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### Title

In Search of Lost Ecology: Recovering a Rural Past in *Housekeeping & The Gleaners and I*

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In Search of Lost Ecology: Recovering a Rural Past in *Housekeeping* & *The Gleaners and I*

Looking back longingly toward the past, whether personal or historical, is nothing unique to the present. Raymond Williams observes such nostalgia, for example, in Leavis and Thompson's 1932 book *Culture and Environment*, which longs for the early twentieth century's lost "organic community," as well as in George Eliot's desire for "the old rural England of the 1820s and early 1830s."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the century-long gap between these writers' reverie of a recollected past demonstrates that the historical relations between the country and the city has always involved an ongoing exaltation of yesterday's good old days, never mind the region or time period.

Indeed, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* evokes the earlier tradition and spirit of Emersonian transcendentalism with a pervasive yearning for pastoral nature and an opposition to materialism and capitalism. Similarly, Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* follows gleaners from the French countryside to the city, documenting the material and ethical challenges created by a rapidly industrializing environment. Although both *Housekeeping* and *The Gleaners and I* lament the natural world as a lost ecology through elegiac frameworks, their efforts to capture the physical and emotional effects of ecological loss diverge crucially in relation to the past, demonstrating how ecological grief<sup>2</sup> manifests differently: Robinson reveres the natural world at

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *The City and the Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Here, 'ecological grief' refers to "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses." See Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, "Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss" (*Nature Climate Change*, 2018), pp. 275-281.

the cost of detached circularity, while Varda frames the rural past as a tangible, albeit lost, artifact, which can be both preserved aesthetically as well as readapted with digital tools and industrial processes in order to affirm and cultivate the present.

Robinson's *Housekeeping* begins with what has been lost. The opening chapter unpacks the personal history of Ruth, who is orphaned after her mother's suicide: "I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher".<sup>3</sup> Robinson takes role call as if it were a litany, prefacing Ruth's life with private tragedy, showing how death and abandonment mark the text from the outset. Ruth's grandmother is presented as the primary caretaker, but after she passes away, her role is resumed unsuitably by Misses Lily and Nona Foster, who depart not long after arriving in Fingerbone. Robinson sets up the novel as an elegy, imbuing her prose with a sense of melancholic affection, and makes apparent who must be mourned and how much must be grieved. Such individual, intimate grief anticipates Robinson's underlying ecological grief, which we understand in terms of and in relation to personal loss. Ruth's lack of familial stability and fleeting keepers introduces *Housekeeping* as a novel of unrest, of uprootedness, both privately and physically.

This uprootedness, however, runs deeper than just Ruth's tumultuous upbringing. She traces her family's history back even further, recalling her grandfather, the "silent Methodist" Edmund Foster.<sup>4</sup> Ruth recognizes "[i]t was he who put us down in this unlikely place [Fingerbone]" and he who built the home that "all these generations of elders" lived in.<sup>5</sup> Sarah D. Hartshorne suggests Edmund represents "the Creator, Noah, Adam, the American frontiersman,

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<sup>3</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Picador, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

the American Adam, the primitive man.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly Ruth’s grandfather is not without “biblical shadings,” and his brief appearance necessarily situates him as the singular, looming patriarchal figure, grounding both *Housekeeping* and Ruth in a particularly spiritual and religious world.<sup>7</sup> But imperative to note too is that Edmund worked for the railroad. He was “a dutiful and industrious worker,” working from evening until dawn; in less than two decades, he had become “assistant to the stationmaster.”<sup>8</sup> The loaded symbolism of the train, as represented in American tradition, signals “industrial progress” and “exploitation.”<sup>9</sup> Edmund is not only drawn to such industrial progress, but he excels at his job, never mind that it “was not an especially good one,” which surely profited from his quiet discipline.<sup>10</sup> His work ethic reflects the diligence expected of the family’s male founder, and establishes financially his family’s working class status.

