/December 2021), 48–51.

the anti-idyllic, hostile aspects of rural space, yet, at the same time, reimagines it as an idyllic queer paradise. This is most emphatically pronounced in a video work titled *Happy Happy* (2021), on show at both above-mentioned exhibitions.

An exhibition guide, published on the occasion of the exhibition at Kronika Gallery, suggests that *Happy Happy* tells the story of a boy who lives in a small house in the countryside. Through the power of imagination and due to the lack of access to historical documents pertaining to his family's life in the south-eastern Polish borderland, he pretends to be the reincarnation of the entire family line of Georg Wenzeslaus Baron von Knobelsdorff (1699–1753), a renowned Prussian painter and architect born in Kuckädel, now Kukadło in Krosno Odrzańskie County in Poland (where Łucki was born as well). In the video, the protagonist, dressed in a variety of historical attires, wearing wigs and make-up, engages in typical farm work, spreading manure, scrubbing floors, and mowing the lawn, convinced at the same time that he is reliving his imagined predecessors' aristocratic life filled with parties, dancing, and cultured entertainment (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Adam Łucki, *Happy Happy*, 2021, video still. By kind permission of the artist

The space – the interior of a ruined mansion and its surroundings – is visibly contemporary, although it contains vaguely historic elements. While the protagonist's meticulous wardrobe and make-up root him (them) in the past, his surroundings are visibly of today. Although the objects – such as rakes, metal buckets, fences, and sheds – are traditional rather than technologically advanced, there is no doubt that the staging of the scene is intentionally historically inaccurate, as suggested by the presence of unmistakably modern inventions, such

as rubber gloves, plastic bowls, fashionable wellington boots, trainers, as well as modern gardening tools and mechanical equipment (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Adam Łucki, *Happy Happy*, 2021, video still. By kind permission of the artist

Dressed in both male and female clothing, wigs and hats, with his face covered in make-up, the artist/protagonist either engages in activities typical for rural life, such as preparing food and tending farm animals, or poses as if he was taking a momentary respite from these activities (fig. 3). All these efforts of tending the land and maintaining the household seem, however, weirdly inept, indeed, quite grotesquely clumsy.

Fig. 3. Adam Łucki, *Happy Happy*, 2021, video still. By kind permission of the artist

Dressed in 18th-century pantaloons and modern wellington boots, sporting a powdered wig and heavy make-up, one fake Knobelsdorff (male) fervently wields a petrol brushcutter without cutting anything (fig. 2). Another (female) uses pruning scissors on a stick-made fence that does not seem to need cutting. She is not making much effort either, casually smoking a cigarette and clearly feigning her interest in gardening (fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Adam Łucki, *Happy Happy*, 2021, video still. By kind permission of the artist

This playful but studied ineptitude suggests what Halberstam called "the queer art of failure," which offers an escape from "the punishing norms" meant to discipline bodies and deliver them from "unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods."[27] In the context of rural landscape and its cultivation, it can also be read as a queer engagement with the garden as a symbolic marker of ownership and belonging. From the picturesque landscape garden to a small-scale lawn-covered patch, the garden has been a potent symbol of nationhood articulated through class-restricted access to land. Because of this potential it has served as a reference point or material for artistic practices that problematised issues of space and identity.[28] In Łucki's work, the characters' impersonation of the landowners is motivated by the artist's desire to imagine the access to rural space as legitimate and "natural," secured by inheritance and genealogy. However, the way this access is played out in the video, with the characters having only

27. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

28. See, for example, the famous landscaping project of Derek Jarman, whose garden is a playful camp eulogy on nature, queerness, illness, and decay.

a vague idea of how to tend their inherited land, questions the very idea of land ownership as legitimate. This is further enhanced through the above-mentioned aspect of historical inaccuracy. The props in the video are not "out of place" in an agricultural setting, but they are visibly "out of time." So are the activities of the Knobelsdorffs, whose ownership of the land, in actual historical circumstances, would not entail the necessity of any physical work. The fact that Łucki's characters fail to perform their status as landowners accurately highlights an important aspect of the relationship between land ownership and agricultural labour in the past: those who owned the land did not have to work it. For them, rural life was a means through which they exercised their political and economic power, not a hands-on experience.