Robinson’s skepticism of this industrialization and paternity, however, becomes apparent in Edmund’s spectacular and mysterious death. One night, the train inexplicably malfunctions. The “engine nosed over toward the lake and then the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock.”<sup>11</sup> No bodies are recovered. Only three “relics” are found, infinitesimally small pieces of evidence that the train had crashed into the water at all.<sup>12</sup> Here, Robinson links the train, an industrial vehicle, to death, of which there is an abundance in Ruth’s life. This relationship between modernity and loss is central to *Housekeeping*, and Edmund’s early tragedy sets up Robinson’s distrust toward urbanization in opposition to her idyllic regard for nature. Although it is not a violent accident, the train crash is a dumbfounding spectacle, which has invisible yet palpable consequences. Robinson establishes carefully how Ruth’s life is

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah D. Hartshorne, “Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond: A Commentary on Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*” (*Modern Language Studies* Vol. 20., No. 3, 1990), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Hartshorne, “Lake Fingerbone,” 52-53.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

shaped both by her grandfather's settling in the rural country and by his locomotive death, which keeps her family in Fingerbone indefinitely.

While *The Gleaners and I* does not open with explicit images of death, Varda suggests that a certain way of living has passed on in the countryside. The first of Varda's subjects acknowledges, "Gleaning, that's the old way."<sup>13</sup> Williams offers that the "country life then has many meanings: in feelings and activity; in region and in time."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, "old" connotes several meanings. "Old," on one hand, evokes the sense of a tradition among gleaners—the old way is a familiar and shared practice. The subject, however, laments, "But sadly we no longer [glean] because machines are so efficient nowadays. But before, I used to glean together with my neighbors."<sup>15</sup> So on the other hand, "old" denotes a period of time that is now obsolete, rendered such by more efficient, industrial methods. Gleaning thus is the way of the past, its tradition deteriorated. In this regard, something has died, namely the old way itself.

For Steve Vineberg, the old way of gleaning is preserved through "fond childhood memory."<sup>16</sup> The subject does, in fact, recall gleaning with such nostalgic recollection: "My mother'd say, 'Pick up everything, so nothing gets wasted.'"<sup>17</sup> Gleaning, in this instance, connects the subject to her neighbors and family, while highlighting how that connection is irreproducible in the present because the old way is defunct. It is not just gleaning that is bygone, but also the communities formed around it. Varda positions her film as one conscious of antiquity, history, and outdated social networks. This consciousness invokes an elegiac framework similar to *Housekeeping*'s way of thinking about loss, wherein the past and the

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<sup>13</sup> *The Gleaners and I*, directed by Agnès Varda. (2000; France: Ciné Tamaris).

<sup>14</sup> Williams, "Country," 4.

<sup>15</sup> Varda, *The Gleaners and I*.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Vineberg, "Lost and Found" (*The Threepenny Review*, No. 88, 2002), p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Varda, *The Gleaners and I*.

country are connected in terms of declining ecological relations, and each connotes the loss of people and common practices, places, and resources.

Robinson commits wholly to reflecting the elegiac, ecological connection between nature and nostalgia, such that Ruth discerns the natural world in terms of her grief. After her grandfather's train accident, Ruth says, "the wind smelled of it, and they could taste it in the drinking water, and they could not abide the smell, the taste, or the sight of it."<sup>18</sup> Ruth's senses are shaped by loss—her own, as well as Fingerbone's shared misfortune. She registers that death palpably penetrates the wind and the water; this grief is deep-rooted in the environment. Indeed, Jonathan Kramnick describes Ruth's consciousness as "a falling and swelling into things," as if her observations themselves mirror the cyclical patterns of nature, her perception ebbing and flowing.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Ruth's understanding of the world is ever in flux, susceptible to her environment's constantly changing order. In this way, Ruth's grief is a tragic constant around which she forms her impressions and perceptions of the natural world.

This is not to suggest, however, that Ruth's nostalgia only centers on her grandfather's passing. Rather, Edmund's death represents but one instance in which Robinson relates death and industrialization. Ruth's mother also dies in a vehicular accident. She recollects her mother's suicide, where Helen drove "north almost to Tyler, where she sailed Bernice's Ford from the top of a cliff... into the blackest depth of the lake."<sup>20</sup> With respect to her grandmother's death, Ruth also elicits the spirit of the lake: "The dream and the obituary together created in my mind the conviction that my grandmother had entered into some other element upon which our lives

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<sup>18</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Kramnick, *Paper Minds: Literature and the Ecology of Consciousness* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 152.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 22.

floated as weightless, intangible, immiscible, and inseparable as reflections in water.”<sup>21</sup> Helen’s suicide and Sylvia’s passing further emphasize the strange relationship between Fingerbone’s lake and death. These particular familial losses draw Ruth’s attention toward the past, but ultimately it is the lake that remains, a symbolic and material remnant.

It is the lake to which Ruth returns repeatedly, despite its harbinger of bereavement. Indeed, no matter where Ruth goes, she and Lucille can “feel the reach of the lake behind us, and far beyond us on either side, in a spacious silence that seemed to ring like glass.”<sup>22</sup> The lake has no limits upon its influence over Ruth’s consciousness, emotionally as well as metaphysically. Even when she’s not near the lake or looking at it, she can feel its reach “behind” and “far beyond on either side,” and its force gives imagined sound to a “spacious silence.” It is as if the lake’s center is everywhere, its circumference nowhere. This omniscient, omnipresent force of the lake attracts Ruth, stimulating her awareness of the natural world with regretful respect to the people she has lost. Through this association and consciousness, Ruth also begins to sense that nature itself is under duress. Ecological grief emerges both in response to experienced personal loss and anticipated loss of the natural environment in which such grief is felt, smelled, and preserved.

If the lake is the epicenter of Robinson’s reverence, then the farmlands are where Varda’s gaze fixates. Varda introduces gleanings with a visual representation. An opening shot lingers on Jean-François Millet’s painting “The Gleaners.” The three peasant women depicted are painted in cool earth tones, the gray and brown of the dirt dominating both the ground and the sky. But it is where they are specifically that foreshadows the film’s focus—that is, in a field littered with leftover wheat. Here the field is open, the country sprawling beyond the frame. This painting

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<sup>21</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

serves as a reference for Varda's subsequent excavation, when she also enters farmers' fields in order to interview gleaners and glean herself. The differences, though, between Millet's painting and Varda's film are not just technical, but also temporal. For Millet, while the gleaners harvested to the dismay of the French middle- and upper-classes, there was yet an abundance of scraps for collecting and gathering. Varda, however, discovers that gleaning has partially declined because there is less produce to glean. Archival footage of gleaners shows the ground covered in stacks of wheat, as the modern subject stands before a barren field thinking of gleaning in the past tense—how it used to be, however harsh and rewarding, when it involved social formations.

Varda further examines the transformation between how things used to be and how gleaning has changed (or rather, has been changed by) modernity. She observes, "What strikes me is that each gleaners on his own," documenting a single gleaner harvesting a humble yield in an open field.<sup>23</sup> She contrasts this lone act with the past, as depicted in paintings, where gleaners "were always in clusters, rarely alone."<sup>24</sup> Time alters the actual landscape inevitably, but the aforementioned efficient machines have also revolutionized the fields. Whether illustrated in an artistic portrait or captured in contemporary footage, the farm fields are a site of ecological and cultural change. Varda's grief encompasses the ecological loss of the depleted natural world, as well as the scattered communities once formed around cooperative gleaning.

*Housekeeping* and *The Gleaners and I* inextricably link loss, whether familial and private or social and shared, to the natural world. The pervasive sense of depletion and destruction in these texts arouses a ubiquitous nostalgia, whose beloved object is a lost ecology. Nature, whole and unified, however, is tangible only vis-à-vis the past's environmental remnants and variations,

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<sup>23</sup> Varda, *The Gleaners and I*.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



while remaining intangible in memory and feeling. This lost ecology is grieved, to be sure, but how, and to what extent, exactly? One point of departure helpful for parsing the ways in which Robinson and Varda look back longingly toward the past is whether they do so mournfully or melancholically. In “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene,” Margaret Ronda distinguishes between the two titular expressions. Unpacking Freud’s theory, Ronda summarizes the difference succinctly: “to successfully mourn is to relinquish the other and to fully adopt the norms of self-possession and social integration; melancholia refuses this consolatory and commemorative work of mourning by tarrying in guilty retrospection.”<sup>25</sup>

Ronda then reads Juliana Spahr’s poem “Gentle Now” and suggests the speaker experiences melancholic grief. She offers that “the speaker takes responsibility for not taking responsibility, grieves for not grieving—and it is through these acknowledgments that its subject comes to be.”<sup>26</sup> The speaker dwells in guilty retrospection, ruminating on the unrecoverable past and internalizing her culpability. Ronda compares and contrasts Spahr’s speaker with Tim Morton’s ecotheory that “directs ecological art toward the present rather than the past, abjuring the elegiac poetics of loss, sorrow, and grieving for the uncanny, melancholic “reality” of ecological coexistence.”<sup>27</sup> For Ronda, Spahr represents a more pessimistic melancholia than Morton, failing to externalize the great loss felt and recognized by the speaker.