In *Happy Happy*, the subversive treatment of the pastoral theme is established on the formal level as well, particularly through the use of the colour palette of faded brown, yellow, and green. The earthy tones are not employed here to evoke a pastoral atmosphere of harmonious cooperation with nature. The effect is contrary – that of dirt and decay. It is enhanced by the presence of multiple other elements, such as dilapidated farm buildings, general squalor of their surroundings, mud, and manure. The characters' enthusiasm contrasts with their incompetence, while their attempted refinement quickly gives way to crudeness. Employing the aesthetic devices of low camp, such as unsophisticated artificiality and bad taste, as well as that which is rejected as base and abject (mud, dirt, excrement, food waste), to express social critique of class distinctions,[29] the artist constructs a queer space-time where the idyllic and the anti-idyllic connect and disintegrate.

However, the engagement of Łucki's protagonists in activities related to tending the land and agricultural production can be read as an act of queering rural space as much as a queer intervention into rural time. Significantly, while rural time has been theorised as based on circularity and linearity – reflecting seasonal repetitive agricultural work and genealogy and inheritance respectively – queer time falls out of linear temporality as it falls out of heteronormative generational ideology of continuance and inheritance. Elizabeth Freeman suggests that queer time "emerged from within, alongside, and beyond [the] heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress, intimacy and genealogy."[30] Mary Pat Brady adds that since "racialisation and gendering are deeply invested in multiple

29. Chuck Kleinhans, "Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London–New York: Routledge, 1994), 163. See also the discussion of the sources and the first definitions of low camp in: Fabio Cleto, "Introduction: Queering the Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 12.

30. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

temporalities […] to undo their repressive effects, a queer engagement must run afoul of linear time."[31] In my reading, Łucki's engagement not so much with the rural space of the here and now, but with the (imagined) rural space of the past does exactly that – it puts linear time out of joint, rendering any spatial or temporal homogeneity of rural space impossible. Neither idyllic nor dystopian, this vision of the countryside imagines a queer time and space where questions about history, identity, class, and land intersect.

Performing Whiteness in the Polish Countryside

While Łucki's *Happy Happy* can be primarily read as a performative queer appropriation of rural space and an imaginative journey recapturing both personal and collective temporalities, I would like to argue that equally important in this work are its distinct references to issues of class and race. In the video, the artist impersonates members of Baron von Knobelsdorff's family – representatives of several generations living approximately in the 17th and the 18th century. Although of Prussian origin, the Knobelsdorff family does not offer access to the German identity, but rather serves as a vehicle for the artist's imaginary search for his roots, a substitute for his lost family history that possibly links him to the Polish eastern borderland nobility. In what follows, I will focus then primarily on the Polish rural space, insisting that this is the reference point of Łucki's work, as suggested by its staging as part of exhibitions addressing the artist's experience of living in the Polish countryside.

Significantly, in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the period between the late 16th and late 18th century marked the hight point of feudal economy based on serfdom and the development of the Sarmatian ideology which, in a proto-racist way, proclaimed the ethnic difference between peasants and nobility, as well as promoted the image of the nobility as descendants of nomadic conquerors who colonised the local agrarian population. As Przemysław Wielgosz argues, the very term used to define peasantry ["chłop"], etymologically related to the Ruthenian "chołop" denoting a slave, became widespread exactly when the peasant unpaid labour obligations increased, and the peasant subaltern status was normalised through Biblical references to Ham and a protoversion of ethnography.[32] Biblical and *quasi*-ethnographic arguments coupled in Walerian Nekanda Trepka's 1626 *Liber Chamorum*, where the author identified "peasant features" in people

31. Mary Pat Brady, "The Waiting Arms of Gold Street: Manuel Munoz's *Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* and the Problem of the Scaffold Imaginary," in *Queering the Countryside*, 113.