The distinctions between mourning and melancholia, as well as between Spahr and Morton, illuminate how we might critically differentiate Robinson’s nostalgia from Varda’s nostalgia. Here, the past either holds one back among the familiar ecology lost, or propels one forward into the modernized future. Ruth’s contemplation of the past overshadows her consciousness concerning the present. Take, for instance, her reflection on need and longing. “To

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Ronda, “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene” (*Post* 45, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

crave and to have,” she says, “are as like as a thing and its shadow.”<sup>28</sup> Although Ruth recognizes that the thing itself and its referent—in whatever form, material or immaterial—are not exactly the same, they are still alike. Desire, in this regard, is as palpable as possession. Ruth asks when “do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it?”<sup>29</sup> She maintains here that lacking the thing for which she longs actually enhances her empirical senses. For Ruth, memory is a muscle that is best exercised frequently. Through recollection, Ruth reanimates her losses. She imagines her grandfather’s origin story with extraordinary detail, although she was not present for his life and death; she revisits her mother in prelapsarian visions, when innocence was abounding, before Helen borrowed their neighbor’s car and drove herself into the crypt-like lake.

Indeed, as George B. Handley describes, “Robinson’s ecology functions simultaneously as a site of memory and the continuity of human difference.”<sup>30</sup> That is to say, Ruth’s recollection of the past and the natural world emphasizes longing and loss, despite the fact that the mere process of remembrance alone cannot revive the times past nor reconstruct the ruins leftover. Ruth believes “the world will be made whole” through this longing, so “whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again.”<sup>31</sup> Ruth ultimately attempts to recover what has been lost, rather than relinquish her cathexes toward it. Her nostalgia, which Maryse Fauvel would likely categorize as “restorative nostalgia,”<sup>32</sup> reconciles the fragments of what has been lost by rejecting modernity for its dissolution of nature and life itself.

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<sup>28</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 152.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>30</sup> George B. Handley, “The Metaphysics of Ecology in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*” (*Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3, 2009), p. 508.

<sup>31</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 153.

<sup>32</sup> Restorative nostalgia puts “emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” and “manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past”; see also, Maryse Fauvel, “Nostalgia and digital technology: The Gleaners and I (Varda, 2000) and The Triplets of Belleville (Chomet, 2003) as reflective genres” (*Studies in French Cinema*, Vol. 5, No. 3), p. 233.

This restorative nostalgia, however, also severs Ruth from productively or socially engaging with the present. Instead, she further isolates herself, most poignantly from Lucille. Under the care of their transient Aunt Sylvie, Lucille and Ruth drift apart slowly. Ruth finds herself “invisible—incompletely and minimally existent, in fact,” while Lucille longs for stability and normalcy, which Ruth begins to sense indicates her “loyalties were with the other world.”<sup>33</sup> Their parting comes to a head when Lucille asks Ruth to accompany her to the local drugstore. Ruth observes closely Lucille’s inspection of cloth for sewing new clothes, but she has no interest in the material fabrics. Lucille, still carefully attuned to her sister, senses her apathy, and she accuses Ruth of wanting to leave. This panics Lucille, who cries, “Don’t! That’s *Sylvie’s* house now... We have to improve ourselves! Starting right now.”<sup>34</sup> This plea fails to sway Ruth, who turns away from her sister and leaves. After all, Lucille’s request uses the language of industrialization; it is imperative that they “improve” themselves, in order to be more valuable or productive or desirable, and they must do so “right now,” because there is no time to waste for advancing and bettering themselves.

No wonder then that Ruth resists Lucille’s appeal. She imagines “that Lucille would busy herself forever, nudging, pushing, coaxing, as if she could supply the will I lacked, to pull myself into some seemly shape and slip across the wide frontiers into that other world, where it seemed to me that I could never wish to go.”<sup>35</sup> Note how the language of capitalism changes Ruth’s perception of Lucille—her beloved sister now mindlessly is set to “busy herself forever,” hollow action after hollow action propelling Lucille toward assimilation and acceptance into “that other world” of modernity, of the present, of forgetting the past.

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<sup>33</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, pp. 95-106.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Ruth's loyalty to the past pushes her away from Lucille and her modern desires, and ultimately drives her back to Sylvie, who prefers sleeping on lawns and leaving windows open to comfortably resting inside with the doors locked. Although Lucille does not cherish the natural world, Sylvie feels "the life of perished things" like Ruth.<sup>36</sup> Their shared empathy with nature is also a shared grief for such "perished things." Moreover, Sylvie represents a temporal medium between the country and the city. A vagabond and social outcast, Sylvie's own family regards her as an "itinerant," a "migrant worker," and a "drifter."<sup>37</sup> It is this detachment from the city, in particular, which draws Sylvie toward the natural world. Here, she moves freely, liberated from any social, familial, or personal responsibilities. As Ruth aligns herself more closely with her aunt, *Housekeeping* reflects the transition from domesticity to vagrancy. This uprootedness repulses Lucille, but as Maggie Galehouse observes, "Ruth's decision to drift is, ironically, a commitment to stay with Sylvie, the only family she has left."<sup>38</sup> And thus Ruth returns with Sylvie to an unstructured, rural way of living, and she is grounded in the world of the past—no school, no jobs, no enclosure, no common persuasions.

The world of the past has its place, too, in *The Gleaners and I*, although the role it plays varies significantly. In contrast to the restorative nostalgia of *Housekeeping*, Maryse Fauvel argues that Varda's film illustrates reflective nostalgia. This kind of nostalgia "dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss" and "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time."<sup>39</sup> What is important to extract from the distinction between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia is that *The Gleaners and I* does not "entail a desire to return to a lost place—France—and a lost time. The kind of nostalgia to which they refer includes a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>38</sup> Maggie Galehouse, "Their Own Private Idaho: Transience in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*" (*Contemporary Literature*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2000), p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> Fauvel, "Nostalgia," 233.

rejection of those lost places and times, as well as a reaffirmation of a renewed contemporary place and time.”<sup>40</sup> To be certain, *Housekeeping* dwells on the past, but Robinson constructs the past as something longed for to the degree that Ruth wants to reconstruct its lost elements in her stilled, stunted present. Varda, however, remembers the past for what it was, not how it can be recreated. Instead of attempting to return to the idyllic French countryside, Varda considers how, instead, she might move forward with it in mind.

One of the film’s subject’s—an artist named Hervé, who goes by the alias VR99—embodies this reflective nostalgia in his work. He collects “heavy objects people get rid of,” thereby recycling used artifacts and maintaining or repurposing their resources. Unlike Ruth’s longing, the artist embraces the urban space in which he lives. Varda emphasizes the cityscape by teasing VR99’s description of a city map. He says, “Town councils and city halls provide” these maps to show “all the streets, districts, and the days on which one can go and pick [the discarded objects] up,” but Varda corrects him, reminding him “the maps show where to dump things rather.”<sup>41</sup> The artist laughs and assures her this is his own reading of the map; he takes it for what it is, but uses it for his own aesthetic purposes. VR99 believes that these objects—which to some like Varda, seriously or in jest, might just be waste—have a second life. “All you have to do is give them a second chance,” he argues, demonstrating this kind of recycling is not about reviving the past, but reframing a new way: of living, of life, of art.<sup>42</sup>

Varda is transparent regarding her personal stake and reflective efforts to reframe and refashion “the old way” of the countryside. After all, she is a subject in her own film—“There is another woman gleaning in this film, that’s me”<sup>43</sup>—appearing both behind and in front of the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>41</sup> Varda, *The Gleaners and I*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