32. Przemysław Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy. Jak kapitalizm dzieli, by rządzić* (Kraków: Karakter, 2021), 47.

whom he considered to be "fake nobility."[33] In partitioned Poland, in 1858, Józef Mączyński described Polish peasants as living "outside of history," claiming that cultural stagnation resulted in racial difference.[34] Racialisation of Polish peasantry was common among the rural and urban elites commenting on the events of the Galician Peasant Uprising of 1846, who expressed their terror at what they regarded as the ultimate cause of the revolt: the masses of mindless and murderous peasants that they called "blackness" [czerniawa]. Wielgosz emphasises that not all but only the rebellious, blood-thirsty, rights-demanding peasants were identified as the "black mass."[35] Quoting Russian nobility, who claimed their peasant subjects had black bones, and referring to how the Polish nobility described the peasantry (particularly their subjects in eastern parts of the Commonwealth that are now Ukraine and Belarus) as having dark and thick skin, Wielgosz suggests that the identification of blackness with moral inferiority and ethnic difference seems to have its roots in Eastern Europe.[36]

Parallel with the construction of blackness comes the process of inventing whiteness as a signifier of social and moral superiority. Indeed, in Enlightenment Europe, the Black becomes a necessary "Other" for early national self-identification, even in states that are not directly involved in colonisation and slavery.[37] Whiteness comes into being not only through the making of blackness as its binary opposite, but also through discursive and performative practices. In *Staging Whiteness*, Mary F. Brewer writes that:

> The controlling images that regulate White identity, and those identities racialised as "other" within the terms of White discourse, emerge from within historical representational structures that include theatrical models embracing elements of fantasy and projection. Thus, raced identities have a performative nature, and one can say that there is something inherently theatrical about Whiteness.[38]

Dating back to Pygmalion's identification of whiteness with beauty and virtue in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the conception of snow-white face as an aesthetic and moral ideal was widespread in the 18th century. In her analysis of 18th-century portraiture, Angela Rosenthal suggests that moral purity and innocence were

33. Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy*, 49.
34. Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy*, 50.
35. Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy*, 30.
36. Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy*, 56.
37. See the discussion on the role of Blackness in 18th-century Germany in: Wendy Sutherland, *Staging Blackness and Performing Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century German Drama* (London–New York: Routledge, 2016).
38. Mary F. Brewer, *Staging Whiteness* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), xiv.

represented by highlighting white women's ability to blush, hence the use of soft pink underpaint by painters such as Allan Ramsey.[39] From mid- to late 18th century the female sitters appear almost colourless except for intensely rosy cheeks.[40] Emerging in the midst of the clashing campaigns pro and against abolition, this aesthetic ideal of whiteness intersects with racial discourses. White blushing skin is considered "talkative," even picturesque, and contrasted with "mute" black skin, whose "inability" to blush is read as an aesthetic flaw and an "external sign of internal failure."[41] With the widespread use of cosmetics, particularly powder and blusher (or *blanc* and *rouge*), the moment of blushing, praised as the physical manifestation of embodied white female virtue, is converted into a permanent feature. Thus, the face is no longer "legible" as a mirror of emotions, while its blushing whiteness becomes a mask.[42]

The act of performing whiteness through make-up takes on a relatively different form in the context of East-Central Europe, where the construction of "blackness" was much more class related and engaged discourses and practices effectively "othering" erstwhile free citizens of the same country. However, as Jan Sowa suggested, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the 16th to the late 18th century, in its political and economic structure, resembled a colonial enterprise (which he mockingly termed the Polish Borderland Company), while its system of serfdom was not identical to but definitely comparable to colonial slavery.[43] Owners of self-governing semi-plantations, great aristocratic families but also less affluent nobility, exercised their power by right of access to the elite social group whose cultural and biological (ethnic) difference needed constant re-enactment. Hence, the seats of the nobility, "the white country mansions in the sea of black," as Wielgosz calls them, were decorated with family portraits testifying to the noble lineage, bodies were dressed, and faces made-up.

In Łucki's *Happy Happy*, the act of dressing the body and painting the face to gain phantasmatic access to the family line of Baron von Knobelsdorff can be read as a queer appropriation of the past, but also as a re-enacted performance of whiteness. In the video work, the artist shows his protagonists engaged in

39. Angela Rosenthal, "Visceral Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century British Portraiture," *Art History* 27, no. 4 (2004), 572.

40. Rosenthal, "Visceral Culture," 576.

41. Rosenthal, "Visceral Culture," 575–583.

42. In early modern Europe cosmetics were widely used but also considered ambiguous in that they "exposed colour as an unreliable (yet often still desirable) marker of race, class, and moral truth." See: Kimberly Poitevin, "Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race, and Women in Early Modern England," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011), 59–89.

43. Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 327.

activities such as cooking and cleaning, but he also offers their portrait-like stills recording how they practice their facial expressions, adjust their wigs, and strike nobility-like poses, as if uncertain whether their "aristocratic look" is convincing enough (fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Adam Łucki, *Happy Happy*, 2021, video still. By kind permission of the artist

Although himself a white male, he paints his face white and blushed according to the period's fashion, historicising it but also making it palpably mask-like, contrived. In recent literature, performed whiteness has been shown to play many functions, from the imposition of the cultural norm in cinema[44] to an articulation of critique in black performance.[45] "Whiteface" as a mask is a tool used to express critique of race, class, and gender constructions. In Łucki's work it is employed in exactly this role, subverting the white heterosexual nobility's claim to the symbolic and material power over rural time and space and peasant bodies. In the film's symbolic *denouement* each of the characters wipes clean their aristocratic whiteface, revealing the same face underneath (fig. 6).

44. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

45. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014).

Fig. 6. Adam Łucki, *Happy Happy*, 2021, video still. By kind permission of the artist

The artist's smirk seems to comment on what the viewers must have known all along: that it was all a masquerade, that both the nobles from the past and the present nostalgic country-life revivalists are impostors in equal measure. The artist does not *really* want to be like the Knobelsdorffs, exercising brutal power over land, animals, people, and history. Instead, he proposes a vision of the past as a joyful and queer failure. He seems to suggest that rural past and rural space can only be claimed as one's own if they are first exposed as phantasmatic. To expose them as such, Łucki employs a number of artistic strategies, such as subversive appropriation of art historical themes (pastoral tradition in painting), performative re-enactment and drag, aesthetic devices typical of low camp (parody, excess, crudeness, dirt, and excrement). This way, I would like to argue, his work undermines traditional gender roles, distorts linearity of historical (rural) time, mixes the idyllic with the anti-idyllic, and, ultimately, questions the class distinctions that regulated the access to land as a resource and as a pastoral ideal of country life.

Conclusion

Mary Pat Brady suggests that a "rural turn" in queer studies "might help to improve or augment our understanding of how race and class operate as discourses, experiences, and embodied practices."[46] In this paper, although I focused exclusively on one artist and analysed one work from his varied multidisciplinary practice,

46. Brady, "The Waiting Arms of Gold Street," 109.

I attempted to show how "the rural" as a material space, theoretical framework, and historical concept opens up the discussion of queer culture and queer experience onto issues of class, race, identity, and belonging. Moreover, in a manner of reciprocal exchange, once "queered," the rural space is made to reveal itself in ways that reflect its historical vacillation between material fact and phantasmatic projection, idyllic utopian vision and harsh dystopian reality.

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