camera, and sometimes doing both at once. *The Gleaners and I* might be thought of as a “cinematic vanitas”<sup>44</sup> to the degree that it addresses aging and human mortality in relation to time passing naturally and historically. For Varda, this address is directed back at herself; throughout the film, she displays her graying hair, the wrinkles on her face, the sun spots on her hands. Varda’s own mortality is equally evident as it is irreversible. Nonetheless, she seems to welcome these signs of aging, highlighting them alongside her tender portrait of trash, waste, and leftovers. Mireille Rosello proposes that it is actually gleaning that teaches Varda “to embrace, rather than to fight, signs of decay that others would ruthlessly eliminate.”<sup>45</sup> This is not a rejection of the future, nor a clutching onto of the familiar “old way.” Rather, *The Gleaners and I* is a reckoning with how things were, and how things can now be accordingly. Here, looking back involves a mirror: Varda contemplates the rural past, former communities of gleaners, and discarded objects, and discovers herself older than she was yesterday, but equipped now with new tools to revitalize what life is left, and yet to come.

With this optimism, Varda mourns without melancholic rumination. The culminating object gleaned is a clock without hands. Varda does not fix it, favoring it this way because, “You don’t see the time passing.”<sup>46</sup> We might imagine that Ruth would also appreciate this clock, but for different reasons. Indeed, Ruth traces all of history back to a source of great pain, recounting Cain and Abel’s violence before returning finally again to the lake:

One cannot cup one’s hand and drink from the rim of any lake without remembering that mothers have drowned in it, lifting their children toward the air, though they must have

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<sup>44</sup> “Vanitas” denotes “a still-life painting evoking earthly pleasures that includes a visual reminder of mortality”; in Varda’s case, the film is that reminder of our human vulnerability, set in opposition to the contemporary materialism and capitalism of modern French society. For more, see Elizabeth Ezra, *European Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 286.

<sup>45</sup> Mireille Rosello, “Agnès Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* Portrait of the Artist as an Old Lady” (*Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001), p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> Varda, *The Gleaners and I*.

known soon enough the deluge would take all the children, too... Well, all that was purged away, and nothing is left of it after so many years but a certain pungency and savor in the water, and in the breath of creeks and lakes, which, however sad and wild, are clearly human.<sup>47</sup>

Time poses an ecological crisis with no solution. Loss permeates everything, from “any lake” to Fingerbone, from “the air” to Ruth’s home. Ultimately, Ruth conceits there is innate violence in the natural world, but it is a “clearly human” violence, which can only be answered with guilt and grief. A clock without hands in *Housekeeping* might offer the pause in time Ruth so desperately craves, with its absence finally satiating her longing for a world without tomorrow’s modernity.

Varda’s sentiment, though, is tongue-in-cheek. She walks behind the clock, superimposing the transparent face over her own for a moment. The clock does not need hands for Varda to show us that time has passed, and is currently passing. From the runtime to the meta-reflection on filmmaking, her film is as much a testament to this as any other relic recovered or any history retold. The natural world has changed because time has, in fact, gone on. But Varda’s ecological grief for its exhausted resources and memories is expunged, rather than introjected.

One might imagine there is no relief for ecological grief. In Roxane Gay’s recent essay, “The Case Against Hope,” she asks herself, “Now what?”<sup>48</sup> This question precedes a long list of problems with no immediate, or even feasible long-term, solutions: the current political climate, national racism, gun violence, restrictions on reproductive rights, and environmental climate change, the latter’s consequences including extinction, global warming, rising water levels,

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<sup>47</sup> Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 193.

<sup>48</sup> Roxane Gay, “The Case Against Hope” (*The New York Times*, 2019).

melting glaciers, forest fires. It is difficult to read this and not think of yesterday, and not ask what we could have done differently, what we should have done differently. Desiring to return to a lost ecology or idyllic place, though, is to stall. It is not, as Gay advocates, “to continue thinking about possibility.”<sup>49</sup> Both *Housekeeping* and *The Gleaners and I* linger on what has been lost, and their griefs bear both the lament and the longing for a rural past remembered. Robinson constructs a world within and around Ruth in which her loss dominates, creating a circular transience rather than a truly liberated wandering. This text is crucial to put in conversation with *The Gleaners and I*, however, in order to understand how nostalgia can be constructive. As Varda lifts up her camera, utilizing contemporary, technical tools to serve her project, she proposes an answer to Gay’s daunting question. “Now what?” Now, we direct not just art, but ourselves, toward the present, exercising elegy, conscious of the rural past, in order to glean better for tomorrow in honor of yesterday’s organic communities, families, vagabonds, and scavengers.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



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